

# TRADITIONS TREASURED, ARTISANS IN SHADOWS

## Is UNESCO's recognition truly benefiting local craftspeople?

On 6 December 2023, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) announced the inclusion of Bangladesh's iconic rickshaws and rickshaw art on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Similarly, many of our heritage crafts, namely the traditional art of Jamdani and Shital Pati weaving were given recognition by UNESCO in 2013 and 2017 respectively.

But how are our artisans doing? Are they — the true bearers of these traditions — reaping any tangible benefits from this international recognition?

UNESCO's recognition of any heritage craft is often seen as a hallmark of international acknowledgement and respect. Hence, this prestigious accreditation is supposed to attract international interest and tourism — which should, in theory, lead to increased market demand and higher income for the artisans, spurring governmental and non-governmental efforts to preserve and support these crafts.

The primary goals when recognising any intangible heritage craft have been to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage and ensure respect for the communities, groups, and individuals concerned. As an intergovernmental body, UNESCO works with the government to develop better policies.

And the positive impact of UNESCO's recognition on communities and artisans cannot be overlooked. In Bangladesh, efforts to revive the art of Jamdani making have not only preserved a significant aspect of the nation's cultural heritage but also promoted economic sustainability for the artisans involved.

Therefore, in many ways, UNESCO's recognition acts as a catalyst for policy development, and research — underscoring the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage not just as a means of preserving cultural identities, but also as a vehicle for sustainable development and economic resilience.

The acclaimed fashion designer, researcher, author and President of the National Crafts Council of Bangladesh (NCCB), Chandra Shekhar Shaha, shares his perspective to help us see the bigger picture. He explains, "UNESCO's recognition serves as an international accreditation, uplifting the global status of the acknowledged heritage. However, the

importance of our traditional crafts should not solely rely on UNESCO's recognition."

In 2008, Baul music was inscribed to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and in 2016, it was the Mangal Shobhajatra, celebrated on Pahela Baishakh. So, if UNESCO didn't recognise them, would we have stopped listening to Baul songs or observing Mangal Shobhajatra?

Shaha points out that artisans of our country have

continued their artistry long before UNESCO's acknowledgement and this emphasises that the intrinsic value of these crafts exists independently, regardless of international recognition.

Therefore, it would be wrong to assume that UNESCO's recognition would naturally increase both the status and income of the artisans. Numerous socio-economic factors



— such as the demand for the product, place of residence, and the extent of literacy — play a vital role in dictating the flow of opportunities and income to these artisans. While the acknowledgement from an international organisation has brought attention, especially from the media to these artisans, is this attention helping them in any way to earn more money?

To answer this question, a rickshaw artist, Md Monir Hossain, says, "After receiving UNESCO's recognition, I have benefitted in numerous ways and among them, the attention from the media and the Ministry of Cultural Affairs has been like blessings for me."

According to Hossain, the Ministry of

especially in Dhaka — should support artists by purchasing rickshaw paintings, which would immensely benefit those who are yet to receive any notable support. So, the picture does not seem too gloomy for rickshaw artisans and perhaps, the rickshaw art will someday cross the threshold of our country and be featured in international galleries. However, it will not be possible without the continuous effort not only from the government but also from us.

Despite the optimistic outlook, the current scenario for the Shital Pati weavers, like Horendro Kumar from Moulvibazar, is bleak. Despite UNESCO's recognition, Kumar laments the lack of tangible benefits. "Neither the government nor NGOs are giving us any financial support; people do not show any interest in our craft," he states despairingly. The grim reality is that this lack of interest and support may lead to the extinction of Shital Pati weaving.

Now and then, we see elderly artisans like Horendro Kumar being invited to many folk festivals in the capital. However, are they receiving any significant benefits? The answer may disappoint us all as Kumar informs us that people would rather take pictures of their products than purchase one. Again, a common notion among people is that traditional products like Shital Pati and Jamdani sarees are too expensive.

Highlighting the existing economic disparities in our society, Chandra Shekhar Shaha remarks, "We are not yet a developed country and on top of that, the ongoing recession has made everything worse. So, why would people buy a Tk 500 worth of Shital Pati when they can buy a plastic mat for Tk 80 or 100? I have talked to many artisans and they mourn not because general people do not show any interest in their crafts. Their misery lies in the fact that people who can afford it do not buy their products!"

For many artisans, the awareness of UNESCO's recognition is minimal. Most artisans are unaware of the international recognition given to their crafts, indicating a disconnect between international

accolades and the artisans' everyday realities.

A case in point is the Jamdani weavers. Mohammad Arif and Mohammad Al Amin are weavers with more than two decades of experience. However, none of them are aware of the recognition given to Jamdani weaving by UNESCO.

"The thread for Jamdani saree has become more expensive...we can't even properly pay our house rent," Arif reveals. The rising inflation and meagre wages leave artisans like him pondering if UNESCO's recognition holds any practical value. "So, if we can't eat, what will we do with UNESCO's recognition?" he questions.

Echoing this sentiment, Mohammad Al Amin, another Jamdani weaver, highlights the disparity between the prices of sarees and their income. Despite some sarees selling for Tk 2 to 3 lakhs, the weavers' earnings have remained stagnant. "Our income is still the same as it was 10 years ago, but most of the benefits are reaped by either Mahajans or business owners, who buy our products at a cheaper rate," he says, pointing out the monopoly of unethical middlemen and stakeholders in the business.

Presently, machines are being used in Jamdani weaving, but according to Al Amin, they cannot replicate the quality of handwoven sarees, yet the artisans find themselves receiving little recognition. This brings us to question the two-fold effect of the commercialisation of traditional crafts.

UNESCO's recognition can translate into economic benefits for many artisans. By promoting cultural enterprises, artisans may reach wider markets, thereby improving their economic prospects. Contrastingly, the commercialisation of heritage products — say Jamdani sarees — often a by-product of increased visibility and market demand can lead to the dilution of authenticity.

If a machine does the work of our artisans, what will happen to them? And again, can machines replicate the magical touch, which the artisans imprint on the Jamdani sarees? So, there's a delicate balance between preserving the integrity of traditional crafts and adapting them to contemporary markets.

The responsibility of UNESCO is to draw our attention to these heritage crafts,

which it has been successfully doing. But what about our responsibility? What can we do to improve the socio-economic condition of our artisans? It is high time that we started thinking about how we can help translate this global attention into tangible benefits for the artisans.

Designer Chandra Shekhar Shaha advises, "If people from urban society appreciate and purchase items like rickshaw paintings for display in their homes and Jamdani sarees for the wardrobe, it can benefit the artisans. Otherwise, the beauty and value of these crafts risk remaining unnoticed."

In this modern age, where the new often overshadows the old, today's youth — armed with education and a global perspective — can play an important role in changing the narrative. What if instead of just taking photos and videos of the artisans, we buy one or two products from them, maybe as a gift for our loved ones? This small act of generosity would largely benefit the craftspeople.

The voice of the youth can be a powerful tool in advocacy. Campaigning for policies that support artisans, such as grants, subsidies, or improved working conditions, can bring about significant changes. Moreover, young designers collaborating with skilled artisans can result in creations that resonate with both the past and the present. These collaborations can also focus on sustainability, attracting environmentally conscious consumers and adding an extra layer of relevance to these crafts.

The inclusion of Bangladesh's heritage crafts in UNESCO's list is truly a commendable step towards preserving these traditional art forms. However, the true measure of success lies in the tangible benefits that trickle down to the artisans themselves.

While there have been some positive developments, much work remains to be done. Only through collaborative endeavours from governmental, and non-governmental and people in general can we ensure that the artisans — the heart and soul of these crafts — receive the recognition and remuneration they truly deserve.

By Ayman Anika  
Photo: LS Archive/ Sazzad Ibne Sayed,  
STAR / Anis



Cultural Affairs recently awarded certificates, a stipend of Tk 9,000 and shawls with rickshaw paintings to 111 rickshaw artists, including Monir.

Along with the accreditation, Hossain has been approached by several people for work. "This recognition has helped not only me, but also many rickshaw artists around the country," he adds, expressing hope for continued support from both governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Md Monir Hossain also suggests that corporate offices in urban areas —