

Manipuri weavers stare at bleak future

Depressed sales, lack of tourists to blame

DISTRICTS IN FOCUS

MINTU DESHWARA

Weavers and clothing entrepreneurs in Kamalganj upazila of Moulvibazar usually take on loans to make Manipuri clothing items as they get ready for higher sales ahead of Eid festivals.

The same had happened in the weeks before the last two Eid festivals this year. But despite easing off coronavirus restrictions ahead of the big occasions, they were left in despair as sales did not pick up.

This means the weavers and clothing wholesalers, and retailers have been deprived of robust sales for the last four Eid festivals in a row owing to the lockdowns and pandemic-induced economic slowdown.

"Now, we will have to sell clothes at a much lower price than the fair price to pay monthly instalments on loans and earn a living. Still, there are no buyers," said Sima Singha, a weaving entrepreneur in Kamalganj.

All the Manipuri weavers in the Sylhet region are facing the same plight.

During a visit to Adampur and Madhabpur area in Kamalganj and Radhanagar area in Sreemangal upazila in Moulvibazar last month, almost half of the clothing shops in the local markets were found to be closed, although curbs were relaxed owing to the Eid festival.

Sales hit rock-bottom in the outlets that were open. Now weavers fear losing all the investment.

Manipuri is an indigenous community that carries on a uniquely exquisite art of weaving, which is also their bread and butter and has been passed down from generation to generation.

Manipuri saris, shawls, scarves and salwar kameezes and bedsheets are a few of the merchandise that are high in demand.

Since sales peak during Eid festivals, the Manipuris invest their savings in making new merchandise ahead of the two occasions.

"But the pandemic has inflicted a huge loss," said Rabi Singha Rajesh, member



MINTU DESHWARA

Weaving entrepreneurs say they have to sell clothes at a much lower price than expectations to pay monthly instalments on loans and earn a living but still they find no buyers. The photo was taken recently from Kamalganj of Moulvibazar.

secretary of the Manipuri Cultural Academy Bangladesh.

According to local traders, Manipuri cloth is an attractive product to domestic and foreign tourists visiting Moulvibazar.

More than 10,000 domestic and foreign tourists used to travel to the area every day before the pandemic. But since the virus arrived on the shores of the country, domestic and foreign tourists have not been seen.

In Sylhet city, there are more than 100 wholesale stores that sell Manipuri items. The largest wholesale market is located in Bandarabazar area. Many wholesale stores have also been set up in Lamabazar, Zindabazar, Tilaghar, Chowhatta, and Ambarkhana.

Many Manipuris also sell their merchandise directly from their houses in Lamabazar and Mashimpur in Sylhet city and Kamalganj and Sreemangal upazilas.

Saddam Hossain, a trader in Sreemangal, says these markets usually attract a lot of

shoppers during normal times.

"But this time, there were only a few people around, and not much noticeable business transaction is taking place at the handful of stores that are open," he said ahead of Eid-ul-Azha.

Mithun Singha, a clothing trader from Sreemangal's Radhanagar area, has a wholesale store in the main business centre in the upazila. He has not been able to sell any of the clothes in the past few months. "But the store rent, electricity bills and other expenses kept piling up. So, I had to shut the store this month."

Shilpi Devi, a weaver in Adampur, says Manipuri saris are popular among young women, including the newlyweds. But lately, sales have been poor.

"Wholesale buyers are not turning up. So, I'm selling the items at lower prices to any customer I can find," said Ranjita Debi, a weaver in Lamabazar.

"With sales falling almost to zero, we are now in a crisis."

Lakshmikanta Singh, executive director of the Ethnic Community Development Organisation (ECDO), an NGO, says weavers meet at least 15 per cent of the local demand for clothes.

Around 5 per cent of the total production is exported to the UK and the US.

He says wholesalers from different districts, including Dhaka, Chattogram, Narsingdi and Bogura, used to come and place orders for bulk quantities.

"But this time, they were unable to come to the town due to the lockdowns."

The NGO opened an outlet, Moirang, for Manipuri women handloom artists in 2014. It has been shut during the pandemic.

It requested customers to buy clothes online, but the response has been low.

Some Manipuri women used to work in the factory of the NGO, but they could not regularly come for the last one and a half years due to the lockdowns.

"As a result, the production has come to a halt. We are at a loss now," Lakshmikanta Singh said.

Many weavers say the industry has suffered a lot during the pandemic. Many have become unemployed.

But so far, there has been no major support from the government although state assistance is essential for the survival of the industry, they say.

Kamalganj Upazila Nirbahi Officer Ashekul Haque said: "A list has been prepared. They will be assisted very soon."

Barkat Ullah, liaison officer of the Bangladesh Handloom Board (BHB) in Kamalganj, says considering the present scenario, the board has cut the interest rate on loans for Manipuri weavers to 5 per cent from 10 per cent.

The loan repayment period has also been extended and conditions relaxed. A weaver can borrow a maximum of Tk 2 lakh.

So far, the BHB has disbursed Tk 1.70 crore among 1,274 weavers in the division, home to about 3,000 Manipuri weavers.

"We have sent a list of the people who have marginalised by the pandemic to the senior officials of the board."

"I have also sought relief from the local administration, which has assured us of providing support. We will receive the relief within a couple of days."

US garment buyers to get special attention

Tipu Munshi says



Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government has taken a special initiative to increase the volume of garment export to the US markets, as the shipment of apparel items to the country's single largest export destination is growing on the back of high demand.

Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi said this yesterday at the concluding session of the "Men's Apparel Guild in California" in Las Vegas.

Munshi said for grabbing more market share in the US, where Bangladesh sends nearly \$7 billion worth of garment items in a year, his government has started assessing the improved standards of apparel, innovative designs and customers' choices for the US consumers.

He said data would be separately preserved for the US customers for supplying special apparels to them.

Munshi said after the unexpected Rana Plaza building collapse in April 2013, Bangladesh improved a lot in compliance to rules and strengthened workplace safety for safety in the garment factories.

Currently, Bangladesh is the global leader in green garment factories as the local suppliers have invested money to improve in compliance, save energy and environment and brighten the image of the country's apparel sector, Munshi also said.

The minister invited the US retailers, brands and businesspeople to visit the factories and to observe the safety and compliances in the factories, according to a statement from the commerce ministry yesterday.

The US businesspeople have showed a lot of interest to visit Bangladeshi garment factories and source more from Bangladesh, the statement also said.

They have expressed eagerness to visit factories and to observe the compliances, health services, working environment and sustainable development that the country has attained over the years, the commerce ministry statement said. Munshi said during the pandemic, the government has given the stimulus packages to the garment entrepreneurs in Bangladesh so that they can run their business smoothly in the time of crisis.

The garment sector alone contributes some 83.5 per cent of the total export of the country in a year and employs 45 lakh workers, of whom a majority are women, especially those who migrated from rural areas.

NEWS In Brief

China urges automakers to strengthen data protection

REUTERS, Beijing

The Chinese government has asked automakers to strengthen data security and store key data generated locally in the country.

According to a new policy published by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology on its website, automakers are required to export critical data and obtain regulatory approvals for both before updating in-car systems. The policy does not include punishment lines for companies failing to comply with the rules.

It comes amid China's push to ensure the security of data generated by connected vehicles as the proliferation of smart cars such as Teslas fuel concerns about national security, in line with its broader aim to tighten policies around privacy.

UK card spending rises to 99pc of pre-pandemic level

REUTERS, London

Spending on credit and debit cards in Britain rose in the week to Aug. 5 to 99 per cent of its level just before the pandemic in the week, up by 4 percentage points from the week before, according to payment data provided by the Bank of England. Separate figures showed online job adverts on the Adzuna website dipped by 5 per cent to 129 per cent of their February 2020 level.

India set to clear Boeing 737 Max to fly again soon

REUTERS, New Delhi

India is set to allow Boeing Co's 737 Max jets to resume flights in the country within days, Bloomberg News reported on Thursday, citing a person familiar with the matter.

The country has been satisfied with the plane's performance since it was un-grounded in the US, Europe and a number of other nations, and Boeing has met India's own requirements, which included setting up a Max simulator there, according to the report.

US House Democrats seek \$160b in new EV funding

REUTERS, Washington

A group of 29 US House Democrats want congressional leaders to include at least \$160 billion in additional funding for electric vehicles as part of a \$3.5 trillion spending measure, according to a letter seen by Reuters.

A bipartisan \$1 trillion infrastructure bill includes \$7.5 billion for electric vehicle charging stations and some other EV-related funding estimated at \$2.5 billion to \$5.5 billion. President Joe Biden in March called for \$174 billion in total spending on electric vehicles, including \$100 billion in consumer incentives and \$15 billion to build 500,000 EV charging stations.



GLOBAL BUSINESS

UK economy rebounds in Q2

AFP, London

Britain's economy rebounded 4.8 per cent in the second quarter as the government began relaxing lockdown restrictions, official data showed Thursday.

The strong growth recovery was fuelled by consumer spending, while the government continued to provide massive financial support by for example paying the bulk of private sector wages.

But the rebound faces challenges as a jobs protection programme is set to end in September and global supply chain bottlenecks persist. Gross domestic product had fallen 1.6 per cent in the first three months of the year, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) added in a statement.

"Today's figures show that our economy is on the mend showing strong signs of recovery," finance minister Rishi Sunak said in a separate statement. Total UK output however remains 4.4 per cent lower compared with before the coronavirus pandemic, or final quarter of 2019.

The ONS, providing also its latest monthly data, said the UK



AFP/FILE

The easing of Britain's Covid lockdown helped the economy rebound.

economy grew 1.0 per cent in June, before England lifted nearly all lockdown restrictions from July. Markets are looking closely at both growth and inflation data as nations emerge from lockdowns following vaccine rollouts.

Analysts warn that strong price

rises could force central banks to hike interest rates sooner than expected, hindering the recovery.

Pressure eased Wednesday however after official data showed US inflation had cooled slightly.

The outlook could be bumpy, analysts warn, as the government

next month ends its furlough scheme that has kept millions of Britons in work during the pandemic.

And while the Bank of England last week maintained its forecast for the UK economy to rebound 7.5 per cent this year, returning

to its pre-pandemic level, it had forecast a 5.0-per cent rebound in the second quarter.

Britain's largest business lobby group, the CBI, warned of a bumpy road ahead following Thursday's positive data.

"Growth bounced back over the second quarter as restrictions on activity were gradually lifted, underscoring that tackling the pandemic goes hand-in-hand with supporting economic growth," noted CBI economist Alpeh Paleja.

"Yet challenges to the recovery are emerging. Several supply bottlenecks have likely taken the edge off growth over the summer: a shortage of raw materials and semiconductors, continuing global supply chain disruption and staffing shortages.

"Britain's recovery comes amid its fast-paced vaccination programme that has seen nearly 89 per cent of adults given at least one dose, while close to two-thirds are now fully jabbed. The UK government on Wednesday said it will offer coronavirus vaccinations to all 16 and 17 year olds, but not to younger healthy teenagers as in many other Western countries.

China signals crackdown on privacy, data, anti-trust to go on

REUTERS, Beijing

China will draft new laws on national security, technology innovation, monopolies and education, as well as in areas involving foreigners, the national leadership said in a document published late on Wednesday.

The announcement signals that a crackdown on industry with regard to privacy, data management, antitrust, and other issues will persist on through the year.

The Chinese Communist Party and the government said in a blueprint for the five years to 2025, published by the state-run Xinhua news agency, that they

would also improve legislation around public health by amending the infectious disease law and the "frontier health and quarantine law".

China is working for a return to normal after the coronavirus pandemic, which emerged in its Wuhan city in late 2019.

Regulations dealing with food and medicine, natural resources, industrial safety production, urban governance, transport, would also be strictly enforced, they said.

Authorities will aim to develop laws consistent with new sectors such as the digital economy, internet finance, artificial intelligence, big data, cloud

computing, they said, adding that they would also improve the response to emergencies.

They additionally laid out directives for the prevention and resolution of social conflicts and reiterated an order for officials to "nip conflicts in the bud".

Better legislation for areas including education, race and religion and biosecurity was also on the cards, they said.

The government has in recent months reined in tech giants with anti-monopoly or data security rules and clamped down on tutoring companies, as the state increases its control of the economy and society.

On Thursday, state-media outlet the Securities Times reported that banking regulators would step up scrutiny of online insurance companies in an effort to "purify the market environment" and "protect the legal interests of consumers".

Authorities used a law aimed at responding to foreign sanctions for the first time last month to sanction former US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and imposed a national security law on the special region of Hong Kong last year, employing legal means to protect interests beyond the mainland border.

The party and the government also asserted that a "rule of law government" must follow the leadership of the party.