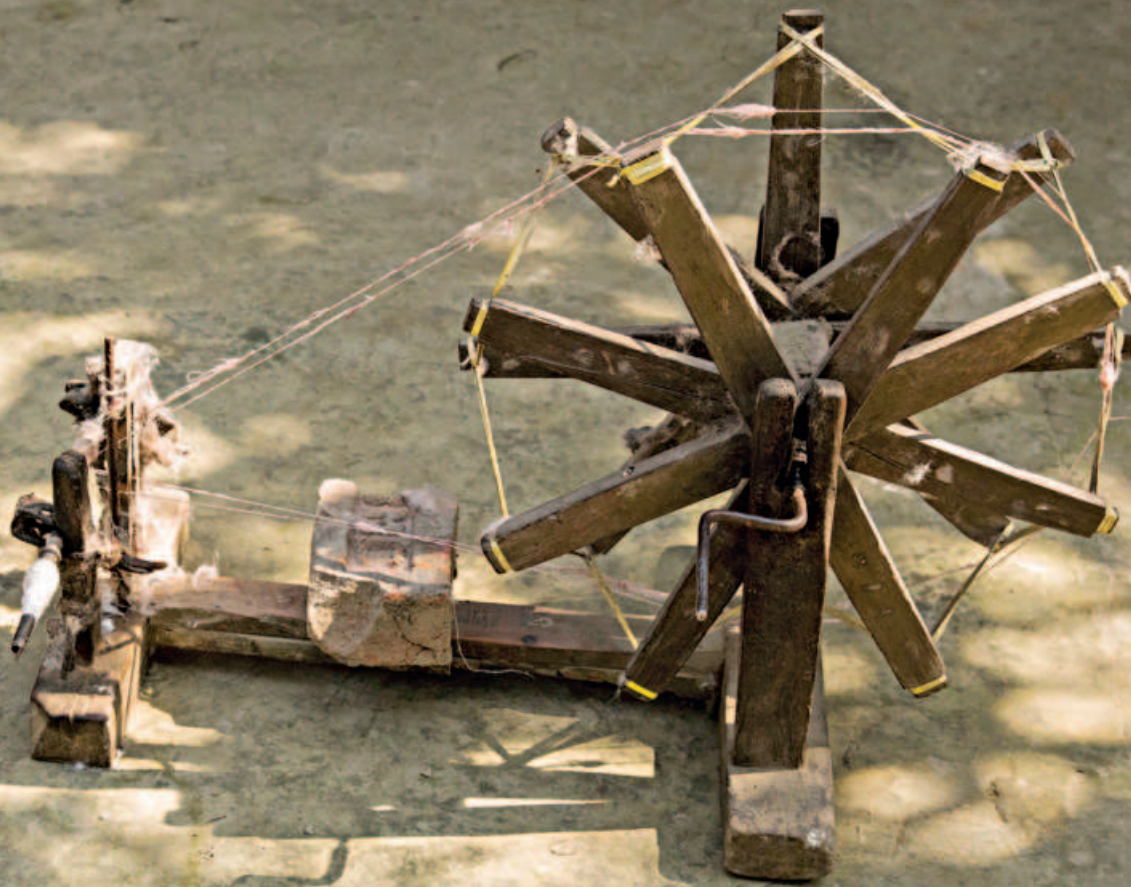


# KHADI

## Reviving a weave of the past



“When they sell, ‘copper’ turns to ‘gold’ but when we do, that very same ‘gold’ becomes dust...”

As depressing as it may sound, these are the very words Chintaharan Debnath, a khadi merchant, used to depict the current state of the handloom khadi industry in Bangladesh.

“Business is dead! We cannot even get ‘katunis’ to spin the cotton for us!” added the master crafter who once had a thriving business. Blaming the middlemen for being dishonest and deceiving the labourers of their dues, Chintaharan Debnath was quite sceptical about the future.

“Do you think we haven’t seen reporters cover this story before? Things will never change if the system doesn’t! As long as people in the trade do not respect our hard work and learn to value the difference between automation and artisanship, nothing will ever change,” said a dejected Debnath with all the weight in his heart.

To get a hold of the backdrop, we travelled as far as Chandina, Cumilla, to a village called Debidwar, where several families still deal with khadi commerce, trying to make a living out of the age-old trade.

Ranjit Debnath, another merchant of



the Khadi trade, was slightly more positive about the circumstances.

“I would not say the trade is dead, but the originality has certainly been tampered with. Today, the entire world is inclined towards fast-paced automation. Handloom has been replaced by power looms to make way for the increase in demand and deal with the rising costs.

“We must also take into consideration that handlooms are uber expensive, and take a lot of time to manufacture; in a free market economy, the transition towards a faster-paced alternative is inevitable, but that does not necessarily mean that we can forget our past or our heritage,” articulated the knowledgeable tradesman.

What Ranjit Debnath probably meant is that end-products of handloom will always be more expensive compared to machine-produced items, but they would also be inimitable; with no two products telling the same story.

Thus, this exclusivity must be appreciated by everyone, especially those involved in the chain of trade —middlemen, traders, retailers and customers.

“A master weaver can weave 15 metres of khadi fabric by hand in an entire day whereas in the case of automation, more than 150 yards can be produced; that too using just one machine! But in the former case, the handiwork will always be different with a unique story to tell on each fabric — we need to know the difference,” reiterated Chintaharan Debnath.

Probir Shaha, another trader of ‘deshi’ fabrics helped us get around the village, meet with the local artisans, and craftsmen and also witness a traditional ‘khadi gaddi’ and a loom factory upfront.

Sadly, everything looked rusty; the charkhas collecting dust, sitting idle in the far corner of rooms with thatched roofs. The wooden looms were replaced by enormous modern machines of steel and cast iron; cotton spinners, ‘katunis’ were completely absent from the scene — probably employed at the local garment’s factory, earning a much higher salary compared to the meagre amount of Tk 10 to Tk 30 per hour assigned to cotton spinners on an average.

“How can we offer more? The middlemen don’t want to pay one taka extra for our efforts! If we raise the wages, the end price would spike and that means a lot of good fabric would be wasted because no one wants to pay for them,” said Chintaharan Debnath while revealing the complex situation.