

Rejuvenating the Silk Industry

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia announced recently that a silk industrial estate would be set up in Rajshahi at a cost of more than eight crore Taka to promote the interests of the country's sericulture industry. She was speaking at the inaugural ceremony of a two-day national conference on development of sericulture in Bangladesh.

The announcement comes as a welcome move to rejuvenate the silk industry. Weaving silk fabric is one of the country's traditional crafts. As with many such other activities, sericulture also suffers from certain amount of neglect. To keep up with changes in consumer preferences and advances made elsewhere, the silk industry needs modernisation urgently. Any programme for updating the existing facilities in this sector should not only include such aspects as improved technology and design, retraining of workers but also embrace the entire chain of production — right from the cultivation of mulberry plant.

Mulberry is the principal host plant for silkworm. The worm feeds on the leaves of the tree and produces silk cocoons which are then processed into yarn to make the prized fabric. This, in short, is what sericulture deals in. The programme for boosting the silk industry being taken on hand now, should first aim at integrating sericulture with other agrosystems.

Sericulture can also be integrated with the ongoing afforestation programme. Experts say that mulberry is a fast growing perennial tree, suitable for cultivation in our climate, particularly in the upland in northern and eastern areas. Grown as bush or tree, they say, mulberry plants sprout all the year round in our climate, providing leaves at least for twenty-five years. It is also said that the mulberry tree lends itself to multiple use. The fruit can be utilised in the food industry for producing preserves such as jam and jelly. The timber is in use in some countries for manufacturing specialised items such as sport goods, tools.

Agronomists further note that a mulberry field provides ample scope for intercropping. Among the many produce that can be grown as intercrops, they mention pulses, vegetables and fruits such as pineapples. It seems only in the fitness of things that the programme for crop diversification should embrace mulberry plantation too.

The Prime Minister herself spoke of the significant prospects of sericulture promoting rural employment. Experts say that the process — starting from mulberry plantation to silk yarn production — can create jobs for at least twelve persons round the year in each one hectare plot of land. In case of intercropping, employment opportunities would probably grow further. Expanding mulberry plantation should, therefore, come as one of the very first steps in the implementation of the uplift programme for the silk industry.

Silk also offers tremendous prospects for expanding the export base. World's leading exporters of silk such as China and India, earn billions of dollars from this product. However, as the Prime Minister rightly stressed in her address, without skill development and raising the quality of the product, it would not be possible to succeed in the competitive international market. This calls for application of appropriate technology in the manufacturing process, introducing the right type of designs with continuous improvements being brought about and retraining the workers to upgrade their skills. Product diversification also would be necessary to bring out fabrics and dress materials suited to the ever changing tastes of the consumers on the global market place. And, to start with, an integrated approach should be evolved, dovetailing sericulture with agrosystem and forestry.

Computerisation may be the Answer

Our Finance Minister was a target again when he drew our attention to the unbearable level of loss in the power sector. Speaking at the inauguration of the Sylhet 90-MW Combined Cycle Power Plant in Fenchuganj, Saifur Rahman pointed out that while power loss in generation and transmission process was somehow acceptable, the huge loss incurred by our Power Development Board (PDB) in common theft and pilferage was really scandalous. What is covered by the general rubric of 'systems loss' is plain theft, either with the connivance of the insiders, or by unscrupulous customers. We are all aware that the WB continues to refuse to release any money for the much needed improvement in the power sector because of the unsatisfactory nature of the corrective measures adopted to cut down the so-called system loss.

It is our belief that we are not sufficiently understanding the implication of this continued 'bleeding' of scarce national resource. It is not only the fact that thousands of crores of Taka are being lost through only one government body. That is bad enough. But added to it is the impression that one institution or its officials incurring such a huge loss, or the ground level workers who are directly involved with this corroding malaise, can get away with it all. That is a very damaging message that is percolating into other branches of the government and creating an atmosphere of no accountability.

The minister's call to all the PDB officials that they should help further in the cutting down of the system loss, was appropriate. But it did not go far enough. We have seen in the past that mere exhortation does not work. A new supervisory system will have to be put into place. One way of doing so is to modernise the PDB's distribution and billing system that will help in detecting and identifying the illegal connection holders and those who tamper meters. The first step in this direction is to computerise the whole power distribution system which will greatly add to the PDB's ability to realise due bills from the consumers. The computer can even detect the places or localities where illegal connections exist, or where a dramatic fall in the billing amount has been noticed, due to meter tampering.

It is true that the initial investment of computerising the PDB may be high, but it is quite possible that more than the invested amount could be realised from the saving generated in the very first year. There are numerous examples in the developing countries where system loss, through false billing and unauthorised connection, has been almost totally checked after modernising and computerising the power distribution system.

We would like to seriously propose that the PDB take a hard look into the cost-benefit analysis of such an investment. We feel confident that with computers doing what is done manually today, this recurrent and shameful waste of natural resources could be prevented.

An average yield of five tons of paddy per hectare through modern agro-processing and by-product utilization can be converted into 3.5 tons of polished rice with only 5 to 10 per cent broken grains instead of 30 to 40 per cent as at present. In addition, it should produce 350 kg rice bran from which 63 kg of edible oil can be extracted and the residual de-oiled bran cake of 287 kg, mixed with maize and other ingredients in very small quantities, can be made into high quality poultry feed. The remaining husk of 1.5 tons can be compressed into briquettes for increased fuel efficiency or used as the raw material for the manufacture of pure silica or several other silicate compounds. Mixed with resin, husk and paddy straw can be converted into boards, useful as construction material; while straws can also be the source material for the manufacture of paper pulp.

The estimated 30 million tons of paddy, expected to be produced in the current year, can therefore be converted into 21 million tons of rice — one million tons more than what would be the output from conventional husking mills — and 380,000 tons of edible oil; while de-oiled bran cake, constituting 40 per cent of the feed content can yield up to 4.3 million tons of excellent poultry feed. The

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Agro-processing and Rural Growth

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can be encouraged through the setting up of a fertiliser blending plant at thana level.

As conceived, the cluster of agro-processing industries can initiate the process of rural industrialisation — simultaneously at hundreds of thanas of Bangladesh. Of particular significance will be the reach of the age of machines, practically at the door steps of 68,000 farming villages of the country.

At the same time, the pursuit of labour intensive manufacturing for export must continue with the same, if not more, vigour and enthusiasm. But garment making cannot be the sole answer to our poverty and deprivation. It is necessary, but sufficiency of manufacturing development must be sought by taking industrialisation to the thana level. Agro-processing, primarily though not entirely, for domestic markets and labour intensive manufacturing for export are the two components of a single strategy that needs to be fully developed by the planners of the country.

There is nothing new in my suggestions since this is what had happened already in Taiwan and Republic of Korea and is presently coming up in the coastal provinces of mainland China and in ASEAN countries.

Why should we be left behind sleeping at the post?



paddy is to highlight the particular source of rural growth which has not received the attention of the private sector in the country. The feed component of the manufacturing development will however require promotion of maize cultivation as a winter crop. It is possible to convert the 5 million hectares of transplanted aman land of Bangladesh to a three-crop farming system consisting of maize followed by early aus and then transplanted aman. If two HYV paddy crops are cultivated in these lands, then we can also emerge as an important rice ex-

same time, irrigation equipment like pumps and motors or engines will be in hot demand. All these indicate that metal and machinery industries can expand many-fold in our country. The paddy based growth in agro-processing will be followed by agriculture diversification leading to increased cultivation of fruits, vegetables, spices and in rural aquaculture. This would generate the second round of agro-processing development for canning, dairy plants, freezing and packaging equipment etc., again giving a new boost to machinery manu-

Mechanisation

The triple cropping would call for mechanisation of land preparation, harvesting and post-harvest work — apart from the demand for irrigation equipment. Small to medium scale metal working industries would therefore come on stream in order to secure maximum yield gains, use of soil specific blended fertiliser

Gains from the Uruguay Round: Facts, Myths and Faith

IN September this year, a Canadian Conservative party candidate in the general elections (which eventually ended with a humiliating defeat for the party), while defending himself over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), was reported as having said that 'free trade' was a question of belief.

Around that time, a friendly GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) official — responding to the scepticism over the claims about the Uruguay Round (job creation and growth) being promoted in the media by the GATT chief, Peter Sutherland, and some of his advisers — asked: 'But don't you believe in free trade?'

He was genuinely non-plussed by the response that 'belief is something best left to churches, mosques and temples and that in secular matters of politics and economics, while the same exactitude of proof as in hard sciences may not be possible, one has to function on the basis of rationality, reason and logic and an element of cause-and-effect proof from past experience.'

As the days tick on towards the 15 December deadline (set by the US, but virtually endorsed by most of the principal participants) of the Uruguay Round, with no signs of narrowing of differences but rather of new ones cropping up every day, politicians and the public are being increasingly asked to leave rationality behind and go by faith and beliefs.

Nothing has been demanding 'faith and belief', and straining credulity and rationality, more than the claims being made and promoted in the media, about the benefits of concluding the Round successfully and the ill-effects of a stalemate and failure.

These predictions — of the Kingdom of God on this Earth (in 10 years) for believers, and brimstone and fire for the agnostics — have been sedulously promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, who having lost their legitimacy since 1972 are struggling to find a new role for themselves but are being challenged over their macro-economic policy advice and prescriptions that have overwhelmingly failed, in the North and the South. The GATT, which is trying to equate itself with the Fund and the Bank as the new Trinity, has joined in spreading

Estimates of enormous gains to be derived from the conclusion of the Uruguay Round may be based more on 'faith' than on scientific evidence. This article traces the story behind the increasingly optimistic figures touted by the Round's proponents.

Chakravarthi Raghavan writes from Geneva

trying to promote itself, has jumped into the fray, raising the stakes, so that any global economic decision-making roles with the Fund and Bank. In 1992, the OECD Development Centre in Paris (which technically is separate from the OECD itself and is financed separately), came out with a thin pamphlet which said it was a briefing note based on a research programme of the Centre and the World Bank and due to be published shortly, putting concrete figures and numbers about the benefits of concluding a Round.