

# Two new units of Premier Cement remain idle for pandemic

The company now expects to begin trial production at the Tk 1,300cr units in November



## KEY POINTS

- Trial production was supposed to begin in March 2020
- New deadline for trial production November and commercial production December
- The Tk 800cr Narayanganj unit will produce 460 tonnes of cement an hour
- The Tk 500cr Chattogram unit will produce 270 tonnes of cement per hour
- Main target domestic market and north-eastern states of India
- 70% of the project cost came from Standard Chartered, Pubali Bank and City Bank and the rest from a Danish bank

JAGARAN CHAKMA

Premier Cement is yet to begin production at two of its new manufacturing units despite getting fully prepared in March, as a few key foreign experts and workers of the company could not return to Bangladesh due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

“We could not start production within the stipulated time due to the absence of some technical experts and workers from China and Denmark,” said Mohammed Amirul Haque, managing director of the cement maker.

After operating on a trial basis for a month, the units were scheduled to go into commercial production in June.

One of the units was developed in Narayanganj at Tk 800 crore and the other one in Chattogram at Tk 500 crore, he said.

Although both of the factories are lying unproductive at this moment, the company has to set aside a certain amount every month to carry their fixed expenditures, Haque told the Daily Star.

Now, the cement maker expects to begin trial production in November and commercial production in December.

The new factories were established with an aim to double the company’s annual production capacity and capture a greater share of the domestic market as well as the northeastern states of India.

The expansion plans were taken way back in 2017 after foreseeing the demand hike within 2021, Haque said.

Demand for cement has grown constantly by about 15.6 per cent for the last eight years due to the government’s mega development projects.

The company was set to issue a disclosure to the Dhaka Stock Exchange following its annual general meeting during the last quarter, he added.

Standard Chartered bank, Pubali Bank and City Bank funded 70 per cent of the project’s cost as loans while a Danish bank provided another \$35 million, or Tk 280 crore, for the purchase of capital machinery.

Haque claims that the expansion of their annual output from 2.4 million tonnes to 5.2 million tonnes will be a record for a single entity in the country.

Vertical roller mills, a product of Danish company FLSmidth which can generate extremely fine powder using 20 per cent less power, will be used to produce 460 tonnes and 270 tonnes of cement per hour in Narayanganj and Chattogram units respectively.

Besides, the company hopes to double the number of staff from the existing 1,100 across its five units.

Despite having many challenges in the sector, Premier Cement has always been profitable and provides handsome dividends to its shareholders, Haque said.

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Farmers are interested in hog plum cultivation as the product is profitable due to high local demand. About 21,000 tonnes of hog plum were grown in Barishal, Pirojpur and Jhalakathi last year.

TITU DAS

# Farmers hope hog plums can make up for their losses

SUSHANTA GHOSH

Following less than ample returns during this year’s guava season, farmers in the Barishal, Jhalakathi and Pirojpur districts wanted to make up their losses through hog plum cultivation.

The farmers in Banaripara upazila of Barishal, Nesarabad upazila of Pirojpur and Jhalakathi sadar upazila are already harvesting hog plums,

locally known as amra.

Since hog plum does not rot as easily as guava, growers are able to market the flowering plant without much haste.

Farmers are interested in hog plum cultivation as the product is profitable due to high local demand.

As a result, many locals in these areas are cutting down their guava orchards to make way for hog plum plantations.

During the nationwide shutdown between March 26 and May 30 aimed at curbing the spread of Covid-19, markets across the country were shuttered and previously harvested stocks of guava ended up rotten.

But now, farmers have turned to hog plum to cover the losses incurred during this two-month period of shutdown.

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# Use of transplanter can give a leg-up to farm mechanisation

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh’s farm mechanisation would receive a much-needed boost if farmers embrace transplanters to sow seedlings as it would save labour, cost and time and provide higher yield, experts and industry people said.

There has been mechanisation of tilling farmland, irrigation, harvesting, threshing, and husking over the years in Bangladesh.

“But there has not been significant mechanisation when it comes to transplanting. This is a missing link. Once farmers adopt transplanters, the entire chain would make a major leap towards mechanisation,” said Prof MA Sattar Mandal, emeritus professor and former vice-chancellor of the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU).

Chayan Kumer Saha, a professor of the department of farm power machinery at the BAU, said transplanters would help farmers get rid of the challenge stemming from the labour shortage during peak seasons and sow seedlings by maintaining proper distance.

“The use of transplanters can save the cost to sow seedlings by up to 50 per cent, apart from saving labour and time. Ultimately, this will bring down the overall cost of production.”

The transplanter is not a new technology globally. Its use is high in the countries where paddy grows aplenty. It is a new technology for Bangladesh although the country is one of the top producers of the key crop.

The major differences between traditional and mechanical transplanting are reflected on the positive impact on production, and savings of labour, time and cost correspondingly, according to ACI Motors Ltd, a local company that is popularising farm machinery including transplanters in the country.

The use of transplanter ensures good quality seedlings and proper distancing of crops. As well as seedlings used in transplanter are in a better quality of root conditions and healthy, the company said.

ACI Motors Ltd is working with Yanmar Rice Transplanter of Japan, the world’s top company in this segment. Both of riding and walking

type transplanter from Yanmar are available by ACI Motors. Such machines are scientific and user-friendly with high quality.

Yanmar Walking type Rice Transplanter can do the planting of four lines at a time whereas Yanmar Riding type Rice Transplanter can plant seven lines. The two models can maintain a fixed distance of line to line of 30cm and 25cm respectively.

These distance helps plants receive proper sunlight aeration as well as helps farmers do inter-operations effectively.

Md Abdul Mueyed, director-general of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), said transplanting manually is a very laborious job and farmers do not sow them maintaining proper distance and line.

But rice transplanters give much-needed relief to farmers and this is even truer when there is a labour shortage during peak seasons, he said.

He said a farmer can transplant a single acre of land in a single day. As younger seedlings are used, the yield is higher.

Since seedlings are grown on trays, it can be done anywhere and one does not need farm land to do so. But one needs to use farmland to prepare seedlings for manual transplantation, said Mueyed.

Traditionally, it requires 15 to 18 workers to transplant one acre of land and it costs around Tk 7,500 to Tk 9,000, considering labour rate of Tk 500 per person. It requires two people and a half working day to transplant in the same area using the technology, according to officials of ACI Motors.

The use of transplanter requires to grow seedling in a precise way. Seedlings can be grown in mat or tray.

Because of the use of the trays, the health of the seedlings remains good as they receive adequate attention. This saves time and allows biological growth of the paddy, giving higher yield at the end, said Prof Mandal.

If 25 per cent or around 2 million hectares of land is covered by the transplanter, it may save around Tk 2,000 crore nationally during transplanting. On the other hand, the production can be increased up to at least 0.2 million tonnes, according to ACI Motors.

Seedling for rice transplanter



Field demonstration of Yanmar rice transplanter AP4 walking type in Gazipur.

ACI MOTORS



ACI Motors is manufacturing this transplanter tray.

can be grown any places which are levelled and have access to water. It requires 80 trays to cover an area of one acre, said Subrata Ranjan Das, executive director of ACI Motors Ltd.

The company has trained people from Indonesia on growing seedlings on the mat as well. The company has already developed and started marketing of transplanter tray.

According to Das, private companies have sold 300 to 400 transplanters to farmers so far. The government has bought about 2,000 for its projects. Transplanters are imported from China where they are

made using Japanese technologies.

Earlier, ACI Motors supplied around 100 units of Yanmar walking type rice transplanter among farmers under a project of the government. Some of the farmers are already successful with these and they are providing transplanting service to their nearby farms, the company said.

During recent floods when farmers were in a big difficulty and were facing seedling crisis for Aman season, the DAE emphasised alternative seedbed preparations in the affected communities of the country during the peak Aman season.

ACI Motors distributed more than 25,000 units of transplanter trays among the farmers. Farmers received seedlings for transplanting just after the flood situation improved. ACI Motors is manufacturing these transplanter trays.

Bangladesh overcame the first obstacle in promoting transplanters by introducing low-cost trays, whose price is nearly a third of international rates, said Das.

He said Bangladesh has to set aside about 4 per cent of its farmland dedicated to rice production to grow seedlings. The use of trays can bring it

down to just 1 per cent.

“ACI has all the solutions to promoting transplanters in Bangladesh. It is to be seen how far we can promote it.”

Das said when seedlings are grown in a traditional seed-bed, it usually takes 10 days to pluck and transplant them. But in case of tray and transplanter, it can be sown immediately from the trays or mats to the paddy field.

“The yield goes up by 10 to 15 per cent,” he said.

A transplanter costs Tk 4 lakh but the government provides 50 per cent in subsidies. A young person can earn Tk 2 lakh a year if they can use a transplanter appropriately, added Das.

While unveiling the budget in June, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal said the government has taken up a project of Tk 3,198 crore to promote farm mechanisation. An allocation of Tk 9,500 crore is made in the new fiscal year for agricultural subsidies.

“The government is promoting farm mechanisation and providing subsidies from 50 to 70 per cent depending on the buying value of the machinery as there is a huge scarcity of wage labourers during peak seasons,” said Prof M Shamsul Alam, a member of the General Economics Division and senior secretary of the Planning Commission.

As a result, the wage rate has gone up and this has increased the cost of production for farmers.

“The solution lies in farm mechanisation at every level from sowing to harvesting,” said Prof Alam.

Prof Mandal said there is no dearth of the government enthusiasm to promote farm mechanisation. Importers and suppliers would have to accelerate their activity and supply machinery and spare parts on time and ensure timely maintenance and repairing.

As it is a complex technology, the operators would have to be given training properly, he said.

An entrepreneur can offer transplanter service to many land-owners and farmers at the same time and help sow paddy. This would encourage farmers to grow seedlings on the bed or trays, Prof Mandal said.