



COVID-19 and the misfortunes of artisans in Bangladesh

#CRAFTS

Late 2019 saw the world face one of its toughest calamities in modern history – a deadly virus that rapidly spread across continents causing a pandemic, which had huge socio-economic consequences. COVID-19 halted economic progress, regressed development and ceased tourism, arts, crafts and entertainment to almost nil. While it took a toll on the whole world, poor artisans of a developing country like Bangladesh suffered the most.

During any major health crises, including a pandemic such as COVID-19, the entire world becomes busy managing and putting greater emphasis on the health sector, and activities pertaining to arts and culture fall short. They are either shut down or put on hold until the situation improves. Till date, the pandemic still ravages on, through which, the poor artisans and their livelihoods



wheel) is also different. Our special *haris* (pots) cannot be made in their pottery-wheels. So, if this craft must go on, then this is about the right time to train the younger generation on our traditional techniques. And I cannot do this alone, or by myself; I need help from private or governmental organisations to come forward and help me in saving our craftsmanship – our *pal* legacy.”

Problem with lack of documentation

The handloom and handicrafts sector is one of the largest in the country in terms of providing employment, but the hurdle lies in the fact that the sector falls in the category of unorganised or informal sector, for which there are no significant data.

“We are unaware of the actual count of artisans all over Bangladesh,” said Sk Saifur Rahman, General Secretary, NCCB, National Crafts Council of Bangladesh. “We do not know what

have been nearly phased out of existence.

The slow death of crafts

“The pandemic has ruined everything for us. The little business that we had before the virus hit was also disrupted and today, we really don’t know how to carry forward with our trade,” said Gitesh Chandra Das, a master-craftsman from Mokambazar, Moulvibazar, Sylhet, best known for making the *sheetal pati* – a distinct floor-covering made out of green cane, the *murta gach*.

“A single piece of *sheetal pati* takes at least 15-20 days to make and I am talking about the simple designs. An exclusive piece usually takes more than two months to make. We do not even get Tk 2000 for our hard work. People nowadays seem to be disinterested in buying traditional items in general. In addition to that, the showrooms were closed and all kinds of gatherings such as the seasonal fairs (*melas*) were put on hold, so where would we get any customers?” he asked.

Also, part of the discussion was Shushanta Kumar Pal, a *shokher hari*

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(decorative clay pots) artisan from Bashantapur, Bagdhani, Rajshahi.

“The pandemic made it clear that the future for traditional crafts is quite bleak. People used *shokher hari* as a daily requirement in the past; they used these on special occasions and also their everyday lives. Today, they do not even want to use it as a rare, decorative material. Our citizens are more attracted to foreign goods, plastic and machine-made items. They do not have the time to appreciate the prestige and exquisiteness of hand-crafted goods and the legacy it holds,” he says.

Pal added, “Once upon a time, in the Rajshahi division alone, there were around 4500 *shokher hari* craftsmen. Today, there is only me, and with my passing, there will be no one taking the heritage-trade forward. Things that the Arts Department students make in Dhaka are completely different from how we make it here. Their ones are more design based, ours are more nature inspired. Our *chach* (pottery



trade they are involved in, but we can assume from experience that the number is quite large. A process is underway to count all of the artisans through a census, and I hope the government initiative would start rolling soon,” he added.

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