7. Entrepreneurs Craft the Future of Collective Artisanal Economies in Bangladesh[1]

Upasana Bhattacharjee

Abstract
This chapter explores the platformization of crafts and artisanal work in Bangladesh. As digitization and e-commerce are hailed as modes of regenerating in an industry caught between automation anxiety and cultural revival, social entrepreneurship emerges as the agent driving such transformations. In a country where a limited section of the population can access the internet, social entrepreneurs and artist entrepreneurs represent two different agents that can capitalize on changes in the artisanal sector. But discourses and structural transformations relying on such individualistic actors, I argue, are not well-suited for the artisanal sector in Bangladesh. Artisanal work has geographically located histories that have evolved through collective practices. Narratives centred around entrepreneurship leave little space and agency for collective actors for whom cultural revival is not rhetoric for national pride but a question of livelihood.

Keywords: artisanal work, Bangladesh, informal work, cultural revival, platformization, creative work

Introduction

As COVID-19 brought businesses and livelihoods to a standstill in Bangladesh, several sectors had to rely on the internet to keep functioning.

1 A version of this chapter was previously published in the Global Dev Blog: https://globaldev.blog/blog/will-e-commerce-revive-bangladesh%E2%80%99s-artisanal-economy

Arora, P., U. Raman, and R. König (eds.), *Feminist Futures of Work: Reimagining Labour in the Digital Economy*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023
DOI 10.5117/9789463728386_CH07

Traditional artisans were among those compelled to go online to sell their crafts, clothing, and jewellery, either individually or as part of a collective. Oftentimes, these collectives partner with existing boutiques and small businesses that rely on social media for sales. Against this backdrop of increased online activity in the sector of craft and artisanal work, it is worth looking closely at this emergent form of entrepreneurship in the creative economy in Bangladesh.

Craft and artisanal work have traditionally been collective activities, rooted in geographic locations (often rural areas) and tied closely to the availability of resources, local traditions, and aesthetics. The artisanal sector, broadly comprising craft work, handlooms, and garment work, has been affected by labour migration, urbanization, eroding resources, and absent linkages (Sharmin and Hossain 2020). National attention to a sector that has seen decline over the past few decades has come in phases and is marked by the rhetoric of heritage revival. This is shaped by political agendas, policy frameworks, labour laws, and private sector initiatives. The sector is closely connected to cultural heritage and traditional arts/crafts in the country, and has historically evolved through local knowledge and customs of artisanal communities. For instance, the process of weaving *Jamdani saris*, a form of handloom, is intricate and long, and usually involves several craftspeople. *Nakshi Kantha* is a form of quilt-making, popular in rural Bangladesh, wherein women come together to embroider and make quilts, enjoying a space of leisure away from their domestic duties and roles (Banu 2009; Chen 1984).

Such recognition and articulation of collectives centre them in processes of crafts and artisanal work. The evolution of artisanal work and products is thus deeply tied to collectives and their relationships with geography and culture. Centring collectives in these conversations also makes space to talk about joint activism and mobilization of workers for visibility and informal organizing for social change (Kapoor 2007). But how does a nation participate in the digital creative economy, centred on individual entrepreneurship while acknowledging its legacy in collectives producing crafts? In this chapter, based on interviews with the upper management of organizations working in the artisanal sector in Bangladesh and content analysis of their websites, I explore the emergence of and factors shaping the narrative of revival of artisanal work. I argue that as digitization and e-commerce are hailed as modes of regenerating an industry caught between automation anxiety and cultural revival, social entrepreneurship has emerged as an agent driving such transformations, at the cost of collective voices and representations of craftwork.

Women Entrepreneurs in E-commerce

Over the course of the pandemic, Bangladesh has seen an upsurge in the number of women signing up to be entrepreneurs online, with the number of social media users seeing a twenty-five per cent increase between 2020 and 2021 (Kemp 2021). Some women entrepreneurs had explored online marketplaces in the past, and as COVID-19 increased the overall dependence on the internet (as a marketplace and as a medium for exchange and learning), a lot of them saw an increase in their sales and engagement. Based on interviews with a few such sellers, *The Dhaka Tribune*, a leading national daily in Bangladesh, reported that the Women and E-Commerce Forum of Bangladesh (WE) had been a catalyst in their success (Irani, B. 2020).

The WE, an organization that began in 2017 in the wake of Digital Bangladesh initiatives, has been training entrepreneurs and organizing certificate courses for them. Gradually, the organization started focusing on e-commerce and entrepreneurship. WE's website[2] speaks about its commitment to social development that is driven by women, particularly through digitalization.

Facebook as the Virtual Creative Economy

Most women entrepreneurs who are part of WE sell through Facebook pages. With their catalogues online, Facebook pages become a site for marketing and selling their products. Facebook is a popular social media platform in Bangladesh with 67.245 million users. While no substantial data is available on the number of such pages on Facebook, WE reports that there are 400K+ women entrepreneurs and over a million members on Facebook.[3] Academic work on social media as sites of e-commerce highlight that in developing countries, these have become avenues for livelihood, creating a class of Digital Subsistence Entrepreneurs, who pursue online entrepreneurship opportunities for survival. Social media sites such as Facebook enable people to identify business opportunities, construct markets, build trust within communities and with potential customers, and create value (Camacho and Barrios 2022). Different aspects of platform architecture and affordances (such as content visibility to public/private lists, time periods for the availability of content, modes of engagement, nature of audience, etc.) determine

2 https://weforumbd.com/

3 https://weforumbd.com/about-us

how people use social media to present and manage their identity online (DeVito et al. 2017).

Pages for boutiques and businesses (predominantly clothing, jewellery, and handicraft) are often in Bengali. Their pages list WhatsApp phone numbers through which orders are booked and finalized. While digital platforms act as mediums that intermediate transactions and audiences, the market targeted here are Bangladeshis who are socio-economically well-off with access to internet and smartphones. Even as craft and artisanal work is beginning to get more attention from state and private bodies, individual sellers communicate in Bengali, implying that the audience they envision is one rooted within Bangladesh as well as their global diasporas, and that they might not be vying for recognition in typical Global North-centred international craft markets.

Social Entrepreneurs Drive Cultural Revival and Place-Making

The vision of an international representation of Bangladesh's craftwork is rather wide, shared by both state and private bodies. As an entrepreneur[4] working with muslin weavers explained:

> But to me Muslin also became an example of reviving multiple issues. One was reviving identity, that we should be proud of what we had in the past. [...] So, such an enormous brand comes from the villages of a country. Before [the] internet, before newspapers, before iPhones and all that, [this was] such a strong identity. The value of that identity and the power of that identity that moved the country back to having an association with this identity. So that was an important part of reviving our heritage (Personal interview).

The last few years have seen the emergence of digital platforms that work with artisans and collectives on skilling and selling their products online. Some platforms focus primarily on equipping artisanal communities with the training and resources to accommodate automation, technology, and digital platforms, and others focus on the process of craft (sourcing materials, labour, space, profitability) and making it more profitable.

Platforms in this landscape are caught between two different forces. The first is that of cultural revival. Cultural artefacts play a crucial role

4 All names used in this chapter have been withheld to protect identity.

in processes of place-making. Place as identity, pride, and belonging is articulated through cultural symbols and processes that represent specific geographic locations. In an increasingly globalized world, place-making is contentious both in terms of authority and claim—what constitutes culture and who gets to claim it? As such, cultural symbols, artefacts, and processes transform into performances and commodities. Through architecture, heritage walks, religious and traditional events, literary, art, and craft festivals, the relationship between people, local culture, and places is (re) invented and asserted (Singh 2018). Reviving traditional arts, crafts, and cultural products assumes urgency because of their significance as symbols of national heritage and cultural identity. Government schemes and policies, thus, do not just invest in the revival of artisanal production but in the production of a cultural identity as well. In trying to revive the artisanal sector, the agenda is also to renew the cultural identity and national pride they provide. Reviving the artisanal sector becomes a process of restoring past glory and national identity.

The second is the threat of worker displacement that automation poses. Machine interventions are primarily at the entry level, and as this is dominated by a female workforce. So, the threat of worker displacement is largely gendered in nature. Further contributing to these threats are patterns in hiring and management that favour male workers in training and technical skills (Sakamoto and Krasley 2019). These forces in the background shape the emergence and operations of platforms in the artisanal sector.

Digital platforms such as these have social entrepreneurs at the helm. A key characteristic of social entrepreneurship is its use of neoliberal, entrepreneurial means in service of the common good (Gandini et al. 2017). The upper management of a skilling platform for garment workers discussed how the platform was conceptualized:

> And so then, you know, she [the founder of the company] also talked to some of the researchers in Bangladesh who are doing researches on the female workers, because you know at one point of time, I would say more than sixty-four per cent of the workforce is constituted by the female, but it is no longer true. Now it's something it's below fifty per cent, right?[5] Question is that where has that fifteen or fourteen per cent female gone? So that's basically a one point that strike her mind. And she kind of you

5 According to the International Labour Organization, 63.4 per cent of the readymade garment industry workforce of Bangladesh comprised women in 2010, which fell to 61.1 per cent in 2018 (Matsuura and Teng 2020).

> know vowed that this is the place where she can do something. So that's how it started [...] and that's basically to help the vulnerable female workers. So that's the bottom line (Personal interview).

Driven strongly by an ethical motive, social entrepreneurs resolve to "change the world" through a largely individualistic ethos (Gandini et al. 2017). Scholars such as Lilly Irani (2019) note that there is an emergent group of "entrepreneurial citizens" in India who are enlisted for national building and establishing markets. Such initiatives and interventions, and the entrepreneurs behind them, operate with a certain capital and privilege as a prerequisite. Without a critical interrogation of the same, it becomes easy to treat such entrepreneurial capacities as ideals and norms, while ignoring the material realities and possibilities of groups and communities lacking similar privileges, working towards development in emerging economies.

Artist-Entrepreneurs in E-commerce

While this trend of emerging platforms converges into the broader goal of recognition for Bangladesh's craftwork in international markets, the trend signals a different approach to that of the WE. They are both trying to weave together cultural identity and social development through the introduction of digital platforms in the craft sector.

Spaces like WE offer opportunities for several artist-entrepreneurs to network and support each other. Gandini, Bandinelli, and Cossu (2017) note that networks of artists and entrepreneurs are redefining what collaboration and community look like in creative work. They argue that community here refers to collaborative approaches to work that embeds social relations within economic networks. Competition and solidarities coexist in the workforce of the creative industries. Both geographical proximities in cities and an online presence through social media are conducive mediums for organizing workers into collectives and building solidarities. While these provide avenues for finding a sense of community, networks, and collectivization, workers acknowledge that there is rivalry and competition amidst them for the same projects and positions (Morgan and Nelligan 2018; Patel 2017).

WE can thus be understood as a network or collective of artist-entrepreneurs. Artist-entrepreneurs, with the increased focus on digitalization, usually represent women who are literate and can access the internet. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, in 2019, only 8.7 per cent of the poorest twenty per cent households in Bangladesh could access

the internet, compared to 75.3 per cent of their richest twenty per cent (Dhaka Tribune 2020). The popularity of the figure of "women entrepreneur" in mainstream media narratives, whose background is one of struggle, emancipation, and independence (and more implicitly, that of individuality), centres the narrative of the artist-entrepreneur: usually homemakers and women who can access the internet comfortably and can navigate tactics of presenting themselves and their narratives online.

Most of WE's members are entrepreneurs working on clothing, fashion, and crafts. Several women who were able to increase their income through e-commerce in the past year acknowledged that membership in WE played a key role in increasing their engagement and sales (Irani 2020). Membership into the organization is opt-in, and while there is no data on the socio-economic background of the entrepreneurs who are part of WE, news and media coverage mostly speak about women who already had an online presence for their boutiques and crafts businesses.

Media coverage of women entrepreneurs often creates a narrative through their backgrounds and personal lives, highlighting their struggles and difficulties, and discussing how entrepreneurial craftwork has been a process of empowerment and financial independence for them. The presence of a narrative becomes essential to one's professional identity (Morgan and Nelligan 2018). In the case of craftworkers, a narrative that brings forth their private lives into the public domain by making their family, their homes/studios, their positions as wives, mothers, and daughters a central element of their *brand* online. While their craft follows a certain aesthetic online, so does their self-presentation (Luckman 2015).

For instance, any discussion around the revival of Nakshi Kantha, a form of embroidery (on worn clothes) which was popular with women in rural Bangladesh, is incomplete without the mention of Surayia Rahman. Rahman was an artist whose embroidery and *Kantha* designs were highly acclaimed. She worked extensively on teaching Nakshi Kantha embroidery to women in Bangladesh, bringing together their economic empowerment and the Kantha cultural revival. The craftform had seen a decline in the twentieth century and discussions on its revival are incomplete without invoking Rahman's contribution (Ravi 2017). While Rahman's legacy as an artist and crafts activist is crucial to Kantha revival, it is also noteworthy that her background as a woman affected by the partition is invoked in discussions of her contribution. For (artist) entrepreneurs, their work speaks for them, but more interestingly, their personal lives speak for their work as well.

Following the rise of Etsy (an online marketplace for handmade products and crafts) in the Global North, the craft economy went through a phase of

platformization that made online self-presentation or what Luckman (2015, 113) refers to as "self-making," a necessary strategy for micro-enterprises. This refers to craftworkers presenting a well-rounded version online which includes their craft of course, but also spins their home and family into a cohesive narrative that joins work with the personal and the social. The emotional, performative, and aesthetic labour that goes into maintaining an online image makes craftworkers "people" before workers and businesses.

The extensively strategized self-presentation of creative workers online also determines their ways of engaging with other creative workers, their followers, and their potential audience. Karen Patel (2017) identifies that creative workers endorse, collaborate, and engage with fellow workers on social media in order to signal expertise and attain legitimacy as experts in their fields. Spaces such as the WE, on Facebook and social media, present alternatives for creating solidarities and collaborations in competitive creative industries. Brooke Erin Duffy (2016) shows that social media acts as a way for people to channel affective labour into building a sense of community and a network in their followers—a large number of followers indicating success.

Blurring the boundaries between work and leisure, social media becomes a space of labour instead of pleasure for creative workers. Duffy (2016) identifies a drive to maintain authenticity and an image of realness in creative workers who argue that their work exists at the margins of traditional industries/professions. Personal narratives and an identity that is consistent across social media defines self-presentation online for creative workers. Workers constantly need to balance the making and marketing that goes into their craft. With freelancing being pervasive in the industry, self-management becomes a powerful process that reflects the social and cultural capital workers already possess (Duffy 2016; Hracs and Leslie 2014; Win 2014).

Emancipation and Cultural Preservation: Entrepreneurship to the Rescue?

And thus, in highlighting stories of craftwork that focus on personal struggles and individual victories, the narrative of the artist-entrepreneur (who is literate and internet-savvy) is reiterated—which, while important, becomes dominant. This narrative portrays craft workers as homemakers/women who have access to the internet and social media, and are able to find financial independence and emancipation in e-commerce. Workers who do not share this narrative are invisibilized. These include rural communities that have

historical connections with craft and artisanal work, which depended on their geographical locations, and in turn, was their primary source of income. The consequences are not only discursive, but also material.

This becomes pertinent as we consider the collective nature of craftwork in Bangladesh. Traditionally, the Kantha craftwork was a way for rural women to embroider old and worn out clothes collectively. Taking place in domestic spaces, Kantha was a leisure activity in their own private space, but away from their family responsibilities. Similarly, another prominent artisanal craft in Bangladesh has been the Jamdani, which has an intricate and delicate process of making, involving several people at once. Jamdani garments have been popular and luxurious, having had an international market for centuries, and this is a symbol of national and cultural pride for Bangladesh in international craft (Chen 1984; Akhter and Ullah 2020).

For a sector that began and evolved with collective processes of making, the increasing prevalence of narratives that centre entrepreneurs needs to be interrogated further. The figure of the entrepreneur has become crucial to the agenda of social development in South Asia that depends on the relationship between technological innovations and social values. Norms and practices of entrepreneurship are channelled into an entrepreneurial quality in citizenship that becomes responsible for development and change, without questioning existing social structures (Irani, L. 2019). Through expertise and technological solutions, they are charged with emancipating underprivileged populations. Several academics critique how innovation and disruption are treated as solutions to societal problems (that exist because of deep structural issues) where the interventions do not affect bigger structural issues, and in many cases, misunderstand processes as problems (Irani, L. and Chowdhury 2019; Morozov 2014). Such challenges are critical with increasingly neoliberal transitions that provide private sector-oriented solutions in the absence of direct state involvement (Abraham and Rajadhyaksha 2015).

Conclusion

Narratives that valourize the entrepreneurial spirit display a vision for social development that emphasizes individual risk-taking, drive, and skills. This emphasis on an individualistic entrepreneurial sensibility is favoured by commercial digital platforms (e-commerce and social media) and a state that is receding from the realm of welfare. This suggests a shift in the way the sector is organized, and further threatens the opportunities and survival of vulnerable groups who have historically formed a major portion

of the workforce. These actors and their relationships are thus excluded or invisibilized. Artisanal communities that practised traditional crafts found themselves out of work for several reasons such as migration, urbanization, lack of availability of resources, and absence of linkages with markets and other industries (Sharmin and Hossain 2020; Banu 2009). An entrepreneurial spirit alone is unlikely to be an adequate solution for reviving the sector.

We need to evaluate the circumstances of the revival of craftwork while keeping its history and collective tradition in mind. Through media narratives, digital intermediaries, and commercialization, individual women entrepreneurs who can access the internet attain prominence in the sector, often resulting in the marginalization of already vulnerable groups such as rural communities that have historically depended on crafts and artisanal work for survival. These largely emulate patterns of craftwork and platformization in the Global North that centre individual artist-entrepreneurs who manage their self-presentation online in addition to their craft and products.

Communities traditionally working in the crafts sector have been grappling with unemployment, inadequate skilling, eroding resources, and absent linkages. We need to attend to such interdependent structural issues by asking the tough questions—who gets to be empowered by the digitization of the craft industry? What kinds of ethical global value chains can we ask for if we want an inclusive and sustainable marketplace? These require targeted state-led solutions that address industry linkages, markets, and knowledge preservation. The sector needs broader social initiatives and mobilization to address profit-sharing and the significance of crafts in the public sphere. We need a new vocabulary of agency for collectives, craftspeople, and workers in the sector that centres their needs and experiences.

Bibliography

Abraham, Itty and Ashish Rajadhyaksha. "State Power and Technological Citizenship in India: From the Postcolonial to the Digital Age." *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 9, no. 1 (2015): 65–85. https://doi.org/10.1215/18752160-2863200.

Akhter, Rawshon and Mohammad Sahid Ullah. "Locked Down but Unlocked: How Online Retail May Preserve Bangladesh's Jamdani Heritage Craft." *FemLab*, December 7, 2020. https://femlab.co/2020/12/07/locked-down-but-unlocked-how-online-retail-may-preserve-bangladeshs-jamdani-heritage-craft/.

Banu, Lisa S. "Defining the Design Deficit in Bangladesh." *Journal of Design History* 22, no. 4 (2009): 309–23. https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epp046.

Camacho, Sonia and Andrés Barrios. "Social Commerce Affordances for Female Entrepreneurship: The Case of Facebook." *Electronic Markets*: 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-021-00487-y.

Chen, Martha Alter. "Kantha and Jamdani: Revival in Bangladesh." *India International Centre Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1984): 45–62. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23001703.

DeVito, Michael A., Jeremy Birnholtz and Jeffery T. Hancock. "Platforms, People, and Perception: Using Affordances to Understand Self-Presentation on Social Media." *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing* (2017): 740–54. https://doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998192.

Dhaka Tribune. "Survey: 62% Households in Bangladesh Have No Internet Access." *Dhaka Tribune*, December 1, 2020. https://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/12/01/survey-62-households-in-bangladesh-have-no-internet-access.

Duffy, Brooke Erin. "The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour in the Digital Culture Industries." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2016): 441–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877915572186.

Gandini, Alessandro, Carolina Bandinelli and Alberto Cossu. "Collaborating, Competing, Co-working, Coalescing: Artists, Freelancers and Social Entrepreneurs as the 'New Subjects' of the Creative Economy." In *Collaborative Production in the Creative Industries,* edited by James Graham and Alessandro Gandini, 15–33. London: University of Westminster Press, 2017. https://doi.org/10.16997/book4.

Hracs, Brian. J. and Deborah Leslie. "Aesthetic Labour in Creative Industries: The Case of Independent Musicians in Toronto, Canada." *Area* 46, no. 1 (2014): 66–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12062.

Irani, Bilkis. "Online Business: WE Turns a Wheel of Fortune for Women Entrepreneurs." *Dhaka Tribune*, August 10, 2020. https://archive.dhakatribune.com/business/commerce/2020/08/10/online-business-we-turns-a-wheel-of-fortune-for-women-entrepreneurs.

Irani, Lilly. *Chasing Innovation: Making Entrepreneurial Citizens in Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Irani, Lilly and Rumman Chowdhury. "To Really 'Disrupt,' Tech Needs to Listen to Actual Researchers." *Wired*, June 26, 2019. https://www.wired.com/story/tech-needs-to-listen-to-actual-researchers/.

Kapoor, Aditi. "The SEWA Way: Shaping Another Future for Informal Labour." *Futures* 39, no. 5 (2007): 554–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2006.10.004.

Kemp, Simon. "Digital in Bangladesh: All the Statistics You Need in 2021 – DataReportal – Global Digital Insights." *DataReportal*, February 11, 2021. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-bangladesh.

Luckman, Susan. *Craft and the Creative Economy*. Basingstoke: Springer, 2015.

Matsuura, Aya and Carly Teng "Understanding the Gender Composition and Experience of Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Workers in Bangladesh." International Labour Organization, 2020. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_754669.pdf.

Morgan, George and Pariece Nelligan. *The Creativity Hoax: Precarious Work in the Gig Economy*. London: Anthem Press, 2018.

Morozov, Evgeny. *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*. New York: Public Affairs, 2014.

Patel, Karen. "Expertise and Collaboration: Cultural Workers' Performance on Social Media." In *Collaborative Production in the Creative Industries*, edited by James Graham and Alessandro Gandini, 157–76. London: University of Westminster Press, 2017. https://doi.org/10.16997/book4.

Ravi, S. "A Helping Hand." *The Hindu*, March 24, 2017. https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/art/a-helping-hand/article17638516.ece.

Sakamoto, C. and Sarah Krasley. "Upskilling for Digital Transformation: Preparing the Fashion Supply Chain for the Future of Work." *Shimmy*, 2019.

Sharmin, Faria and Sharif Tousif Hossain. "Revitalization of Handloom Communities for Preserving the Craft Heritage of Bangladesh." *Urban and Regional Planning* 5, no. 1 (2020): 1–10. doi: 10.11648/j.urp.20200501.11.

Singh, Binti. "Cultural Resurgence, Place Making and Urbanism." *Indian Anthropologist* 48, no. 2 (2018): 7–20. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26757762.

Win, Thet Shein. "Marketing the Entrepreneurial Artist in the Innovation Age: Aesthetic Labor, Artistic Subjectivity, and the Creative Industries." *Anthropology of Work Review* 35, no. 1 (2014): 2–13. https://doi.org/10.1111/awr.12026.

About the Author

Upasana Bhattacharjee (upasana.bhattacharjee@mail.utoronto.ca) is a PhD student at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. She is an interdisciplinary researcher working at the intersection of digital labour and cultural production. At FemLab, she has been working on cultural production and creative work in the Global South. She holds a Master's in Development Studies from the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, India. She was a fellow at the Global Center of Spatial Methods for Urban Sustainability, Technische Universität Berlin. Trained in qualitative methods, her research interests lie in cultures of innovation, labour, and digital cultures.