

Golden fibre dissipates into liquid gold

Adamjee Jute Mills Limited.

Back in Pakistan days, it was a money-spinner. Not anymore. Now, every year the government counts losses to the tune of Tk 80 crore, even when it is closed, and Tk 180 crore, when in business.

The figures are staggering, thanks to decades of mismanagement and neglect from policy-makers. Today, thousands of looms lie inoperative. There is hardly any work, for no one works. Politics and terrorism reign in the premises of the once-prestigious enterprise on a 300-acre land. Every government has used the labour unions to display their mettle. In return the workers have been spared of hard work.

Amazingly, at the world's biggest jute mills, trade in liquor — of all things on earth — continues "secretly". So much so that Adamjee's production rate is only second to that of Carew. The beneficiaries include all -- from the ailing state business' chief executive to CBA officials to local police. Here, of course, they go by certain rules. Yes, there is a profit-distribution equation.

Today's Adamjee Jute Mills Limited is just another huge burden of corruption and mismanagement that Bangladesh reels under. **Golam Mertoza** recently revisited the already-known. Photographs by David Barikder.

EVERYDAY, some 20,000 gallons of liquor worth Tk 1.8 crore are brewed, i. e. Tk 54 crore taka a month and a staggering Tk 648 crore taka per annum. The brewery in question is Adamjee Jute Mills Limited. Production of jute goods at the world's biggest mill from the 'golden fibre' has made way for brewing of liquid gold — local ale.

The state-run enterprise incurs an annual loss of Tk 80 crore, when closed and an additional 100 crore, when in business. The clandestine brewery earns Tk 648 crore every year. Lucrative, indeed. Unfortunately, the government does not get a single penny. It is not supposed to; for, on paper the brewery is a 'secret', an 'open secret'.

The Adamjee township

Before Bangladesh came into being, there was a saying that Pakistan was run by 22 families and the Adamjees were one of them. Wahed, Zakaria and Gul Mohammad, the three Adamjee brothers, founded the mills along the bank of the Shitalakshya, on a 300-acre land. That was in 1952.

The mills changed the dynamics of the area. Adamjee Jute Mills Limited became a city within the city, unquestionably an important one. There are five schools, 10 mosques, three madrassahs, four to five mazaars, ration shops and playgrounds within the mills complex.

When Adamjee Jute Mills Limited went into operations on December 1, 1952, it had 1700 looms and 1000 sacking looms. In no time, it became one of the most productive enterprises of Pakistan. These were the days when state guests used to have the mills on their list of places to visit.

"In 1963, Queen Elizabeth came here. She was amazed. The products, the working... everything about the mill was simply great," said Sohrab, a veteran worker.

"Handsomely decorated mills, spectacular parade and fireworks greeted the queen. That was the fashion those days. We used to be proud of our products and the environment we worked in. Not anymore, though. Now, it is a brewery," he sighed.

The brewery

Adamjee is situated 11 miles away from the capital. Sources say that four to five thousand gallons of liquor are produced every day in the mill premises. Naturally, the market is off-limits to journalists. Local people are wary of 'intruders'. Journalists fall into that category for obvious reasons.

Upon entry to the Adamjee Jute Mills through the gate opposite the Siddhirganj Karim Market, one will find a BDR camp on the right. The building was originally built to house healthcare facilities for the workers. Leaving the BDR camp behind, a walk through the New Colony will take one to the CBA office. In front of it is the Adamjee Sramik Kalyan High School. On its left, there is a narrow lane with small cigarette and stationery shops on both sides. As one moves along, one will encounter obnoxious odour. The brewery and the 'bars' are nearby.

In all, there are 48 one-room shops on either side of an one-man wide alley. Some have open space in front for the customers to have their drink. The non-descript facade of the rooms is somewhat deceptive. One of the rooms that the writer got into was simply an extravagant techno-harem. A show case adorned with sets of pretty cups and saucers stands on an expensive carpet stretching across the middle of the room. On the right is a Sony colour television with a VCR partnered by a lavish CD player and on the left is a small bed. A small kitchen is visible at the corner with a huge drum resting on a lighted stove. The brewing is on.

Next the buying routine.

"How many pouches do you need? 'Bangla' or 'Bhatti'?"

"Bangla goes for 30 taka, 'Bhatti' for 70 taka."

Usually, the liquor is sold in polythene bags. The market is visited by all sorts of people of varying ages. Alcohol is produced in each of the 48 rooms. Molasses and borax used by jewellers are the raw material. Twenty 50-kg drums are used. There are also fifteen 10-15 kg drums.

The Collective Bargaining Authority (CBA) officials admitted that as much as 20 thousand gallons of liquor is produced every day. The quality of this liquor is reportedly better and the price cheaper, compared to that of the state-owned Carew company. Adamjee supplies to Dhaka, Narayanganj, Munshiganj, Narsinghdi and adjacent areas.

The Chain of Corruption

Corruption and malpractices are rampant at Adamjee Jute Mills.

There are 3250 looms at Adamjee of which 2100 are actually operational. Everyday, new looms break down. There are no facilities to repair them. There are 19,300 permanent workers on the payroll, with 7000 temporary workers ('badli'), 1700 staff and 300 officers. The number of workers is also on the wane. In the face of drastic deterioration of the condition of the mills, many have retired and moved out.

Although the target is 240 tonnes, in reality production does not exceed 140. Consequently, production cost is also higher than other BJMC mills, about 60,000 taka per tonne against 40,000 taka elsewhere. From 1972 to 1999, Adamjee Jute Mills Limited has incurred a loss of nearly Tk 1200 crore. The labour leaders have had a crucial role to play in this regard.

Jute is the major raw material and its procurement procedure is the heart of corruption. The purchase is done through 37 agents country-wide. On the basis of quality, there are six classes of jute. Almost always, grade 6 jute is cleared as grade 1.

Jute worth Tk 18 to 20 lakh is procured. Every maund of jute bought, irrespective of quality, is overpriced by Tk 30. The string of payoffs is intriguing. The executive director gets eight taka, the general manager (administration), general manager (production) and manager (production) get three each, while the CBA has five. While in the CBA, labour leader Rehan Uddin had an individual account. He used to get four taka.

Whereas labour leaders are squarely blamed for rampant corruption at Adamjee, the big fish, the high-ups in the administration, often remain out of the picture. Indeed, almost every CBA leader has become millionaires through corrupt means. But, the administrative officials have benefited no less by playing accomplice to unscrupulous trade unionists.

For transfer to key positions, the officials turn to the union leaders. The post of the Jute Division chief is the most sought after. A position in the procurement cell is an opportunity of lifetime. In return for handsome bribe, they win transfer.

Incumbent manager (jute) Mustafa Jalal worked for BJMC for 19 years. After four transfers, he landed at Adamjee and has been there for nine years. In the meantime, he was terminated once on charges of corruption. Somehow, he sorted it out and got reinstated.

The procurement division annually buys products worth Tk 15 crore including stationers for the mills and tamarind seeds. In some cases, the purchase is made through press tender or spot quotation. According to inside sources, for every tender the relevant department including the labour leaders has to be paid 15 to 20 per cent of the contract money as commission. That is the standard practice. If paid less, the supply is branded as of inferior quality.

There are nine ponds in Adamjee, which yield fish worth nearly Tk two crore every year. The labour leaders have taken lease of these ponds for very nominal fees whereas the wetlands could have fetched almost Tk 60 lakh if leased out through tender. Now the revenue from these ponds is about 150,000 taka and part of this too goes to some in the administration.

Side by side, Adamjee are also crippled with the burden of debt, accrued every year by unpaid bills for basic amenities and procured jute. This year the it has been allocated Tk 18 crore for purchase of jute. However, last year's bill of Tk 16 crore has not



Gateway to liquid gold... a walk through the narrow alleyway will take one to the brewery and the 'bars'

been paid yet.

Every month the mills consumes electricity worth Tk one crore. Adamjee owes Power Development Board Tk 100 crore in unpaid bills. A few days back, forced by a PDB ultimatum, it paid Tk one crore.

Similar is the payment scenario of gas bills with Tk 15 crore in arrears.

Of the total consumption of gas and electricity, 60-70 per cent is actually used for production, the rest for other, mainly illegal, activities. Adamjee Jute Mills Limited is supposed to have a total population of around 50 thousand people including the family members of the officers and workers. But, alarmingly some 200,000 people reside on its grounds. Two and a half thousand rooms have sprung up illegally. Illegal business organisations and markets have also mushroomed. Conversely, workers find no place to stay. Some of them reside



Rehan Uddin (left), the worker-turned-union leader-turned millionaire, has a strong presence on the darker side of Adamjee-Jute Mills. (Right) The playground for Adamjee Jute Mills Madrasah and High School has been made into a pond. Rehan's brother Abul Kalam Abu earn millions of taka from this pond through fisheries.



Lost opportunities and recurring nightmare... Adamjee Jute Mills Limited is now an epitome of corruption and mismanagement.

in the dilapidated quarters built way back in 1952 dating with disaster every moment.

Up to its ears in debt, the mills no longer generate enough money for the labour leaders and administration. As a result, the liquor trade is in full swing under their direct supervision.

Distribution of profit

The police have made no attempt so far to put a stop to the illegal business. In fact, on paper, they are not even aware of it.

"It is made in secret — not in front of the police. We take measures if we see such activities. Also these issues are looked after by the narcotics control department, not us," said Saiful Islam, the officer-in-charge (OC) of Siddhirganj police station.

Sweepers. In his eyes, are responsible to keep the trade alive. They are the ones who keep this business alive. They need liquor otherwise they cannot work."

However, although sweepers do indulge in alcohol, they don't drink the kind made here. It's just an 'eyewash'.

A former OC of Siddhirganj Thana said, "The Siddhirganj police station gets one lakh taka everyday from the liquor market out of which 10 lakhs per month has to be given to the Narayanganj SP. Even after 'distribution', the OC ends up with 10 lakh taka." Labour leader Rehan, in his nine-year reign, has earned four to five crore taka from the liquor trade. He, however, denies involvement.

Incumbent general secretary of the CBA Delwar Hossain says, "Since Rehan is on booze, he has always been interested in liquor business. It was because of him that it flourished."

Apart from a few leaders, the present CBA is not connected with the illegal liquor business and many of its leaders want an end to it. They have also submitted a memorandum to the Home Minister in this regard.

Safe haven for terrorists

Adamjee Jute Mills has become a retreat for murderers, terrorists and outlaws. The police, the NSI, the DB, the SB are there. Words go around the mills that they protect and ensure security for the convicts. They even sit and drink together. Rumour has it that when there are intra-party or group battles the law enforcers take sides and give shelter to different parties at different times.

There is an anecdote in this respect.

On September 27, a football match was arranged and the chief guest for the occasion was one Abul Kalam Abu, who had been sentenced to 12 years in prison. The name of the 'chief guest' was also blared all over the area through loud speaker.

The match, ironically was held in a field in front of the thana. Abu gave a speech, distributed prizes after the match and left the scene right under the nose of the police.

"We don't know whether Abu was here," said OC Saiful Islam.

But he gave a speech in front of the station.

"We are small in number. It is very difficult to keep watch," was his excuse.

Abu works at the mills, receives regular wages and has allegedly 'captured' an officer's apartment.

"That's for the mills administration to take care of, not ours."

There are 42 fugitives, including Abu, at Adamjee and many of them are Rehan's men. And OC Saiful Islam is on good terms with each of them.

A few days back, he was awarded the President's Police Medal (PPM) for arresting *Gala Kata* (Cut-throat) Kashem. Allegedly, it was a well-rehearsed farce.

Kashem, charged in quite a few cases, was arrested because of an internal feud which infuriated the local people as well as the rival groups. So he had to be 'removed' from the locality by Saiful's 'courageous' attempt. The arrest was staged when Kashem was fishing in the pond and police chanced upon him.

CBA general secretary Delwar Hossain said, "We cannot understand why the police are not catching these criminals. Instead of going around with them. We have told the police to catch them even if they are from our party but to no avail. Rehan's men are still at large."

The array of arms used for terrorism and anti-social activities have changed significantly over the 70's, 80's and 90's. Now the arsenal at Adamjee Mills includes modern AK-47 and M-16 rifles, Browning and Maozer pistols, SMGs and LMGs.

Festival at Adamjee

Whenever there is a ruling party-sponsored programme or public meeting in Dhaka it's festival time at Adamjee. Which means no work with pay. On September 26, fifteen thousand workers joined the public reception at the Paltan Maidan for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Presently there are three registered workers' unions. The Adamjee Jute Mills Workers' Union is headed by present CBA Delwar Hossain and Ruhul Amin Sardar; Rehanuddin Rehan

heads the Adamjee Jute Mills 'Patkal Sramik Karmachari Union and Reazuddin Renu heads the Adamjee Jute Mills Sramik Sangha. These are all ruling party-backed unions. This time the CBA was formed by victorious Jatiya Party, but after being elected the office bearers joined the Awami League.

Shakawat Hossain, office secretary of the CBA, said, "We switched sides to protect the interest of the workers."

This workers union was founded by Saidu Haq Sadu. Sadu is a very influential person and was a close associate of former president Ershad and his cadres were responsible for the murder of Communist Party leader Tajul Islam. Islam was an educated worker and leader joining the Mills after getting his Masters degree. After Sadu's death Siddique Sardar took over the union. Siddique was also a close associate of Ershad and frequently supplied workers for his public meetings; he also met many of the workers' demands. But in the 1990 elections Siddique lost to Rehanuddin Rehan who began his iron reign. Now the offices of the CBA hold pictures of Bangabandhu instead of Ershad picture sandwiched between portraits of Siddique and Sadu.

Adamjee has both rail and river route facilities so it might still be possible to make the enterprise profitable. The union leaders and unscrupulous workers have taken all and we have got nothing from the mills.

It has become a tradition for union leaders to keep in direct contact with the higher tiers of administration. As Siddique and Sardar both had direct contact with Ershad so has Rehan with Sheikh Hasina. That's why the union leaders make light of local leaders. On the contrary, local leaders come to them for help and advice. Rehan was temporarily in trouble over leadership after he lost the recent CBA elections but reinstated his hold with the support of Shammin Osman.

BNP's Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal is headed by Abul Khair Khaja and Falaz Ullah Khondaker heads the United Employees Union.

Endangered existence

Adamjee Jute Mill Limited is shrinking day by day. Workers continue to leave while others retire due to old age. The wages, pensions and arrears they receive are yet to be paid. The gratuity they are supposed to have stands at 140 million taka. The BJMC thinks Adamjee has too many workers so they are trying to cut labour. This move has created dissent among workers.

Shakawat Hossain further added, "We don't have excess workers - what we have we need them all. A section of the owners are trying to shut down the mills; it's a conspiracy. A machine is shown to be inoperative for just one bad part; this is how losses are claimed to the inspectors."

Maintenance of the mills is in great disarray. Every month parts worth 20-25 lakhs and oil worth 20-22 lakh taka are bought - at least this is what is shown on paper. Most of the parts cannot be found when needed. Adamjee has two good workshops and only specific hardware for the machine need to be imported from abroad - all the other parts can be manufactured at the workshop. But that is not happening now. It is alleged that leaders in league with the workers are manufacturing local arms like pipe guns and pistols.

Labour leaders, workers, staff alike have pushed the mills toward complete annihilation. Most of them, almost all the purchase officers, now have houses and expensive cars all at the cost of the mills. The huge losses incurred annually has led to suggestions of privatising it and in the face of this it is hard for the workers to raise their voices. But they have nevertheless.

Adamjee has both rail and river route facilities so it might still be possible to make the enterprise profitable. The union leaders and unscrupulous workers have taken all and we have got nothing from the mills. The right step would be for the Government to look into the matter, mere privatising won't yield solutions.

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