



Workers blockaded the roads Khulna city demanding their wages be paid. The mills owe them Tk 1,600 crore.

PHOTO: STAR

ZYMA ISLAM AND DIPANKAR ROY

THE TIGHTENING NOOSE OF GOLDEN FIBER

The jute industry is in such deep debt that it would have to sell an arm and a leg, and perhaps both kidneys too, to be able to pay all that it owes their workers.

Nobody who has visited any of the jute product festivals that have been taking place since Jute Day on March 6, would have suspected as such. Rallies were brought out in all the districts where jute mills were located to encourage people to switch over to the environmentally-friendly jute products. Dinghy boats with colourful sails flapping in the wind flocked around Dhaka's Hatirjheel lake to the tunes of folk music, to educate people about the harmful effects of plastic on the environment. In the capital city, distributors routinely put up displays of their crafts—ottomans, bags, carpets, floor mats, curtains all made to the tastes of the latest fads in bohemian interior decor.

But far away from Dhaka, in the districts where the government-owned jute mills are actually located, the workers have not gotten paid in over two months.

And so the jute workers in Demra, Khulna, Rajshahi and Chittagong have been on the streets since the beginning of the month, protesting against their mills. They called off demonstrations for a short while last week, but plan to start again this

week.

While not being paid was the straw that broke the camel's back, unpaid wages are barely the tip of the dung-heap. The protesters are dealing with a whole gamut of issues, some of which are so shocking that it is a wonder why more people are not aware of it. How many, for example, know that none of the workers who had gone into retirement from 2013, received a single taka of their provident funds or gratuities? Or that a new minimum wage was announced in 2015, but it is yet to be implemented four years on?

"The sector will need to pay the workers Tk 1,600 crores if we implement the new wage board this year," says the secretary of the Ministry of Textile and Jute, Md Mijanur Rahman. This figure includes the amount of money owed to the workers as back-wages over the last four years, during which time they should have legally gotten higher salaries as per the 2015 pay-scale.

"The ministry does not have this much money. We cannot give the mills the money to pay the workers," says jute ministry secretary Rahman. It is true—the amount allocated as the operational budget of the entire ministry this year is Tk 186 crores, a mere tenth of the money they owe the workers.

In addition to this, over 8,000

workers and officials who have gone into retirement are owed over Tk 426 crores in gratuities and retirement benefits, and not a single coin of this amount has been handed over since 2013, informs the general manager of the finance department at Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation, Md Abdul Maleque.

"The mills are just not making enough money to give the workers their retirement benefits," he adds. "The government has always taken care of that for us, but they stopped since 2013, so the workers have been going about unpaid."

All the money collected from the workers as provident funds over their many years of employment had to be injected back into the mills, say the owners. The 26 government-owned jute and jute-related mills collectively made a loss of Tk 455 crores last year. The year before that, during the fiscal year 2016-17, the loss was Tk 481 crores, while the loss was Tk 655 crores during the fiscal year 2015-16, and Tk 727 crore during the fiscal year 2014-2015.

"This year the loss is projected to be over Tk 1,000 crores if we have to pay the workers their back-wages," says Maleque. In recent times, the mills only profited during 2010-2011, when they made a measly profit of Tk 17.53 crores.

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