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In 2016, the government jute sector was given Tk 1,000 crores by the finance ministry to sustain itself. 60 percent of that money was to go into paying arrears of the workers, while 40 percent was for modernising the capital goods. With that astronomical amount of money, the sector could merely bring its losses down by Tk 200 crores.

"The mills have never bought any new equipment since their inception," says Maleque. It is a startling fact, given that most of these mills are from the pre-independence era. Seven mills of the current lot were built in the 50's, meaning they are using technology, and machines, that are more than half a century old.

In fact, modernisation of the factories is one of the nine demands that the workers are making right now.

"We cannot work with the machines that we currently have. We have to work overtime to finish the daily target," says 53-year-old Mohammed Shukur Ali, who has been a worker at Platinum Jute Mill for over two decades.

"They undergo losses in many ways, but they blame the workers, saying that we are not working."

"The factories in Khulna are only producing 33.79 percent of their target. They aimed to produce 272 metric tonnes of products during this fiscal year, but only managed to churn out 92 metric tonnes," claims Khulna's liaison officer for Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation, Shankar Chandra Bhuiyan.

Another demand being made by the workers right now, is also for the sake of the factories—they are demanding that the mills set aside money to buy jute during harvest time.

"When the farmers harvest jute, the government mills do not have any money to buy it from them. The private mills on the other hand, do. Our mills are able to pay for the jute three or four months into

*"The sector will need to pay the workers Tk 1600 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 harvest period, and they end up getting the worst jute. Then the workers are blamed for not being able to process them," says Sardar Motahar Uddin, the president of the Bangladesh Jute Workers League. During fiscal year 2017-2018, they were able to sell less than 60 percent of the goods they produced, according to BJMC documents. In Khulna, where a majority of the protests are happening, the mills are hoarding unsold goods

weighing 32,060 metric tonne worth Tk 300 crores, claims BJMC liaison officer Bhuiyan.

"This year, the mills in Khulna could only buy 27 percent of the total amount of jute they had targeted to purchase," he adds. In his division, the nine government mills owe arrears worth Tk 44 crore 20 lakhs to the workers.

"The BJMC has to either earn the money to resolve the crisis or borrow money from the government," says jute ministry secretary Mijanur Rahman. "We are in a process of trying to get these funds from the Finance Ministry. Maybe they will give the money."

"The government has done so much for this sector, but it is now their responsibility to make profits. They cannot expect the government to continue bailing them out," he adds. To put into perspective, the loan-scam riddled state banks have received bailout packages worth Tk 2,000 crore just last fiscal year, and over Tk 10,000 crores in bailouts over the last decade.

"We have instructed the factories to begin paying the workers their dues, but we have not gotten any indication from the government that we can get the money needed to do so," says general manager of the department of worker liaison at BJMC.

Meanwhile, as the wages remain unpaid, and while the government mulls over whether or not it will grant a bailout, workers are in dire straits. A total of 250 police cases have been filed against the workers because they protested.

Mijanur Rahman, a worker from Platinum Jute Mills had gone out to protest because he had not been paid for 11 weeks. Now he is on the run because of the police cases.

"I am not being able to stay home. I owe the grocer Tk 13,000 but I don't know whether I will still have my job once this blows over," he says.

Each worker has a tragic story to tell. Shukur Ali who is also a worker of Platinum Jute Mill is now being forced to pull his teenage daughter out of school, and marry her off.

"I used to get a wage of Tk 2,200 every week, but we have not been paid in nine weeks. I now owe the local grocer and the landlord around Tk 17,000," says Ali.

"My 14-year-old daughter used to go to the colony school, but I can't afford to pay her school fees anymore, so I've taken her out," describes Ali, "I am simultaneously looking for a potential husband for her to marry."

When asked why he is pushing his daughter into an underage marriage, he says it is because she is sitting around the house, moping about the fact that her friends are in school but she is not. "She can start her life anew," he says.

Meanwhile, as there is no indication that the workers will get their due retirement benefits, Ruhul Haque is having to go back to his village home in Barguna empty-handed, after working as a jute mill worker for 44 years. The worker, who is currently at Crescent Jute Mill, has no savings left from his miserly monthly salary of Tk 8,200.

"Everything I earned, I sent back home. I am now due to retire any day, but how can I go home without my provident fund, without any money?" he asks.

The state has a lot to answer for.



Retired workers have not received retirement benefits in over six years.

PHOTO: STAR