



## COVID-19 and the misfortunes of artisans in Bangladesh

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"Every single crafts council in Bangladesh dealing with artisans has their own list, but there's no one single directory to look into. And that's why during the pandemic, it became even harder for the artisans, because most of them could not be reached to provide support, neither did they know who to approach for sustenance. This situation was definitely difficult."

"However, things are not so bleak as they appear. From NCCB, we tried to fund as many artisans as we could throughout the pandemic, plus for the future, we are planning to work on big projects with the government where we hope to train artisans from four different categories, namely *Bash-o-Bet* (bamboo and cane products), *Benaroshi* (Banarasi sari), *Adibashi Shei* (Indigenous community weaving), and *Sheetal Pati* (decorative cane floor-mats). Through this scheme, we hope to train the artisans in product development and skill development. After that, we plan to hold an exhibition for them where they will be able to sell their stock and earn for themselves. The most important part of the project is that it will be 100 percent funded, meaning the attendees would be paid for the commute, food, shelter and for any other necessities throughout the entire training process," said Rahman.

**A change in our attitude**  
With the world more amused by and

invested towards fast fashion, plastics and everything new, the pandemic proved to us once again that sustainability should be at the core of every little production idea. It is about time we take things slow and concentrate more on possessions that were natural, and local.

Shahid Hussain Shamim, Director, Prabartana, could not agree more.

"We have learned that sustainable living is the only way to living in the future, if we are to save our planet and live in harmony with nature. A large section of the population has already realised this fact and is looking to procure only sustainable products in a global economy. This is where we come in. And I have facts to prove it. Where many sales dipped during the pandemic, our sales in exports actually increased and we are hopeful for further increase in the future. So, the future is actually there, all we need is proper training of the artisans and products development to match the needs of the global audience."

"The Bangladesh Government has been quite progressive in the heritage crafts sector through applying for GI (Geographical Indication of Bangladeshi Product). Now, the second step that remains is to create a proper seal for GI, which can be used while exporting

materials like the *Jamdani*. The motion has been put into effect; all we need at the moment is unity and joint activities to take the process further," explained Hussain Shamim.

### To conclude

Speaking to the experts and the master craftsmen, we realised that while many things are being exercised to reach the goal, there are still gaps and loopholes which need to be addressed to make for a smooth and systematic development. And maybe digital platforms could be the solution to plug in the pitfalls.

Dismally however, the subject matter lacked in all conversations. The artisans were not introduced or informed of any digital platform concepts, neither the dignitaries spoken to were informed of any future plans, including digital platforms.

The pandemic has made us realise that the economy requires change and huge investments in the digital economy, especially because a huge number of people logged on to various digital platforms during the crises. From shopping, to holding virtual meetings to conducting online classes – anything and everything shifted to the digital platform. With easy access to smartphones and online connectivity all over the country, maybe it's time that we concentrated on this sector and thought of innovative ways to bring in the artisans under one network: to train them, to motivate them, to fund them and to showcase their products to ourselves and the world.

By Mehrin Mubdi Chowdhury  
Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed

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