

Notebandi makes dent in brass biz, hammers workers

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MORADABAD: The constant clang of artisans' wooden hammers and chisels shaping brassware in the bylanes of India's brass city never disturbs anyone. But its absence did recently, when exporters ran out of cash to pay workers following demonetisation.

The export industry, estimated to earn the city over \$1 billion annually, had to cut capacity to less than half for weeks, say factory owners who together employ over 3 lakh people. Artisans and labourers say their earnings simply halved. Scores lost jobs.

"The clanging is the ticking of life clocks. We're nursing ourselves back to life but the bruises are unlikely to heal soon," says Aman Ansari, chairman,

Moradabad brass artisans' association. The city got its name from Murad Baksh, son of emperor Shahjahan. The brass city was founded in 1625 by Mughal general Rustam Khan.

Demonetisation hit the city hard. Vishal Agarwal, owner of JMD International, says, "For the larger good, we were willing to suffer inconvenience and losses. But I'm yet to figure out who benefited from the Centre's move to demonetise." BJP was on a roll here following the 2014 Lok Sabha victory. The party's Kunwer Sarvesh Kumar won here and its mayoral candidate, Vinod Agarwal, won the bypoll in August 2016. But now, Agarwal believes, demonetisation has eroded core votes.

Job losses have had a more adverse impact than earlier believed. Syed Ghanim Miyan, head of the brass artisans' society,

says, "Lack of jobs have pushed people into recycling of e-waste, another illegal trade that's reached an alarming magnitude in the past few years." Miyan says artisans take out miniscule amounts of gold from computer chips but have no knowhow or the wherewithal to dispose of the hazardous objects. "They're exposed to toxic fumes daily as they burn the e-waste," he said. In the past few years, half of all printed circuit boards in India found their way into Moradabad, generating a staggering 9 tonnes of hazardous waste daily.

Officials say almost 50,000 people are involved in the illegal trade. The then UP chief secretary Javed Usmani had banned e-waste recycling in Moradabad, Ghaziabad and Hapur in 2014, but nothing much came of it. "We demanded an e-waste plant here. Though the city municipality and district administration took it up, the state government showed no interest," Ghanim Miyan said.

Samajwadi Party is recontesting in the district's six constituencies. The Congress got no ticket here even after the alliance. In 2012's assembly polls, BJP's Kunwar Sarvesh Kumar won Thakurdwara here but had to vacate it once he won Moradabad in 2014 Lok Sabha elections. SP's Nawab Jaan then won the seat. In another seat, Kanth, in the news after violence broke out over demands to remove loudspeaker at a religious place there in 2014, has 14 contestants, nine of them Muslim. In the Muslim-dominated Kundarki seat, 10 nominees are Muslim.