

No elegy for jute

Just recently, when the government took a rather hard-line in closing down more jute mills, a few economists even pointed out that by using half of the money that the government would be spending for finishing the mill-closure formalities (i.e. payment of arrears and others), it could have run those mills after sorting out the existing problems.

REAZ AHMAD

MUCH has been said about jute -- about the prospect of survival and revival of the "golden fibre" of Bangladesh. But it is not enough yet. While people speak or debate on the jute issue from their diversified stand-points they often tend to position themselves in a hostile situation -- they think their views are so dissimilar from each other that there is no converging point.

But, this notion is utterly perplexing, specially when one can see that there are enough common grounds to share, and learn from, rather than being argumentative and rigid.

While the post 1/11 caretaker regime sees the issue from the economic point of view that public money should not be wasted in running the production-inefficient state-run jute mills, independent economists and civil society members, particularly those having sympathy for the jute workers and their families, consider closing down of mills as a punishment to the workers for the failures of the management and corruption in Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC).

Civic forums and rights organi-

sations are campaigning for the revitalisation of the sector and criticising the government policy of mill closures. A citizens' body, Public Commission on Jute and Jute Industries, is now working on a report in this regard.

On the other hand, the World Bank, which has been associated with Bangladesh's jute sector reforms since the '90s, maintains that the poor financial performance of jute mills continues to be a major concern. Today, BJMC is the second largest loss maker among public sector manufacturing enterprises, with annual losses of Tk.2.3 billion, accounting for over 50 percent of total manufacturing SoE (state-owned enterprises) losses in FY2006.

"In 2002, jute sector reforms got a new lease of life with the closure of Adamjee Jute Mills (AJM). This alone led to a decrease in BJMC's losses from Tk.3.9 billion in FY2002 to Tk.2.1 billion in FY2003. It also led to an increase in BJMC's productivity, which jumped from roughly Tk.25,000 per employee in FY2001 to Tk.39,000 per employee in FY2003," the World Bank Country Director in Bangladesh Xian Zhu wrote in a recent article.

Despite shutting down of many

state-run jute mills in recent years, and retrenchment of hundreds of jute workers, the time has not come yet to sing an elegy for the natural fibre. Every cloud has a silver lining. While, the government, World Bank, and civil society members are holding various critical, and sometimes very dissimilar, views on jute sector reform, they all have got one thing in common -- and that's the most important one -- HOPE for resurgence of jute in Bangladesh.

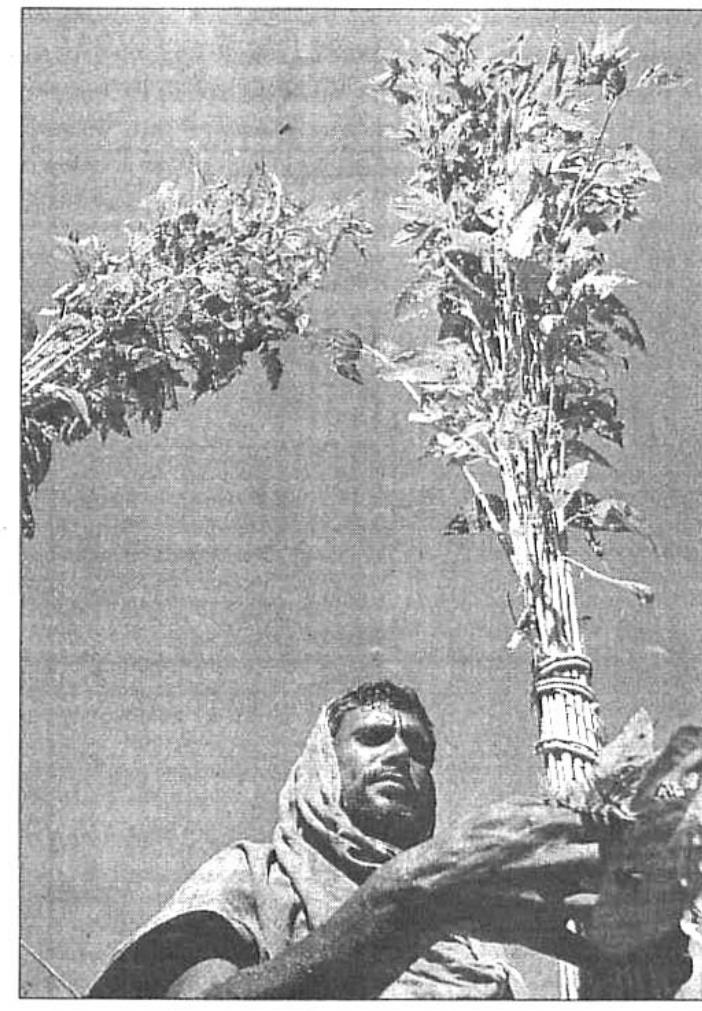
From this rare union of positive notes of all the stakeholders about jute, we should find paths to rejuvenate the jute sector and regain the rich legacy of the "golden fibre" of Bangladesh.

The danger is not that synthetics will crowd out the demand for jute in international markets; it lies in our own inefficiency in operating the mills properly, and in the rampant corruption and non-accountability, and patronisation of non-cost-effective state-run mills by means of guaranteed bank loans year after year.

Just recently, when the government took a rather hard-line in closing down more jute mills, a few economists even pointed out that by using half of the money that the government would be spending for finishing the mill-closure formalities (i.e. payment of arrears and others), it could have run those mills after sorting out the existing problems.

But, as some say, it's easier said than done. These jute mills actually carry a legacy of problems, ranging from unnecessary, politically motivated manpower recruitment to fund misuse, to loan non-repayment, to machinery wearing out -- all due to sheer negligence toward the jute sector by the successive political governments. No one posses any magic to quick-fix all these in one go.

Now, a new thinking is brewing in government circles; to lease out all the state-owned jute mills in phases to stop spending on them. Press reports suggest that the jute ministry has initiated a move to strike management-outsourcing contracts with interested private parties, based on production sharing, to efficiently run the eight jute mills, instead of divestment.



The public sector jute units under the lease-out process include four closed mills -- People's Jute Mills, Karnaphuli Jute Mills, Forat-Karnaphuli Carpet Factory and Qomoni Jute Mills. Four

others are Alim Jute Mills, where a lay-off has been announced, Dhaka-Baghdad Jute Mills, RR Jute Mills and MM Jute Mills.

The idea is to enter into five-year production sharing contracts with

private entrepreneurs for the eight mills, as the government cannot guarantee the operation of the mills after their privatisation. It is something new by way of which BJMC can avoid losses, but can keep the industrial units in operation and earn some money as well.

We think that before the government embarks upon any new experiments with the much-neglected jute sector, it should further engage with other stakeholders, share their concepts, and listen to the workers, managers and the private parties. Let us forget, once jute was on top of our export basket and used to fetch the highest amount of foreign currency.

When jute was the country's main export item, the activities were more rural based, rooted in agriculture. This had a broad based distributional effect on the rural economy. But slowly jute lost its edge in the export basket, from 59 percent of the total export earning in 1983-84 to only 4.7 percent in 2004-05.

Until the beginning of the privatisation of jute mills in 1983, the number of jute mills under state ownership was 77, which has now been brought down to a mere 18. Before we further narrow down our state-run capacity to produce jute products, we must give it a serious thought.

And, mind it, prudence does not rest with the government only -- we have to listen to other stakeholders' views too. After all, jute is a national asset -- grown over the years, much to the credit

of toiling farmers. Jute farmers had hard days when ever the market did not give them the production price.

Now that things are changing for the positive -- and growers have started getting relatively better price -- it's high time for policy planners to give back the honour of producing the "golden fibre" to them (growers).

Bangladesh was all through the major provider of raw jute to the mills set up by the British in Calcutta. But then the scenario changed, and India has been the leading jute producer since the 1970s. Today, it produces 1.977 million metric tons of jute while Bangladesh produced only 963,000 metric tons in 2003-04.

The more recent growers, like China and Thailand, decreased output in the 1980s and 1990s. Myanmar, Nepal and Brazil are just some small producers on the edge.

Dhaka houses the International Jute Study Group (IJSG). The government should also make better use of IJSG expertise to get clues on how to steer the nation's pride sector -- jute -- to a new height. IJSG must have records and documents about how India prospered in the jute sector over the years -- and those were the same years when Bangladesh's jute sector suffered the most setbacks. May be a sheer coincidence, or maybe not?

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Death from all sides

A nine-minute police video made in the moments after the shooting shows helicopters similar to those used by Blackwater still hovering over the wreckage of charred, smoking and bullet-pocked cars. The graphic images include footage of burned human remains and show the street littered with brass bullet casings.



KEVIN PERAINO

SINCE the fatal Sept. 16 Blackwater USA shooting in Baghda's Nasoor Square, officials from the private security company have insisted that their guards were responding to fire from "armed enemies." Yet, an extensive evidence file put together by the Iraqi National Police and obtained by Newsweek -- including documents, maps, sworn witness statements and police video footage -- appears to contradict the contractors' version of events. A confidential incident report, which has been provided by Iraqi National Police investigators to American military and civilian officials, concludes that the Blackwater vehicles "opened fire crazily and randomly, without any reason."

A nine-minute police video made in the moments after the shooting shows helicopters similar to those used by Blackwater still hovering over the wreckage of charred, smoking and bullet-pocked cars. The graphic images include footage of burned human remains and show the street littered with brass bullet casings.

They also show what appears to be a police officer waving a pistol at the scene; the footage was captured by a different police officer, who had run over from the nearby Iraqi National Police headquarters (portions of the video have been previously broadcast; it was

recorded without sound).

Iraqi National Police investigators also believe that Blackwater's helicopters fired on the cars from above, according to confidential police documents and interviews with senior police officials. A memo written on Sept. 17 by the lead Iraqi police investigator states that shortly after the shooting began, "helicopters opened fire from the air toward the cars and civilians." Gen. Hussein al-Awadi, the commander of the Iraqi National Police, told Newsweek that the trajectory of some of the bullet wounds could only have been caused by fire from the air. "If anyone moved -- whenever they saw someone leaving -- either the convoy or the chopper shot him," says Ali Kalaf Salman, an undercover Iraqi National Police officer who was working as a traffic cop at the scene (one of the police documents lists 17 fatalities and many more wounded from the shooting). Other accounts have put the death toll at 11.

Blackwater officials have acknowledged that their helicopters were at the scene of the shooting, but have denied that the guards in the choppers opened fire. In statements from Blackwater guards provided to the U.S. State Department and obtained by ABC News, the guards say they were fired upon by uniformed Iraqi police officers and others dressed in civilian clothes from multiple locations near the traffic circle. Still

images provided to the network show a Blackwater vehicle pocked with five bullet marks. Anne Tyrrell, a company spokesperson, said shortly after the incident that the company "acted lawfully and appropriately in response to a hostile attack in Baghdad ... The 'civilians' reportedly fired upon by Blackwater professionals were in fact armed enemies and Blackwater personnel returned defensive fire."

Yet, Iraqi policemen and other Iraqi witnesses told Newsweek that the trajectory of some of the bullet wounds could only have been caused by fire from the air. "No one shot at Blackwater," says Col. Faris Saadi Abdul, the lead Iraqi police investigator. "Blackwater shot without any cause."

Al-Awadi, the National Police commander, says that minutes after he heard the shooting begin, he rushed to the scene, which is just around the corner from the National Police headquarters (he says he was accompanied by a unit of American military trainers embedded with his police). "We were trying to figure out why they were shooting," he told a Newsweek reporter at the National Police headquarters in Baghdad over the weekend. "We tried to find a reason and we couldn't."

He says that his men searched the civilian cars at the scene, but didn't find any weapons. When Iraqi investigators later stopped a different Blackwater convoy near the scene of the shooting, the general says that the Blackwater guards

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