

From waste to energy

Poor villagers in Dinajpur bank on alternative sources of domestic fuel

KONGKON KARMAKER, Dinajpur

Some villagers squatting around a sugar mill in Dinajpur are turning milling waste into an affordable fuel for domestic use. It helps locals save cooking fuel that can be used for at least three to four months a year.

The poor villagers' trade simultaneously helps the environment from damage as otherwise, locals would axe down a huge number of trees and undergrowth to procure firewood for the growing population.

According to sugar mill officials, the sugar mills of Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, Panchagarh, Joypurhat and Rangpur produce hundreds of tonnes of sugarcane waste a year during the production season, which is usually disposed of as useless by-product.

One visiting the surroundings of any sugar mill in any district of Bangladesh will stumble upon piled-up waste, giving off the stench of rotting organic matter. But the local poor have set a unique example by turning the waste into assets and earning extra money by saving their greenbelts.

During a visit to a sugar mill in Joypurhat, women from the surrounding villages, especially the poor, were seen engaged since early morning in collecting the sugarcane wastes disposed of by the mill authorities.



A worker in Dinajpur piles up sugarcane waste, a bi-product of sugar mills, and leaves it in the sun to dry for two to three days. The dried-up waste is then used as fuel for cooking. The process is simple and costs next to nothing, except labour.

KONGKON KARMAKER

Commercial eateries and roadside tea stalls in the district are using the fuel as it costs them less than any other conventional source of fuel



A festive environment prevails there as cane crushing starts at the mill.

The mills usually crush canes for at least two-three months during winter. After collecting the litter, women make piles and leave the heaps to dry in the sun for two to three days. The dried up waste is then used as fuel for cooking. The process is simple and it costs almost nothing, except labour.

Ratan Sarker from Masterpara village, a consumer of this fuel, said the dry litter burns well without creating any

smoke and now middleclass people, who are the major users of firewood, are using these as a primary fuel for cooking.

Commercial eateries and small scale roadside tea stalls in the district are also using the fuel as it costs them less than any other conventional source of fuel, including firewood and kerosene, said locals.

Only six to eight years back, the mill waste in the cane-crushing season used to choke drains in the locality and create general pollution in the municipal area, said Md Abdus Sattar, a

resident of Shantinagar village of Joypurhat town.

"But the poor living in the suburban villages near the mills began turning the rubbish into reusable fuel and are earning money to manage their families. The drains in the town don't choke and there is no bad odour either," he told The Daily Star recently.

Now, they are enjoying an alternative means to livelihood during the cane-crushing season, Sattar said.

Nasima Begum, of Bulupara village near Joypurhat town,

said the mill waste offered them an opportunity to earn a living and manage their families well by transforming the litter into different forms, such as fuel sticks and balls.

However, the cane residue containing chemicals can cause skin diseases and stomach disorder to those coming into direct contact with the matter, said Md Mosammel Haq, deputy civil surgeon of Joypurhat.

He suggested people, who rummage through the litter, wash their hands properly.

When the hacker ethos meets capitalism

CHRYSTIA FREELAND

The uprising in Egypt has provoked the familiar "realism-versus-idealism" foreign policy debate in many Western capitals, as diplomats and politicians struggle to balance their ideological sympathy for the protesters against fears of chaos and the threat of a future anti-Western and anti-Israel policy from Cairo if the people do win.

What we have paid less attention to is that the demonstrations have forced some of the world's hottest technology companies to engage in a very similar debate. The conclusions these technorati end up drawing may be as significant as the verdicts of Western governments. This new intellectual battleground is a further sign that in the age of the Internet and the global economy, foreign policy doesn't belong just to professionals or to states any more.

The quandary Egypt poses for technology companies particularly the power troika of Google, Facebook and Twitter goes far beyond the classic corporate social responsibility concerns that have become standard operating practice at big multinationals.

On one hand, the Egyptian revolt and the ways in which it has been facilitated by the Internet is the apotheosis of hacker culture and its worldview. That is the

powerful conviction of the digerati: that they are on the side of freedom, small-d democracy and of doing good in the world. This self-image is easy to mock that Google pledge to "do no evil" makes a pretty juicy target for satirists but it is also deeply felt.

Egypt has helped confirm this view of technology companies being on the side of angels. For example, Wael Ghonim, the Google executive who helped organise the protests, was jailed and has emerged this week as an important face of a movement looking for leaders. Before that, there was the much publicised workaround that Google and Twitter technologists devised to help evade the Egyptian government's communications crackdown. As Adrian Chen noted on the Gawker blog, "the amount of positive press generated [for Facebook] by Egypt's uprising ... could only be greater if Mark Zuckerberg had parachuted in and started beating back riot police himself."

On the other hand, the problem for technology companies in many parts of the world is that doing good or even doing no evil is very much in the eye of the beholder. The views, and the self-interest, of twentysomething programmers in Silicon Valley, or in Bangalore, India, are unlikely to coincide with those of eightysomething dictators. And

that can spell trouble for companies intent on building a global business.

"Facebook is trying to expand into China, so it is hard for them to take the side of the protesters," said Evgeny Morozov, author of The Net Delusion, which argues the Internet will not necessarily make the world a freer, better place.

"They don't want to be considered the digital equivalent of Radio Free Europe," he explained. "If they take the side of the protesters, their global business model will come under pressure."

Mr. Morozov is pretty certain that in this conflict between "the hacker ethos" and "the capitalist ethos," it is the hackers who will have to compromise.

But even if he is right that technology company shareholders and executives, like any others, care overwhelmingly about maximising profits, Mr. Morozov may be underestimating the expectations users and employees have of companies whose founding premises are the empowerment of the individual and the democratisation of information.

Facebook, in particular, has been blasted by the Internet's emerging punditocracy for failing to adapt its no-pseudonyms policy to the needs of democracy activists in authoritarian regimes who, for obvious reasons, can't use their real names.

Facebook has a sophisticated policy team that understands these concerns. But they are also worried about weakening the "real names only" policy, which is crucial to the power of the platform, by administering a policy that permits some people to have pseudonyms and not others.

Richard Edelman, the boss of the PR firm that carries his name, works with businesses around the world. In his firm's annual survey of which institutions people trust, technology companies are near the top. They are "seen as legitimate forces for good," he said.

That halo brings many benefits. But as technology emerges as a force for real good in some of the grimmest parts of the world, that reputation may force technology firms to stick with their idealism even if realism might be better for the bottom line.

"There is a higher expectation of technology companies than of any others," Mr. Edelman said. "There would be a lower expectation of resource companies, for instance. It is why, ultimately, Google walked in China."

We used to say that Western missionaries came to do good, and ended up doing well. Technology firms could find themselves forced to do good, even if it sometimes means doing badly.

The writer is the global editor at large for Reuters.

India woos Muslim investors with new stock index

AFP, Mumbai

India's stock market has traditionally been dominated by Hindu investors but the country has taken a step towards financial inclusion with the creation of a new index compliant with Islamic law.

The Bombay Stock Exchange, Asia's oldest stock market, has launched the TASI Shariah 50 in an attempt to open stock-trading to more of the country's vast Muslim population.

"The intention is to reach out to the Muslim community which has historically been less involved in India's equities," James Shapiro, head of market development at the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE), told AFP.

"To grow your business, the stock exchange has to be more inclusive. One cannot keep growing on a very thin layer of very rich people trading," added Shapiro, a former New York Stock Exchange head of foreign listings.

Experts have blamed a lack of political will in Hindu-majority India for the failure to promote Islamic finance, despite the country having 170 million Muslims, the world's third-highest number.

Stock investment is still nascent in India with just one percent of the 1.2 billion population overall investing in shares. For Muslims, who are poorer and less educated than Hindus according to official figures, the percentage of investors is much less, estimated at at 0.5 percent of the community.

The 50 stocks on the new index have been cleared by a top Mumbai-based Islamic law firm, Taqwaa Advisory and Shariah Investment Solutions (TASIS), as compliant with the investment rules of the Islamic legal code known as sharia.

Aziz Jadwet, 38, who studied Islamic finance at an institution in Dubai, said he believed many Indian Muslims who were previously hesitant about stock investments would feel more confident about investing using the TASIS index.

"Inshallah (god willing), this year I will also do so," Jadwet said.

The Islamic law firm vets listed companies to determine whether they derive benefits from interest or the sale of "sinful" goods and services like alcohol, gambling, tobacco, weapons or pork products, prohibited under Islamic law.

But the index still has many heavyweights, including firms like auto giants Bajaj Auto and Maruti Suzuki, generic drugmaker Dr Reddy's Laboratories, software outsourcer Wipro and India's largest private firm Reliance Industries.

"We believe the TASIS index is superior" to many rival indices elsewhere "as stocks screening is more conservative and better tuned to achieving sharia objectives," added Mohammed Hussain Khatkhatay, a TASIS senior advisor.

Standard and Poor's and Dow Jones are among companies abroad which run sharia indices.