

## The golden fibre

Jute has a huge genome, at 1,200 megabases, roughly 3 times that of rice. But in recent years the cost of gene sequencing has come down, and at the current rate to have the jute genome sequenced with high precision will cost about \$2 million dollars or roughly Taka 14 crores. While this amount is not small, it is a pittance compared to the amount that government is recovering from individuals who have amassed wealth through unfair means.

ARED CHAUDHURY

In recent weeks much has been written about the "collapse" of the jute industry in Bangladesh, including heart-rending reports detailing the human tragedy in the jute mills in Khulna.

This collapse relates to the financial non-viability and the eventual closure of the publicly owned jute mills. Writings have been published describing motley causes of this malaise, including one from the country director of the World Bank.

While these writings have

described the tragic and the unwarranted situation, nothing concrete has been written about how the jute industry can turn around except for a very glib but mysterious claim by the industries advisor that the jute industry will turn around in three years.

How people are responding to the jute debacle is dictated by their own background. Writers and social commentators are detailing the human trauma of the jute industry workers, left-wing intellectuals are blaming the World Bank for the malaise, and economists are seeking its salvation from

the private sector.

For Bangladeshis, jute is not just a plant that produces fibre; it is rather a national icon, linked to the adage: Sonar Bangla. It was also linked to our quest for economic emancipation. In mythical golden Bengal, around which much of our national lore is constructed, we have undulating rice fields together with a field of fibre, both golden.

This adage has a justifiable history. In the early days of Pakistan due to the high demand of jute during the Korean war, jute obtained an instant international

market, thus saving the fledgling state of Pakistan from economic ruin.

In those days Pakistan was involved in bitter dispute with India regarding the sharing of foreign currency reserve. Pakistan, with precipitous decline in foreign reserve, had found in jute a pathway to survival. And it was all due to the contribution of flood-drenched delta and its toiling masses who supplied this fibre. Quite rightly this issue became a pertinent slogan during Bangabandhu's question to Pakistanis: Sonar Bangla shoshan keno? or: Why is the golden Bengal now a graveyard?

While it is interesting to ponder on these historic events, it is also important to ponder how indeed jute might turn around and how we can facilitate the change. Precious little has been written by people who know jute as an organism, commenting on its limitations and promise. Central to any future planning to turn the jute sector

around should be an emphasis on the genetics of jute and an attempt to turn things around with the help of genomic technology.

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It has been suggested that government should utilise these recovered wealth to build bridges, hospitals, etc. A far more pertinent and exciting use of a fraction of that money would be to have the genome of jute sequenced. The whole operation can be outsourced to an efficient international organisation and the people of Bangladesh can have the genomic information available to them.

How might such an information lead to new development? A major trait that needs to be manipulated for jute is its fibre length and fibre quality. A finer fibre, fibre of many colours and strength, fibre of various levels of strength are needed to extend the range of products that can be made with jute.

A combination of the knowledge of the jute genomic sequences together with mutational analyses will pave a way towards this development. Such a modern research platform will also be highly sought after by other jute-producing nations such as India. This is an area in which Bangladesh can become a leader by investing very little.

Instead of bemoaning the current situation and blaming each other endlessly, we can take a solid stand and declare that in Bangladesh a genomic era of jute has begun. The current government can think of innovative ways of raising funds for the purpose including money to be made avail-



ABU KHAN/REUTERS

able from businessmen who might want to whiten their black money. I cannot think of a more exciting way of legalising dubious money.

In this venture people of all sections, including the expatriates, can also join in order to pay tribute to a national symbol. Together we can raise enough money to have the jute genome sequenced. Afterwards and after due consider-

ations of intellectual property the genomic information can be made available in the Internet to humanity on behalf of the people of Bangladesh.

Many years ago, in all our pledges and aspirations we had congregated around a fibrous plant as one of the symbols of our national identity. Time has now come to redeem that pledge.

## Celebration of new life

Today is Easter. Christians are celebrating this wonderful religious feast with much joy and enthusiasm. They will also join their Muslim and Hindu brethren in celebrating this feast inviting them to sit together in social gathering at table to share the festive meal; they too will join them in exchanging the Easter greetings.

FATHER PATRICK GOMES

THE whole Christian community rejoices today with great voice proclaiming to the whole world: The Lord is truly risen. There is victory over death. Alleluia! Today, March 23, Sunday is Easter Sunday. Easter signifies the celebration of the glorious resurrection of Jesus. And it is the dogma of Christian faith that for the salvation of all mankind Jesus, the fullest revelation of God the almighty Father came to this world, through his words and deeds established

the kingdom of God and opened for mankind the way to heaven.

By his suffering and death he acquired the total remission of sin of mankind and brought the covenantal bond between God and mankind. And through his resurrection, Jesus manifested the Glory; glory of God to which this resurrection calls to all men.

Preparation is also a celebration: The 40 day Lenten season consisted of the many spiritually-enriching exercise namely fasting, almsgiving and special prayers. People were motivated to make self examination about moral and

spiritual life; they were spiritually cleansed through the Sacrament of Confession; they were immersed in the depth of the mystery of the suffering and death of Jesus.

Easter Sunday: Straight way we can say that this Sunday is the celebration of the great Solemnity of Christ's Resurrection. If Christ would not rise from the death, the death of Christ would have no significance. Death of Jesus thus is the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus is the glory that the death has brought for mankind. The Risen Christ is the glorified Christ who is seated at the right hand of



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God the Father. Risen Christ is the fruit and hope for mankind to share in the same glorious state of life in heaven as the reward of leading good life here on earth. The resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact of which the Holy Bible speaks of Empty Tomb. When there exists the

victory over sins through Christ's death, how can then Jesus remain in the tomb which is a symbol of sinfulness? Yes, Christ is truly risen as he foretold to his disciples at least three times while on earth. However, our human intellect and reason can never comprehend it,

understand it or grasp it completely; because this whole issue of death and resurrection is transcendental and at the divine control. It is God who is working through Christ. And so since this is a mystery, called Paschal Mystery we only with deep and profound faith believe it and reflect on it. We try to live according to the demand and message of this mystery.

Message: The message is very clear. The whole mystery brings us this one challenging message: to rise from the death of sin to new life of values. Jesus, God, and man, crushed the head of sin through his death so that by his suffering and death we can be remitted; and his death indeed brought us this remission of sin. He is risen.

His resurrection brought us this victory, sure victory that man is given the glorification to be shared with Jesus in heaven. Therefore, Easter demands from us this life of glory,

this life of transformation. And a man who is dead to sin cannot remain anymore in the "tomb" of sin. He has only one joy: that he is renewed; he is spiritually risen with the Risen Lord.

To be risen, to be transformed in our day to day life, so to say "to have resurrection experience" in our day to day life is a challenge. It is, however, not impossible. Stealing, bribe, cheating, various crimes, misuse of power, terrorism etc are very common sins in our life, in our family, in our society.

Easter calls us to die to these sins: to have a total and radical conversion in life. This can happen by the power of God's grace and self-endavour each and every day to make every effort to overcome these sins, to have victory over these sins. The result will be new values manifested in life, values like, truthfulness, sincerity, justice, forgiveness, mutual reconciliation, pure thoughts, ever eager to help others

particularly the poor and destitute etc. That person is thus transfigured to Christ's risen face; that person is indeed a "glorified" person.

Today is Easter. Christians are celebrating this wonderful religious feast with much joy and enthusiasm. They will also join their Muslim and Hindu brethren in celebrating this feast inviting them to sit together in social gathering at table to share the festive meal; they too will join them in exchanging the Easter greetings.

This inter-religious communion and brotherhood can be a wonderful manifestation of Easter festival in reality. In this way, Easter gets a sense of universality. May the blessing of the Risen Lord be in every family, on every person, in our country. To everyone, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, I wish in the name of the whole Christian community in Bangladesh: Happy Easter!

## Nor any drop to drink

Furthermore, Bangladesh is now experiencing a developing water crisis. According to statistics of Bangladesh's Water Development Board, more than 170 of Bangladesh's 230 large and medium rivers suffer from pollution and poor water management. Besides, a large number of people, due to lack of awareness, unsafe sources of water for personal and domestic needs like cooking, bathing, and washing utensils.

M. MAHAMUDUL HAQUE

WATER, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink," lamented the eminent English poet Coleridge in his poem The Rime of the Ancient Mariner written over 100 years ago. Such a drastic situation might not exist in Bangladesh, but neither is it so far away, with many of the population having to search frantically for safe drinking water.

Though Bangladesh has been known from ancient times for its abundance of water from various sources, it has been suffering for decades from acute scarcity of safe drinking water.

Prior to Bangladesh's independence in 1971, surface water from ponds, lakes and rivers, and to a lesser degree, groundwater from dug wells, were the traditional

sources of drinking water for the country's people.

Tube-wells have been used in Bangladesh since 1940s and in increasing numbers over the past 20 years. But tube-well water became suspect after it was found contaminated by arsenic in 1993.

Over the decades Bangladesh has been facing health hazards due to lack of safe drinking water. Many types of constraints are identified in ensuring safe water in the country, especially in the coastal belt, hilly region, and city slums.

Statistics says about 30 million people face health hazard due to arsenic contamination of the groundwater sources, while 55 million others are denied the use of water from tube-well due to fall in ground water level during the dry season. Another 14 million people in coastal areas are also badly affected due to excessive salinity.

National Sanitation Status (June 2007) states that 97.6 percent of the country's population drink piped water as well as from public taps, boreholes/tube-wells, protected wells, and spring or rainwater. But the discovery of the widespread arsenic contamination of groundwater has undermined this commendable success, and effectively lowered safe drinking water coverage to only 74 percent of the population.

About 28-35 million people are exposed to arsenic contamination above 50 ppb (parts per billion) while 46-57 million others are exposed to arsenic contamination above 10 ppb. WHO has identified the arsenic contamination in Bangladesh as the "largest mass poisoning of a population in history."

Safe drinking water both in rural and urban areas is under threat as

hand tube-wells, the major source of water in the rural areas, are being contaminated by arsenic. Piped water in the country's large cities including Dhaka gets polluted due to old pipelines and leakage, and for lack of proper maintenance.

Most of the slum dwellers in the big cities not get piped water due to shortage of water. A situation report states the disparity between demand and supply of water and sanitation services is worst in the urban slums of capital Dhaka, where only 16 percent of the slum population has access to safe water.

Inefficient management and operation of urban water networks leads to a substantial waste of precious water, and more than 40 percent of water is unaccounted for in the major cities of Bangladesh, the report added. Acute shortage of "normal" water is found also in hilly areas, where water coverage is not more than 15-20 percent.

Furthermore, Bangladesh is now experiencing a developing water crisis. According to statistics of Bangladesh's Water Development Board, more than 170 of Bangladesh's 230 large and medium rivers suffer from pollution and poor water management. Besides, a large number of people,

due to lack of awareness, unsafe sources of water for personal and domestic needs like cooking, bathing, and washing utensils.

Due to the lack of safe drinking water, Bangladesh faces a critical health hazard that forces the country to spend a huge amount of money every year for the treatment of water-borne diseases. National Sanitation Status, June 2007 said that every year Tk 50 billion is spent for the treatment of water-borne diseases in Bangladesh.

Eminent author K. Park in his book, The Text Book of Preventive and Social Medicine writes: "Water is considered safe when it is free from pathogenic agents, free from harmful chemical substances, and pleasant to taste -- i.e., ideally free from colour and odour, and usable for domestic purposes."

Can we meet this criteria for safe drinking water? Hardly.

Because the surface water sources often get mixed with highly polluting wastewater from domestic and industrial sources, and many areas of both groundwater and surface water are now contaminated with heavy metals, persistent organic pollutants, and other ingredients that have adverse affect on health.

Sources of safe water are being

gradually decreased or destroyed as level of groundwater is being contaminated by arsenic and other heavy metals due to unplanned use of water by installation of hand pumps.

By using unsafe water, one may be affected with various water-borne diseases. Though no reliable data is available, every year in Bangladesh, hundreds of thousands of people, particularly children, die of cholera, diarrhea, dysentery, typhoid, and other water-borne diseases for lack of safe drinking water. Banglapedia indicates that these diseases account for nearly a quarter of all illnesses in Bangladesh.

Former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan once said: "We shall not finally defeat Aids, tuberculosis, malaria, or any of the other infectious diseases that plague the developing world until we have also won the battle for safe drinking water, sanitation, and basic healthcare."

Safe drinking water is a prerequisite for reducing the spread of water-borne diseases. Many strategies and policies like Water Management Plan, National Policy for Safe Water and Sanitation, Sanitation Policy, National Arsenic Mitigation Policy, Pro-Poor



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Strategy, etc. have been formulated for ensuring safe water and sanitation. But these could not be properly implemented in the country yet due to many reasons.

Financial constraint is one them. But it is a great concern that there are some allegations against some ministries implementing these policy and strategies. Implementation of such policies and strategies are being hampered due the lack of co-ordination among concerned ministries.

To ensure safe drinking water and safe use of water, alternative technology and water sources

like ponds and filtration and rainwater harvesting system should be introduced in crisis zones, specially in the coastal, hilly, and slum areas.

We should all become committed to stop misuse of water and water pollution alongside ensuring good governance in the country's water management. Government, NGOs, and donor agencies should come forward with more effective plans and policies on the country's water management immediately to meet the challenges.

Mr. Mahamudul Haque is a Sub-Editor, UNB.

## The malaria problem

NASHYA HAIDER

MALARIA has been a major public health problem in Bangladesh. According to World Health Organisation reports from 2005 approximately 88% of the total population (106.6 million people) are at risk of malaria. The majority of malaria cases are reported from 13 out of the total 64 districts in the country. These 13 districts have a population of 24 million. The malaria situation in Bangladesh is worsening in recent years particularly in the hilly and forested areas in Hill Tract Districts and also alongside the border belt areas in 11 high endemic districts. These areas are also reporting chloroquine and Fansidar resistant cases.

In 2004, there were 155,825 probable malaria cases, 59,853 laboratory confirmed cases, and 505 deaths were reported whereas, in 2005, the malaria situation improved. The proba-

ble cases, lab confirmed cases and malaria deaths declined to 142,628 (8.5%), 48,121 (19.8%), and 481 (4.8%) respectively.

However, the Plasmodium falciparum percentage increased marginally by 1% reaching an alarming proportion at 77%. Malaria cases are grossly under-reported due to shortcomings in surveillance and information. About 4 million people living in 34 upazillas of eight of the thirteen districts live in the epidemic-prone border areas.

Bangladesh's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in January 2008 launched a program to combat malaria in 13 malaria-endemic districts of the country and the ministry plans to distribute 49,000 insecticide-treated nets (ITN) as part of the program.

Some ITNs will be provided at no cost, while others will be sold at a subsidised price. The program is scheduled to be imple-

mented in the districts in phases and will receive a grant of 27.5 million taka -- or about \$402,000 -- from the Global Fund To Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria through to 2012. The districts of Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban are among some of the areas being targeted.

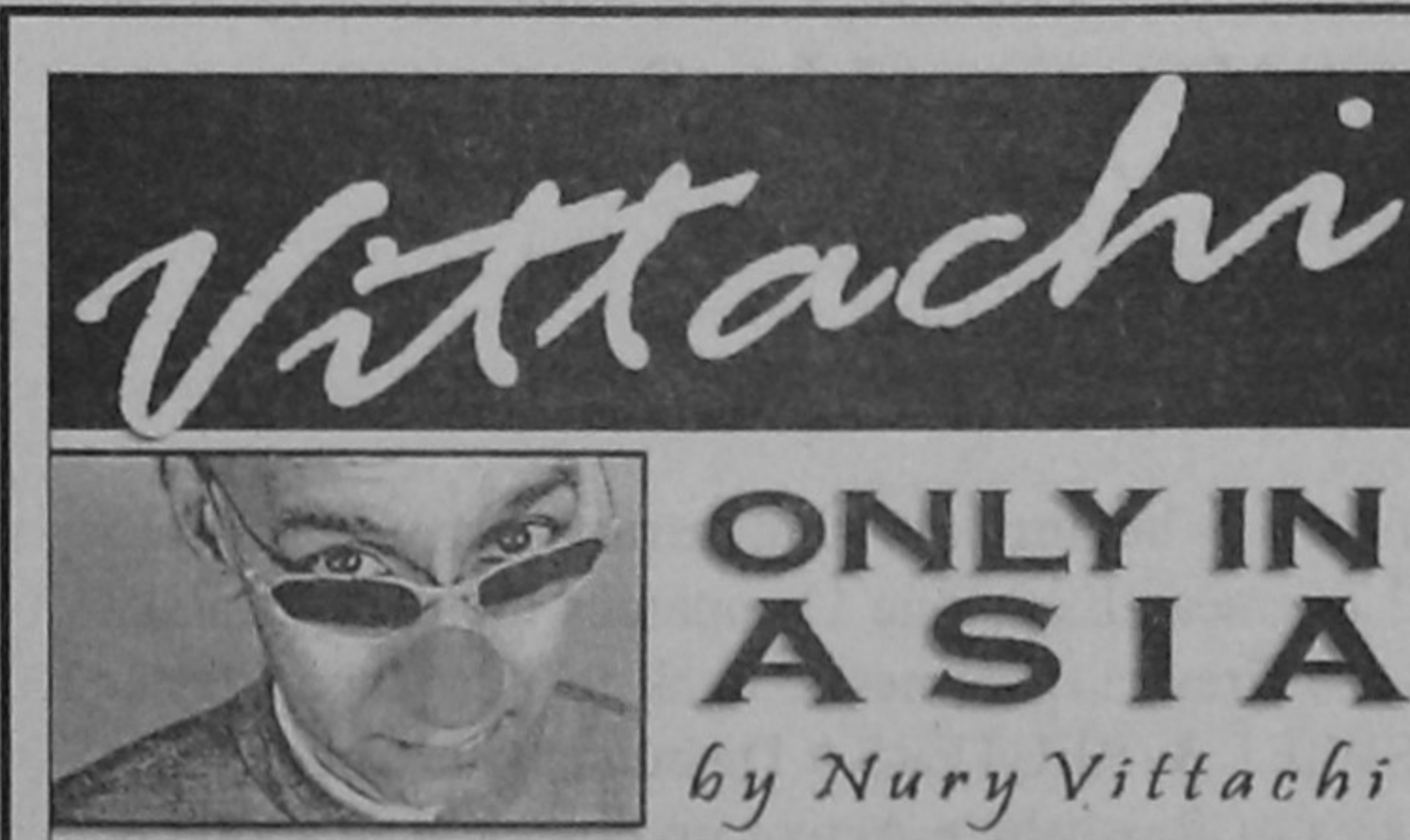
In Bangladesh, the peak season for malaria is from May to August and local outbreaks occur every year, and the response to control the epidemic is inadequate as can be seen from the published figures of cases as reported by the World Health Organisation (2005) and the limited number of bed-nets currently being distributed country-wide.

Challenges exist with establishing links with the private sector, especially regarding surveillance and treatment of malaria cases. Private doctors treat about 30-40% cases in the hilly areas, and no mechanism is in place to assess their skills or to

monitor the quality of diagnosis and care and treatment. Monitoring of access to quality anti-malarial medicines available from private practitioners, local pharmacies and shops is also of concern. An estimated 1.2 million additional ITNs are required in the 13 high endemic districts to attain good coverage.

Many problems and constraints exist for the program including: (i) lack of trained staff particularly as a result of retirement of experienced eradication staff; (ii) weak surveillance, supervision and monitoring at various levels of program implementation; and (iii) increasing drug resistance in high endemic areas, especially the Chittagong Hill Tract districts.

Whether or not these challenges will be dealt with in the foreseeable future in an efficient and constructive manner in a country burdened by the aftermath of recent floods, cyclones, and avian flu or just left on the back-burner is yet to be seen.



## The games are afoot

THE Olympics are coming to Asia. The venues are rising majestically in Beijing. A canal has been built for rowing, a running track for running and a velodrome, for, er, velling.

Now I know what you're thinking. Asians tend to be bookish types who hate sports.

But choice has nothing to do with it. It is absolutely vital that boys grow up with the ability to conjure entire conversations out of inane sports statistics. This is a key tenet of manhood. Women often say that men are no good at talking about deep, serious

things, but you should hear the conversations we have when we're in a female-free environment.

"What about Everton's two-nil clincher in the '84 cup?"

"Yeah. Or Spurs' four-three against Man City in '82."

"Yeah. Or West Brom's one-nil over Everton, '68."

"Yeah. Or Arsenal's three-two against United in '79."

"Well, I guess I better be going. Thanks, that was a really good chat."

So I decided to force my son to watch sports on TV to get an appetite for the Olympics. We were both soon

bored out of our minds. Then he came up with a brilliant idea. While Asia has got the games, we should Asian-ify them. We must give the Beijing Olympics a touch of eastern magic.

Here are ten proposed Asian games. Subway face-off: Team A tries to get out of a subway train carriage while Team B tries to get in.

Synchronised smoking: 20 Marlboro in 20 minutes. Korea and Japan are tipped for the gold and silver medals in this one.

Moderated karaoke: An audience of singers and musicians will judge this, their brains wired to a cringe-o-meter.

Noodle slurp: The award goes to whoever can down the longest noodle with a single slurp, no hands. Road racer: This is a car racing sport with drivers having to swerve around bullock carts, rickshaw pile-ups, and massed platoons of terminally deaf scooter riders.

Toilet gymnastics: Contestants have to use a traditional Asian squat toilet, a Western-style throne toilet, and a hi-tech Japanese toilet one after another. Noteasy.

Chopstick lunge: Four pork buns in the basket, five diners, ready-steady-go.

Elevator leap: Team A has to close the lift doors before Team B reaches them.

Democracy demand: Each team has to organise a demonstration to ask for political reform in their country. (Most Asian citizens are well-practised losers in this game.)

Chilli chew-off: Teams eat red-hot peppers in relay form, finishing with those tiny green blow-your-head-off ones from Thailand. Medal for anyone who survives.

You know, the Asian media has always had a unique spin on this subject. When an American boxer was arrested for rape a few years ago, Asian papers printed the story under the heading "Sports News." And almost every year, when news about the Super Bowl in the United States is released, it appears under the heading "Bowling."

Having said that, there have always been sports associated only with Asia. Readers may remember the Mumbai man named Nayak who hardened his body so he could endure any pain. "He set a record by enduring 43 kicks to the groin from martial arts experts," the Indian press reported.

Suddenly, being a puny nerd doesn't sound so bad.

Next: Not sure, depends on what readers write to me about.

Write to Nury at [nury@vittachi.com](mailto:nury@vittachi.com) to stop this column being blank next time.