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Thousands of jute mill workers must be saved from destitution

Jute must make a sustainable comeback

THE end of the state-owned jute industry that has closed down 22 jute mills and laid off around 25,000 workers was a tragedy waiting to happen. Being laid off in the middle of a pandemic is a cruel blow to these workers who have families to feed and rents to pay. But it is not the pandemic that has led to the suffering of these people but decades of sheer neglect of the state-owned mills. Financial irregularities, inefficiency of resources, obsolete machinery and lack of any initiative to popularise the products produced made the end of these mills inevitable. This is made all the more obvious by the fact that jute mills in the private sector are making profits while the state-owned ones have, for decades, been running at a huge loss, with the government regularly bailing them out with rescue funds.

Why were these mills allowed to run at losses for years on end without any attempt to address the bottlenecks? Who really benefitted from these loss-making mills? Certainly not the tens of thousands of workers who have been protesting against the mismanagement of the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) and demanding their due wages for more than a year, only to be met by complete apathy. Hundreds of retired workers did not get their due benefits in the last ten years. The BJMC could do little to improve the industry, whereas it sucked thousands of crores of Taka from public funds.

The jute minister has said that financial benefits of all retired workers and wages and benefits of the current workers will be paid "in due time", and that a Tk 5,000 crore fund will be allocated for this purpose. We can only wonder why this was not done before. Why was the Mandatory Jute Packaging Act, 2010, which requires several agricultural products to be stored and marketed in jute bags, not enforced? There have been promises about the mills being modernised and reopened under public-private partnership, thus generating jobs that would be offered to the laid-off workers. Why didn't the modernisation take place at least ten years ago? In fact, how is there any guarantee that the land on which these mills are located, will not be sold off for the benefit of some, leaving the workers in the lurch?

The fate of the state-owned jute industry is representative of most of our state-owned enterprises, in which huge sums are invested, but are plagued with weak management, irregularities, no innovation, no product promotion and total disregard for workers' rights. The government, at this point, must first give the workers their dues and find ways to re-employ them. In the long run, the jute industry must be revived and cleansed of corrupt elements, with effective marketing of jute goods. If the government is committed to this cause, a revival of the golden fibre may be possible.

Anomalies in Covid-19 testing at Chattogram's BITID

Such mismanagement can cost lives

A recent report published in this paper reveals a shocking situation at the Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases (BITID) in Chattogram. There have been a growing number of allegations that the institute has mishandled test results of patients who got tested for Covid-19—making mistakes in labelling, giving reports after weeks and so on.

A patient—who gave his sample in late May and finally learnt he tested positive after several failed attempts, in mid-June—already received his result on June 27, but had June 28 as the designated date for sample collection and June 29 as the date of delivery. With such obvious mistakes, it is difficult for the patients to trust the accuracy of the results. The report says that some test results were found stacked in a basket and left on a table at the corridor of the institute, with no responsible staff to take care of them. Patients are supposed to rummage through the many stacks of papers in order to find their individual report. Not only does such a callous practice make it possible for the reports to go missing, but they remain vulnerable to the violation of a patient's privacy.

At a time when we are facing a formidable health crisis, such mismanagement in delivering reports, and the ensuing trouble caused by it, is weighing heavy on the already burdened patients. The institute's claim that there is a shortage of manpower is not an acceptable justification for such callousness, as the outcome of these results are a matter of life and death. When testing is our only means of hope, hospitals cannot be negligent in carrying them out in the most accurate manner possible—from the collection of the sample to the delivery of the report.

We urge the authorities to immediately take steps to ensure that all those who have been given the responsibility to diagnose Covid-19 do so with diligence, and hold responsible all the officials involved in the anomalies in BITID and take immediate action. The health ministry can intervene to provide the necessary support and coordinate with the hospital staff to safeguard the testing process. Testing is futile if it is done in such a careless manner and dangerous because these mistakes can lead to wrong diagnosis and treatment.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Pandemic burials

The practice of honouring the last rites of the deceased has been impeded by the pandemic, as it is unclear how long the virus can survive on a person who died of coronavirus. Therefore, arranging funerals has become a challenge for the victim's family. Many organisations and volunteers have come forward to take on the responsibility according to respective religious norms. They help the victim's family, from the first call to their final resting ground. I am immensely thankful to those individuals toiling round the clock to provide the last rites of the victims of Covid-19. They set a perfect example that humanity is still well and alive.

Samia Jahan, by email



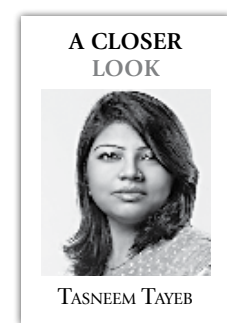
Indian Border Security Force (BSF) soldiers guard a highway leading towards Leh, bordering China, in Gagangir on June 17, 2020.

PHOTO: AFP/TAUSEEF MUSTAFA/GETTY IMAGE

INDIA-CHINA BORDER DISPUTE

Lack of actual control

Centuries of British colonial legacy remain a threat to Asia's regional stability



A CLOSER LOOK

TASNEEM TAYEB

that led to casualties on both sides, India and China's bilateral relationship has been through highs and lows over the centuries. But the modern day spats between the two countries are rooted deeply in the colonial legacy left by the British.

India and China are divided by a tricky border, which can be sub-categorised as the western, central and eastern sectors. While the problem with the eastern border can be attributed to the 1914 Shimla Convention and the creation of the McMahon Line, the problem in the western frontier goes back another half a century.

The disputed region of Galwan Valley where the recent fray broke out between the two countries is close to Aksai Chin, a region claimed by India and administered by China. And this has a lot to do with how the British rulers marked, unmarked and demarcated the area over decades for almost a century.

Following the 1846 Treaty of Amritsar, when the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was established which included Ladakh, WH Johnson—a British officer—was tasked with demarcating the boundary. In 1865, he suggested a border that presented Aksai Chin as part of Kashmir. This was later endorsed by Sir John Ardagh in 1897, the then British Director of Military Intelligence.

In his book, *India's Armed Forces: Fifty Years of War and Peace*, Ashok Krishna, a retired Major General of the Indian Army wrote, "British expeditions penetrating the uninhabited wastes of the mountains north of Kashmir found that the choice of boundary lay between the Karakoram range of mountains, which formed the watershed, and the Kuen Lun range, some 70 miles farther north. In order to secure the high ground, defenders are generally tempted to push their defences forward. Hence, the British Director of Military Intelligence, Sir John Ardagh, urged in 1897 that the line of the Kuen Lun should be claimed. This had been recommended by an officer of the Indian Survey, Johnson, who had led an expedition to the area in 1865... It was, therefore, known as the Johnson-Ardagh Line."

However, there was a problem. The British Viceroy Lord Elgin objected to it. He felt that maintaining India's claim to the area might create difficulties with China and suggested an alternative: the Macartney Line.

Hung Ta-chen, a senior Chinese official, shared the region's maps with the British consul general in Kashgar, George Macartney, in 1893. According to Ashok Krishna's book cited earlier, the new line "skirted the northern edge of the Karakoram mountains, but left the plateau between them and the Kuen Lun to Tibet, and, therefore, to China". In 1899, this line was presented to the Chinese by a British diplomat

and soldier, Sir Claude MacDonald, as the Macartney-Macdonald Line. China however, did not reply to this, but it was adopted by the British. It was assumed by some quarters that the Qing government in China accepted the boundary.

What followed in the next few decades was uncertainty. The British, while until 1908 accepted the Macartney-Macdonald Line as the boundary between India and China, officially acknowledged the Johnson-Ardagh Line after the 1911 Xinhai Revolution that led to the fall of the Chinese central power. And in 1927, the British government again decided to "readjust their version of the frontier", as mentioned in *India's Armed Forces: Fifty Years of War and Peace*. And even at the time of India's independence in 1947, the British had not been able to resolve the demarcation of the western border between India and China. Nor did the British discuss this with China or Tibet.

And border disputes between India and China on all three frontiers, especially the western and the eastern frontiers, continued.

True, India was the second non-Communist country, after Myanmar, to recognise the People's Republic of China in 1950. And even before that, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's show of sympathy for the Chinese—sending a special medical team to China during the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1938 and the boycotting of Japanese goods—demonstrate the soft corner India had for its neighbour, struggling for freedom like itself.

But it all took a u-turn in the fifties, when both countries tried to define their borders after finally breaking free from British imperialism. The border disputes became more apparent after India prepared a concrete map marking all frontiers in approximation of the Johnson-Ardagh Line in the west and the McMahon Line in the eastern parts of its border with China. Similarly, *China Pictorial*, an official Chinese monthly magazine, in July 1958, published a map of China, depicting—according to *The Indian Express* as published in an article titled, "Why Ladakh matters to India, China: history, geography, and strategy" dated, June 19, 2020—"large parts of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and the Himalayan territory of Ladakh as part of China".

Despite the common anti-imperialist sentimentality and the show of support for each other during trying times, the colonial legacy of the British finally prevailed. With tensions brewing across the border, it didn't take long for full-fledged war to break out in 1962: the First Sino-Indian War. A sort of a demarcation, which later came to be known as the Line of Actual Control—a contested and vaguely marked border between India and China, based loosely on the multiple lines the British had drawn between the two countries—was formed following the 1962 war. But bloodshed over disputed borders did not stop just there.

It was followed by the Second Sino-Indian War in 1967, also known as the Nathu La and Cho La clashes, a series of skirmishes that took place between September and October in the eastern frontier. According to an article titled, "India-China Border Dispute: A Conflict Explained", published by *The New York Times* on June 17, 2020, at least 1,000 Indian troops and around 800 Chinese

military soldiers died in the 1962 war; and the 1967 war claimed the lives of around 150 Indian soldiers and 340 Chinese troops. Although that was the last time before the June 15 clashes soldiers had been killed on either side, the disputed border remains a bone of contention for the two Asian giants, much to the dismay of the region.

For one, both India and China are major players in the social-economic landscape of the region. Countries such as Bangladesh, which consider both India and China as important neighbours and share strong bilateral ties with both, would not want tensions to escalate further between the two.

The economic fallout from any unrest between India and China would have major consequences for all the countries involved in trade with these two nations—almost all of their Asian neighbours. In 2019, Bangladesh's exports to India crossed USD one billion, according to the Export Promotion Council of India, as reported by a local Bangladeshi financial daily. During the corresponding period, China's imports from Bangladesh was USD 1.4 billion.

For now, the fire seems to have receded to some extent—despite the fears of the neighbouring countries, cooler heads seem to have prevailed. Both Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, in trying to deescalate the situation have demonstrated their maturity, prudence and wisdom as leaders of two of the fastest growing countries in the world, and nothing less is expected from them, given the important positions they hold in regional and world politics.

The nationalist agenda of both the governments makes it very challenging for them to assuage the concerns of their equally nationalist peoples, but pursuing the June 15 incident with attacks and counterattacks or severing of economic ties cannot be the solution.

While some elements in their knee-jerk reactions are calling for India to cut-off trade ties with China—and as a consequence of this the Indian Railways has indeed "scrapped project contracts awarded to multiple Chinese companies" as reported by TRT World—neither country should follow this path.

If anything, now more than ever, both countries should focus on strengthening their economic relationship to cushion the damages caused by their military misadventures in the Galwan Valley. More economic gains, happier people and prosperity will act as healing agents to tend to the deep wounds both have endured for decades, especially in the latter half of the last century. And both, along with their neighbours, including Bangladesh, should work together to strengthen regional bodies such as BIMSTEC, ASEAN, AIB and other economic platforms for stronger multilateral ties.

India right now might be feeling threatened by the Belt and Road initiative of China. The latter too is viewing India's move last year to repeal Article 370 of the Indian constitution—bifurcating Jammu and Kashmir, and changing Ladakh's status to a separate union territory from a region in J&K—as a way of asserting Indian control over the disputed region. India's recent construction of the 255-km Darkbuk-Shyok-DBO road along its side of the LAC has also raised concerns for

the Chinese. In a complex geo-political environment these concerns are perhaps inevitable. But while suspicion on the political front runs high, both countries must do everything they can to rise above them and find areas of common interest, especially in trade.

According to a recent report by *The Indian Express*, titled, "Why China trade ban will hurt India more", China accounts for five percent of India's exports and 14 percent of India's imports, while India's imports from China account for three percent of China's total exports and China's imports from India are less than one percent of its total imports. This reveals the room for more trade that can be engaged in by these two nations to further bolster their economies. Pulling the plug on this would be damaging for both the countries, especially when both are grappling to contain a fast-spreading pandemic. The Indian and Chinese economies have had to take the hit of Covid-19, and trade disruptions between the two would only harm both the peoples—pharmaceuticals and related raw materials feature prominently in their trade.

Sending martial art trainers to the Tibetan plateau to train the troops, as China reportedly did immediately before the recent clashes broke out—under a 1996 agreement none of the countries can carry guns or explosives in the area—or flying fighter jets over the flashpoint Himalayan region in an exhibition of its military prowess, as India did a few days back, are not acts of conciliation.

And to add to the worries, a Reuters report from last week suggests that China has built infrastructure in recent days, including bunkers and storage units for military equipment. Even as late as last month, those structures were not there. According to a BBC report, Indian defence analyst Ajai Shukla tweeted that "there is a large Chinese camp in the Galwan Valley, 1.5km into the Indian side of the LAC [Line of Actual Control]". And while neither India nor China has commented on this, the region remains nervous due to these developments.

China should immediately disengage its troops along the LAC in the western sector to fulfil its June 6 commitment, and both countries need to bring down the number of their military forces and armaments along the disputed Himalayan border according to bilateral agreements between the two countries. Any structure or infrastructure that can be cause of concern or dispute should be immediately dismantled by both countries. India and China need to engage in high-level diplomatic negotiations and determine their own borders, and build on the ancient heritage of shared prosperity they have. And it is high time both countries seek peaceful means to resolve the differences.

A war, overt or covert, during a pandemic will push the region back by decades, and Asia cannot afford this. Everything that can be done, should be done, and by all, to prevent a conflict between India and China. Otherwise, the region will become the collateral damage in the fight between the two giants, thanks in part to the legacies left behind by the colonisers.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem