

Ava: An e-commerce platform interweaving traditional handicrafts and modernity

Ava highlights Bengali handicrafts and the regional specialties of Sirajganj, while also promoting the entrepreneurial skills and craftsmanship of the women in the area. They started six months into the pandemic, when many local women had either lost their jobs in the service industry, or had no customers to sell their saris, panjabis or needle work. Occasions such as Eid and *Pahela Baishakh* were no longer being celebrated at the same scale, which caused a dire plunge in sales.

Be it *shital pati* or *alpana*, many forms of Bengali art and handicraft have comparatively lost a lot of their prevalence in the mainstream. Cooling mats called *shital pati* are no longer as commonplace in Bangladeshi households.

Alpana and *rickshaw* art fail to illuminate the courtyards and vehicles they had once been a regular feature of. When a form of art comes under threat, so do the artists behind it.

"Many women came to us at the women's chamber, and told us how they were simply unable to get their products to customers. Demand had slumped. They asked us if we could find a way for them to get their products, their handicrafts, and the clothes they made to customers, as customers no longer went to them. That was when we thought up Ava," recalled Sharita Millat, the Founder President of Sirajganj Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industries.

Although the pleading of the local women helped manifest Ava, it also aimed



to tackle the bigger picture unfolding in Bangladesh as well. Many of the traditional forms of artistry and craftsmanship had started to come under threat, as many traditional products which boasted of the culture of Bangladesh were starting to

become obsolete. Ava and the Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industries in Sirajganj responded to the urgency around the issue by promoting and selling products, which utilised traditional Bengali artisanship, especially ones rooted in Sirajganj.

Ava takes an interesting approach to promoting Bangladeshi artistry and handicrafts by infusing traditional forms of artistry into modern products. They sell an assortment of masks featuring flowers

illustrated and shaded with needlework, along with masks which exhibit the *nakshi kantha* work found on warm quilts. The use of *shital pati* goes beyond that of cooling mats, permeating into laptop bags, cross-over bags, table runners and desk accessories such as penholders.

"In many cases, the handiwork in question was starting to become obsolete because the products they were commonly used for were no longer high in demand. We decided to tackle this by diversifying. We brought the traditional artistry to products which are commonly found in modern households and closets. If *alpana* and *rickshaw* art can no longer be used on the back of vans, why not bring them to cookie jars and desk accessories?" explained Sharita.

Even though Ava promotes various types of Bengali craftsmanship and handicrafts, they have a special spot for the specialties

of Sirajganj, bringing them centre stage. As Sirajganj is known for its *taant* work, *taant* saris, lungis and napkins are offered by Ava. The *taant* products showcase the exceptional weaving skills of local women, with its delicate lightness and transparency. Jute is also incorporated into the products sold as well, due to its significance in Sirajganj history.

"Bengali culture is filled with vibrancy and colours, capturing and emitting sunshine. Our products aim to carry that essence. *Ava* (in Bengali) means light and glow. We want to spread that glow by selling our products to the rest of Bangladesh, and the rest of the world too," beamed Sharita.

Essentials —
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By Tasfia Ahmed
Photo: Ava

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