

Jute sector reform

Downsizing cannot be the sole answer

It is common knowledge that the state-owned enterprises in the jute sector have been hemorrhaging to an extent that their cumulative losses stood at staggering Tk 4,770 crore in 2006. Given the size of the monetary losses incurred so far, the Tk 1,376 crore rejuvenation plan announced by Jute and Textile Adviser Geetara Shafiya Choudhury Wednesday may sound appropriate. But it's a three-year programme, rather a longer-term one, for a sector that is confronted with all kinds of pressing problems to be resolved early enough to gain in a context where synthetics are fast losing ground to jute and jute goods.

The programme aims at retrenchment in the four BJMC mills ordered shut down in Khulna, Chittagong and Sirajganj, to be eventually handed over to the private sector. There will also be downsizing of the work force by 50% in 18 other mills. In all, 14,000 workers have been earmarked for 'golden handshake'. We are given to understand that after retrenchment a segment of them would be employed on daily-basis. The question is: would it be cost-effective? There is bound to be a social cost in jettisoning the excess labour. This can be mitigated by paying their dues upfront rather than in a staggering fashion.

The focus is on downsizing whereas we believe it should have been squarely laid on management, labour unionism, financing, pricing, procurement and marketing issues. We gather that the jute ministry has formed a task force comprising representatives from jute and finance ministries and BJMC to oversee jute procurement activities which have been riddled with corrupt practices. The bureaucratic tangles between the finance and jute ministries as well as between the jute ministry and the BJMC will have to be done away with, otherwise all the reforms being contemplated now will turn out to be cosmetic. We suggest that a high-powered body of experts be constituted to go into all aspects of management.

India and China have substantially taken away our traditional market share. But not all is lost yet; indeed, with increased investment in the best quality jute that we produce in the world, we stand a chance of massive recovery in the sector to be a front-runner in the business. Considering all the complexities and problems the jute sector faced over a long time, we deem the present step is on the right track.

Gautama Buddha relics

Bangladesh's cultural heritage must be protected

THE handing over of the hair relics of Gautama Buddha to a high-powered team from Sri Lanka on Wednesday carries considerable historical symbolism for Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. That symbolism was again strengthened by the gift of a preserved footprint of Lord Buddha from the Sri Lankan authorities. In the overall sense, therefore, the exchange was reflective of the historically close ties the two countries have maintained through the centuries. The presence of Sri Lankan ministers, among whom was Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama, on the occasion, was at the same time a powerful indication of how such links can be developed in the times ahead.

While on the subject of the hair relics and the footprint of Lord Buddha, we cannot but draw the attention of all and especially the authorities to the rich cultural heritage that Bangladesh has been home to through the centuries. A study of history shows that travellers from various parts of the world have regularly broken or ended journey in what is today Bangladesh. In the process, what has happened is a mingling of cultures or an enrichment of them through taking in new characteristics and eventually having them assimilate in order to throw up a new cultural dimension altogether. From such a perspective, Bangladesh has served as a melting pot with travellers, religious preachers, traders and royalty making their entry into it at different points of time. The result is what we observe before us today -- Mainamati, Paharpur, Sonargaon and other spots of the kind. Relics spanning centuries and touching upon different aspects of people's lives have been found and preserved in museums. A commingling of traditions involving Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism has continually added substance to Bangladesh's heritage.

It is such a heritage that must now be preserved. Regrettably, our cultural diversity is often downplayed, ignored and sometimes deliberately suppressed. This diversity of our heritage must be popularised as part of a concerted programme. The many historical relics in the country must be maintained well and where they are in a bad shape, measures must be taken to restore them.

Let us put down the chair



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

FOR the first time in my life I can explain something which I don't understand. Now don't let confusion paralyze your mind yet, wait till you are as confused as I. Since Awami League President Sheikh Hasina was arrested last Sunday, some people have been crying foul. They are upset because a former Prime Minister and a daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has been taken into custody. Frankly I don't understand what they mean. But I can explain why they are unhappy. They have got a chair on their head.

I shall come back to it, but first thing first. Like many people in the country, I also deplore the fact that Sheikh Hasina went to jail. I am not sad because she was taken to jail. I am sad because she had to go to jail. It is possible that she has been arrested on trumped up charges. May be she is the victim of a con-

spiracy. May be she is guilty as charged.

Over the last few days I have heard some of the most ludicrous comments. One politician argued over the statutory limit. He said that one couldn't be tried for a crime committed in the period before the relevant law was passed. His view was that charges against Hasina may have become time barred. I didn't quite get him. For god's sake, we are not talking about an ordinary criminal, but a leader of the people, a moral icon, who should remain accountable at all times.

Then there are the unhappy others. Some of them aren't happy because, according to them, there was no need to arrest Sheikh Hasina. There are others who are doubters. They believe Sheikh Hasina could do no wrong. They are full of conspiracy theory and paranoia.

Their beloved leader is surrounded by enemies who are trying

to destroy her, the colleagues from her own party, evil schemers from the government, and perhaps foreign powers who would like to give this country back to the anti-liberation forces.

Not to say these concerns are not real. Experience over hope, we have seen how politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen have subordinated this country to their greed, how they have plundered its economy doing whatever it takes, covering up murder, taking bribes, sucking up to foreign diplomats, running business syndicates, doing extortions, selling formalin-laced fish and adulterated food, their acts contrived and condoned in the hierarchy of gangland protection, each standing over other like an umbrella, wholesaler over retailer, godfather over wholesaler and leader over godfather.

I understand that part. But someone needs to explain what is so wrong if Sheikh Hasina, like

many other politicians and businessmen, was picked up from her house, taken to the CMM court, denied bail and sent for detention. So many others, although less luminous, have been dealt in the same manner. Why should it be different for her?

I personally believe that one shouldn't be taken to jail until that person is convicted in the court. The complaint should be investigated, merit of the case determined and then the trial held while the punishment should come at the end of this long process of justice.

Unfortunately, that is not how the law works. Last week, we read about a mentally-challenged young man who was arrested and thrown into jail because he had the same name as a suspected drug dealer. Sheikh Hasina was Prime Minister of this country, the leader of the opposition more than once, yet she never tried to change that law.

Why should we look for an exception for Hasina? I can understand those who don't believe she is guilty. I can understand those who claim that she is just a victim of another plot. But I don't understand those who claim that she should get preferential treatment, tried without keeping her in jail. Then what about other prisoners who have been arrested on the basis of similar charges? Shouldn't they be sent back to the comfort of their homes? They can sip on tea or coffee until the verdicts are announced.

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Now let us talk about double standard. This is about saying two conflicting things in the same breath. I am amazed how many people say that they want new reality, yet hesitate when time comes to reorganize the molecules of the world. W.B. Yeats wrote about the Irish Revolution in 1916, "All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born." The double-standard mind loves to preach the beauty, but hates to practice the change.

That is a symptom of atavistic mind which lives in the coils of feudalism. In my lifetime I have seen one human being carrying a chair on his head and following his feudal master, who, surprisingly, was another human being.

The chair was placed on the ground where the master wanted to sit and picked up again when he

CROSS TALK

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