



Districts in Focus



Brick exports: brisk business, but eco-worries mount

Construction activities on the other side of the border depend almost entirely on Bangladeshi bricks as the prices in India have gone up following restrictions on manufacturing. In India, every thousand pieces of bricks cost Rs 7,500, which means Bangladeshi bricks are now almost half the price they would pay for local bricks

KONGKON KARMAKER, Dinajpur

BRICK exports to India through two northern land ports have become a lucrative business for Bangladeshis as India allows duty-free brick imports in a bid to protect its environment and farmland, hugely affected by brick manufacturing.

A year ago, the environment authority of India stopped issuing new licences for building new brick kilns to protect arable land and cut carbon emissions. Besides, the existing Indian brick kilns have been brought under stringent monitoring to combat environmental pollution from brick kilns which also resulted in cutting their bricks production.

In contrast, on the Bangladesh side of the border, a considerable number of brick kilns have been built so far violating the Brick Kiln Act, officials said. Traders of Hakimpur upazila said at least 15 brick kilns have been set up in a year within three kilometres of Hili land port.

"Restrictions imposed on setting up new brick kilns on the other side of the border by the Indian government prompted traders to import bricks from Bangladesh as construction activities saw a sharp rise in the area," said a customs official of Hili port, seeking not to be named.

According to official records, about

1.2 crore pieces of bricks have so far been exported to India through Hili of Hakimpur upazila of Dinajpur and Banglabandha port of Panchagarh district by at least 25 exporters. But people familiar with the issue said the actual quantities would exceed the official figures.

Sources in the Deputy Commissioner's Office in Dinajpur said there were 110 brick kilns in 2010 but the number has gone up to 130 this year, and there are nine brick kilns currently in operation in Panchagarh.

The traders said exporters get approval from their respective district chambers of commerce and industry first and then obtain letter of credit (L/C) opening declaration certificate before exporting bricks at the rate of \$.05 per brick.

After obtaining the L/Cs, the respective traders have to get a Safta (South Asian Free Trade Association) certificate from Rajshahi Export Promotion Bureau under the commerce ministry.

Md Harun Ur Rashid, owner of Khan Traders, a brick exporter, said traders procure bricks from the kilns in Dinajpur, Joypurhat, Naogaon and Pabna to meet the exports demand.

On paper, every 1,000 bricks are sold for Tk 3,700 to India, but the market price is Tk 5,000 per 1,000 bricks on average. Exporters collect the rest of the payment by unofficial



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Soils are piled up at a brick kiln in Dinajpur Sadar upazila.

means such as hundi, affecting the country's foreign currency earnings. The Indian traders bear other expenses including travel costs.

The construction activities on the other side of the border depend almost totally on Bangladeshi bricks as brick prices have gone up in India following restrictions on manufacturing, said Ashok Kumar Mondal, president of C&F Agents Association of Bangla Hili of India.

In India, every thousand pieces of bricks cost Rs 7,500, which means Bangladeshi bricks are now almost half of what they would pay for local bricks, Mondal told The Daily Star.

Wahedur Rahman Ripan, a trader of Hili port, said the Bangladeshi traders receive the Tk 3,700 for every 1,000 pieces of bricks and the rest amounts are managed by other means, causing losses to the state coffers.

Enamul Haque, assistant land commissioner of Hili land port, however, denied any such irregularity in the transactions.

The traders said bricks are also being exported to India through other ports, including Burimari of Lalmonirhat and Chilahati in Nilphamari district.

Nurul Moeen Minu, president of

Dinajpur Chamber of Commerce and Industry, opposed brick exports to India and said the kilns are damaging the environment, and already scanty and precious farmlands. He claimed he wrote several letters to different government departments, protesting the exports.

He said he raised the issue at a meeting at the commerce ministry on February 12 where Commerce Minister Faruk Khan was also present.

The chamber chief urged the government to stop brick exports immediately, which is causing irreparable damage to the environment and lands. "India is a big country with huge tracts of fallow lands; why is Bangladesh selling its precious pieces of lands to India?"

Md Jamal Uddin Ahmed, deputy commissioner, also opposed brick exports.

According to the environmentalists of Hajee Danesh Science and Technology University (HSTU), brick-kiln operators require the agricultural soil, mostly topsoil for burning it into bricks. Kiln owners pay a lease amount of about Tk 20,000 to Tk 50,000 per hectare per year, they said.

At places, the topsoil has been dug up to 3-6 feet, which threatens the fertility of the land. Due to the loss of

topsoil, there are chances that the land being used for mining may lose its fertility forever, the experts of HSTU said.

Md Sekandar Ali, deputy director of the Department of Agricultural Extension, indicated that the loss of topsoil leads to a reduction in the crop production of land by about 5-10.5 kg per hectare per year. The loss of topsoil leads to loss of the land's water retention ability and thus decreases water table in the surrounding areas.

Sources said that about 100,000 cubic metres of soil is required for every 800,000 bricks while every brick kiln of the district has a capacity to produce at least 3 million bricks every season.

The kiln operators, in the absence of adequate monitoring by government officials, are taking a heavy toll on the precious topsoil and ecological changes are taking place due to illegal mining of soil for brick-making.

While visiting several brick kilns of the district, it was found that owners collect soils and woods round the year through local agents and pile them up at their respective sites. In winter, they start brick kiln operations emitting huge volleys of carbon in the atmosphere.



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Truckloads of bricks wait in queue at Hili land port in Hakimpur to enter India.