

New vista opening on jute

Sooner the knowledge gets used, the better it is for the sector

THE secret of jute plant is now at the fingertip of a scientist, thanks to the work of Bangladesh-born Dr. Maqsood Alam who has decoded the genome of this natural fibre. We congratulate him and his team on their potentially epoch-making success.

With this discovery of the genome sequence of jute, the prospect of Bangladesh's Golden Fibre, which showed signs of decline in the recent past mainly due to the successive governments' wrong handling of the sector, is seeing a glimmer of new hope. But before that can happen there would have to be more research, more innovation through greater research, institutional replication and widespread application of the knowledge.

Now what really is so special about this discovery of jute's genome sequence? The most important consequence of this scientific achievement is that the scientists will now have the power to experiment with jute's basic properties so that it will now be possible to add new features to the fibre's original qualities. For example, it may now be possible to develop new kinds of jute that can grow in extremities conditions, or that will not need the help of pesticides to fight pest. It may also be possible to grow a variety of jute that has better fibre quality such as relating to its strength, durability and so on. To be precise, the discovery has opened up a new whole vista for this cash crop of Bangladesh.

And since the credit for this achievement goes to a Bangladeshi scientist, we in Bangladesh can now hope to take the lead in the areas of jute such as its production, development and marketing with a competitive edge over other jute growing countries in the world market.

Since none other than the prime minister made the first announcement of this brilliant scientific feat by a Bangladesh-origin researcher, it is genuinely expected that far from being confined to the academics in ivory tower the new knowledge about jute will now be put to practical use in the field. And sooner the jute farmers get the benefit of this knowledge the better.

The good news is that the scientist himself at a press briefing on Thursday assured us all that the fruits of the discovery could be brought within the reach of the farmers by the next five years.

One cannot lose sight of the fact that jute's past glory owed a lot to the growers of jute. The past governments' lackadaisical attitude towards jute is largely to blame for the growers' increased stress on other crops in place of jute. Now they are expected to be bolstered as higher dividends are paid through cultivation of new strains of jute.

The government can now ill afford to waste any time to make the best of this new possibility that has opened up before jute. The scientists leading the research and their counterparts deserve to be provided with all necessary supports, rewards and motivation by the government so that the nation may reap the benefit of this discovery as early as possible.

Stalking and harassing young women still unabated

Organised resistance and deterrent punishment called for

MUCH as we would like to think a momentum has come into the business of resisting those who stalk and harass young women, we cannot but note that incidents of such stalking or harassment have been going on across the country. Only the other day, a schoolgirl was murdered over her refusal to accept an indecent proposal from a young man in Satkhira. In Noakhali, another young woman was subjected to acid throwing and consequential burns at the hands of a gang of local criminals. In Chapainawabganj, a schoolgirl has simply stopped going to classes because of the harassment and humiliation she has been subjected to day after day by wayward young men in her locality. In Kushtia, a young man brave enough to protest the harassment of a young woman was stabbed to death by her stalkers.

We will not pretend that these four incidents are isolated in nature. Nor can we suggest that harassment of a similar nature is not going on in other regions of the country. The fact is that women, especially the young among them, are in a number of instances today victims of a society fast declining in values. To be sure, there has of late been a growing awareness in the country of the necessity of putting an end to the harassment and stalking they go through. Both at the levels of the government and the media, much attention has been and is being focused on ways and means of handling the issue. In a fairly good number of instances, wayward young men caught in the act of harassing young women have been subjected to swift punishment in public. While such action is commendable, it has to be said that the pattern of apprehending the culprits and punishing them must become a regular one. Indeed, the punishment must be a good deal more than a mere act of making a young man say sorry when he is caught causing nuisance in public. In other words, deterrent punishment is called for.

Incidents of urban harassment apart, there remains the matter of what measures to apply in dealing with the elements stalking young women in the rural areas. The vulnerability of women and their families is most acute there, which means a greater degree of vigilance on the part of the police, village elders, the teaching community and imams of mosques now becomes necessary. In the overall sense, the drive against eve teasing or stalking or harassment must be geared up all over the country. It will be advisable to have every stalker detected subjected to swift and harsh punishment if those yet bent on intimidating young women are to be prevented from carrying out their nefarious purposes.



Unhappy fans barricade Jatrabari Road after electricity goes out 10 minutes into the Argentina vs. Nigeria match.

Performing in the clutch

People can live without lights and fans and refrigeration. And we can live with hours upon hours of sweaty load-shedding every day. But live without the World Cup? Now you go too far.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

THE mantra of the government is that they have everything under control. There is nothing to worry about. There is method to their madness.

It is even possible that this optimism is warranted. Perhaps the government really does have a medium to long-term plan in place. Perhaps the various crises that bedevil us will be resolved in the next few years, and that as the next elections roll around the country will be happy and healthy.

It could, of course, be that the government is quite unable to handle the accumulated mess that it has inherited (and is now adding to) and that three years down the line it will still have precious little to show.

How do we tell whether the government is really up to the task, and that it is, slowly but surely, doing what needs to be done (the government's position), and not that the government is out of its depth and that it has no ability whatsoever to resolve any of the nation's crises (as one increasingly suspects)?

Well, one way is to see how it does when it really counts, when it must perform, when delivery cannot be kicked down the line to some indeterminate time in the future.

The World Cup thus provides a telling case study of the government's ability to deliver.

The tournament is, in fact, a boon for any Bangladesh government. It is relatively affordable and accessible entertainment that keeps the population reasonably content and their minds off their other problems.

A good tournament is good for Bangladesh. Indeed, if either Brazil or Argentina run out eventual winners, it would probably have almost as much of a positive effect on the national psyche as if Bangladesh were to win.

All you really need to do is to ensure that the power supply remains steady throughout the games so that there is nothing to interrupt our viewing pleasure. However, even on this count, the government seems to be falling short.

The World Cup comes along only every four years and the next one won't be until after the next elections. In this

election cycle, the AL won't get another bite at the apple. This is it. If it screws up the World Cup, there is no do-over.

And the government knows this. It knows what is at stake here. You would have to be blind and deaf not to understand the importance of the World Cup to the average Bangladeshi, and even this government is not that clueless.

It is fair to say that the government's popularity, at least over the next month, depends on nothing so much as it does on supplying sufficient power to allow people to watch the World Cup in peace.

So, how has the government performed so far, in the clutch? Not so well, it has to be said. Despite its presumably best efforts, power is still going off during games. And if the government can't guarantee uninterrupted power to watch the World Cup, what is it good for?

Already there have been reports of power stations attacked by thwarted fans. If the government doesn't fix this problem, and fast, then it really is going to be in trouble.

People can live without lights and fans and refrigeration. And we can live with hours upon hours of sweaty load-shedding every day. But live without the World Cup? Now you go too far.

This is not a problem that can be solved down the line. It needs to be solved now. The murmurs that the government is out of its depth will gain

traction if it fumbles the World Cup.

Even if power is plentiful in two years time, people won't forget. And with the next World Cup in 2014 just after the next election, it will be a potent campaign theme.

Forget about a chicken in every pot and car in every garage. Anyone credibly promising to deliver a World Cup without power-cuts will have a ready-made campaign theme.

In vain will the government then try to argue that it is steps that it has taken that will allow an incoming government to reap the benefits of its foresight.

All people will remember is that the government couldn't deliver when it counted.

Then again, it is still early days. Just as the top teams haven't yet shown up to play, it is possible that the government, too, is finding its feet, and waiting to unleash its A game.

Perhaps the government is pacing itself for the length of the tournament, and will get better. Like, ahem, Spain. Well, all I can say is that it better get a move on.

It's all very well pacing yourself for the final. But if your performance is so dismal that you don't even make it out of the first round, then it will all be for naught.

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Fearful of the written word

If an editor is persecuted in the 21st century, it only shows we, as a nation, may not have come too far. In this age of nuclear weapons, space wars and endless waves of terrorist attacks, the government, much to our disappointment, is fearful of the written word.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

AS if it was not already bad enough to arrest the editor of a newspaper, we are told that he is also being roughed up. Perhaps roughing up are not the right words for what is being done to him. He was reportedly taken to secret places where unidentified men inflicted torture on him. If that is true then in the 21st century, we are living in medieval times.

It's not hard to guess what is happening. The government wants to teach a wayward editor the lesson of a lifetime. I am sure the government has its reasons to strike back at anybody who steps on its toes. There was a time in this world when Roman emperors made dissident writers lick up their written words. But this editor is not exactly a writer. He is a politician who writes to criticise the government, and he belongs to the opposition side. Voila!

But should that be an issue for a modern government, particularly in these days of information open house? If we

talk about democracy then people should be allowed to speak their minds. Now, of course, there should be limits so that people would be responsible for what they speak or write. If this editor went out of line, if he has been irresponsible with his paper, he should be tried in a court of law. Why should he be tortured or harassed? Why should anybody think of "fixing" this man?

Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, would have urged us to do nothing. Liberty depends on the freedom of the press, he has told us. Then he has also told us that this freedom cannot be limited without being lost. God knows what the unspeakable horror of torture does to that freedom.

Of course, the politician-editor cannot avoid responsibility for anything he writes or says. The government can arrest him, bring charges against him, and, if the charges are proven, punish him as per law. But why should the need for physical abuse arise? This editor is not a prisoner of war or a foreign spy. Neither is he a criminal or delinquent of

any kind. There is no need to "squeeze" him for everything he knows.

Frankly, it is hard to digest that the editor of a low-circulation daily could be a threat to the two-thirds majority government. What he has written may have been aimed to embarrass it. It has been part of the adversarial jousting by which the opposition tries to undermine its rival in this country.

Be that what it may, it has the irony of using a cannon to shoot a mosquito. It would have been wiser if this editor were left alone. If he were allowed to write what he wanted to write, because his target readers have a particular bent of mind. His readers already read with prejudice. How could he further influence their minds, which are already influenced?

Instead, the government has earned the editor an outrageous amount of publicity mileage. He has been in the news for days, and the opposition leader has spoken for him. He is being discussed in the talk shows, and editorials are being written about him. In business sense, the return on investment has been very high for this editor.

If he has landed in jail for writing in his paper, this controversy has generated more words in his favour in last seventeen days than he has written against this government in seventeen months.

A friend of mine always tells me that

running a country is not exactly a walk in the park. There are issues to be tackled, conspiracies to be foiled, enemies to be disarmed, and miles to go before a ruler goes to bed. Perhaps this editor has been a pain in the neck for this government. Perhaps he has annoyed it far too much to invite its wrath.

Still, compared to some other men he is a milksop. There are those who show disrespect to the government, those who play hardball with it and openly stonewall its minister. They are the real threat to its authority and to the people of this country. Yet, they aren't even touched.

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote about persecution: "Distrust everyone in whom the impulse to punish is powerful." One of the seminal forces of human history has been to conquer that impulse, and shift it from inquest to request, exploitation to cooperation, dominance to dignity, cruelty to tolerance, impulse to patience, and fear to trust. If an editor is persecuted in the 21st century, it only shows we, as a nation, may not have come too far.

In this age of nuclear weapons, space wars and endless waves of terrorist attacks, the government, much to our disappointment, is fearful of the written word.

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