

## Jute industry must be made profitable again

Pay the workers, remove the bottlenecks

TO say that the jute sector is in trouble would be the height of euphemism. It is actually in a shambles and has been an ailing sector for decades. Yet we don't understand why the government-owned jute mills should be incurring such huge losses and not be able to pay their workers for months resulting in inconceivable misery and despair. Despite its huge prospects and in spite of supplying 95 percent of worldwide demand for jute yarn, our jute mills are running at a loss.

The government, moreover, has injected Tk 7,000 crore over the last decade yet the jute mills are still plagued by poor management and bad planning. So where is the much-needed reform in the jute sector? Why have we not diversified to meet global demand? What kind of research and development have we invested in to make that happen?

The sheer neglect of this valuable sector has now resulted in the present crisis where thousands of jute mill workers have not been paid for six to 12 weeks and are agitating on the streets. Now Bangladesh Jute Mill Corporation (BJMC) has asked the government for Tk 340 crore to clear arrear wages until June of its over 32,000 workers. BJMC has sought another Tk 1,600 crore to implement the 2015 wage scale for its workers which is one of the demands of the agitating workers. The question is how will BJMC continue to pay its workers if the mills continue to run at a loss?

It is a mystery why this sector has not been revitalised years ago when the first signs of it sliding were clearly visible. Now it is incumbent upon the government to try to save this industry, not by endlessly injecting money without any demand of accountability but by identifying the bottlenecks in the industry and taking necessary action. This includes making the management efficient and free of corruption, updating the machinery in the mills and investing in research and development of jute products to cater to the global market. In all this, workers should be treated humanely and be paid their dues before Eid. They should not suffer because of the incompetence and irregularities of the management.

## Negligence has contaminated the water

Ancient, broken supply lines not replaced

WE are shocked that 16 percent of the water supplied by Wasa in Dhaka is not clean and as many as 57 city areas are getting contaminated. This has been revealed after Wasa made the admission in a report submitted before the High Court. The cause of the contamination is also outrageous—broken-down supply lines.

This begs the question why this report was submitted after months of public suffering and regular complaints by consumers about the bad quality of water. In April of this year Transparency International Bangladesh's year-long study found 91 percent Wasa subscribers have to boil the supply water to make it drinkable, burning Tk 332 crore a year burning gas to do so. The report has found that almost half the subscribers do not get the desired amount of water while 35 percent find the water to be of poor quality.

This paper has repeatedly reported on the poor quality of water, quoting city dwellers who are at their tethers end trying to get water from clean sources.

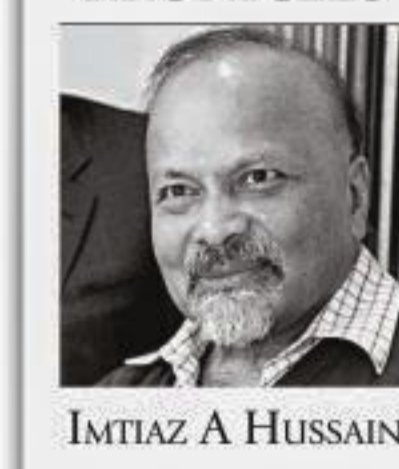
What is clearly a maintenance issue should have been addressed many years ago. The supply lines are as old as 150 years and only less than half (24,000 km out of 60,000 km) has been replaced. Thus more than 50 percent of the network has been waiting for 150 years to be replaced!

There can be no justification for such gross neglect of such an essential public service just as there is no excuse for the Wasa managing director to have said less than a month ago, that the Wasa water "is 100 percent pure" although admitting that even he himself has to boil the water sometimes at his home. Since then the MD has admitted his mistake but this hardly provides solace to the public who are at risk of contracting waterborne diseases because of the contamination. The Wasa report based on a World Bank Study has found 80 percent of the household tap water across the country has E-coli contamination.

We are relieved that the court, after a report in this paper about quality of water, ordered the LGRD ministry to form a four-member committee to test the water following a writ petition. Finally, it seems something will be done to address this crisis. Apart from continuous testing of water we urge the government to expedite the replacement and repair of broken supply lines as this is the major factor behind this widespread contamination.

# Galloping Bangladesh: Emperor with no clothes?

KAUTILYAN  
KRONICLES



IMTIAZ A HUSSAIN

"DON'T judge a book by its cover." So goes a popular cliché, though appraisals become more sanguine the more one opens the volume. Recent (April)

reports about the country's top-flight economic growth-rates expose why heeding that message helps keep us on track.

One was by the World Bank, ranking Bangladesh among the world's top five countries. Another was from its sister-organisation, the International Monetary Fund, pushing the country even higher, among the top three. A third report from London's Centre for Economics and Business Research made an equally robust prediction of the world's 41st largest economy, Bangladesh, climbing to the 24th largest spot by 2033. Against the *oborodhs* which drove foreign investors away five years ago, news like these can leave us giddy, unguarded. The country might hit all of these thresholds, but a host of creeping costs elsewhere tempers celebrative excesses.

Our economic *magnus opus*, the low-waged RMG (ready-made garment) industry, also carries a demonic flipside. From classical economics we know how low-wage production leverages grow, and though Bangladesh is not fully neoliberal, we exemplify some of its historically-confirmed seeds of decay. One is the skyrocketing spending we have gotten into. Splurging on construction may be critically needed (for infrastructure building), but conspicuous consumption may be taking the glow away too rapidly. These illustrate the "public" and "private" spending columns, respectively, in any account book. Sold-out Cox's Bazaar hotels depict the latter (even though a large proportion of guests work with refugees instead of fitting the "tourist" bill), as too travel abroad, especially to Bangkok, Kolkata, or Singapore. Spending boosts production, but also spikes imports. If borrowed, it also sows the seeds of a payment-postponement mindset: since spending on material possessions bring visible gratification and inflates our social value, indulgences win the day over restraints, opening the slippery road to non-performing loans (of which we are overflowing) and imposing unnecessary fiscal pressures.

As our own expenses diminish our own bank balances, or push our credit-card payments upwards, the country wincing when this becomes contagious. With a stable income these irritants can be ironed out, but when even sustainable employment cannot be sustained, as against automation and crony capitalist practices, pain becomes our uninvited guest.

If we shift from the personal account balances to the macro-level, we will have to barter the emperor's robe to survive. Take, for example, the 1.2 million

refugees we cater to. Numerous reports put the annual monetary costs at USD 800 million to USD 1 billion (these only for directly needed basic items, like food, shelter, medicine, and the like). Damages to the environment will be far higher, but since they involve long-term calculations, these festering issues will also be pushed to the back-burner while we savour our material expansion. With foreign contributions dwindling, at least one-third of that USD 1 billion must come from our own coffers, adding another curveball.

Surely one-third will not leave us

Bank report, climate-change losses will account for 1.8 percent of our GDP annually, a figure far larger than our highest annual military expenditure proportion ever (thus far). Just to stave off further climate-change danger, that ADB report posits we will have to pay USD 89 million annually by the 2030s, climbing to USD 363 million by mid-century. When this century ends, according to that report, 8.8 percent of our GDP will be shielding our grandchildren's grandchildren from climate change concerns. We might feast like a king/queen, but our reputation to them may

is, find a robe for the denuded royalty? Something unusual must creep into the cards: to become more of a *rational* consumer in what we purchase, consume, discard, and produce. Being penny-wise is not sufficient. Purchasing is what triggers production, so *where* that production takes place could be one consideration, and then, *when* the consumption is completed, efficiency and sustainability matter as much: whether recycling is possible (which not only cuts some of the accumulating pollution, but also opens up other environmental-friendly industries), if not personally, then for



Children walk over the top of a sandbag embankment that was breached by high waters in Khulna on May 4, 2019, after Cyclone Fani reached Bangladesh. PHOTO: AFP

naked. Yet, other forces lurk. Protecting those borders is one of them, spiking our security costs. Deploying Border Guards (once again) to St Martin's Island, and maintaining a functional army along the border and around the refugee camps, have helped push the military component of our gross domestic product (GDP) from USD 3.3 billion in 2016 to USD 3.4 billion. Considering we only allocated USD 2.4 billion to the military in 2013, only a superficial analysis would conclude that safeguarding refugees did not play a part in that hike. Except for 1975-6 and 1995-2000, our defence expenditures never really touched even 1.5 percent of our GDP, but that should not delude us into thinking the economy is not being impacted: any crisis would send those costs soaring through the ceiling, leaving us too close to the breakpoint.

Other elements also beg attention. Another World Bank report (in September 2018) puts our urban pollution costs at USD 6.5 billion annually (attributing 80,000 direct deaths at that to just this causation). This, while 75 percent of the country's wetlands get despoiled, imposes a steadily climbing environmental cost that will, let's say by mid-21st Century, come back to haunt us. By that time, according to a 2014 Asian Development

become as poor as a pauper's.

Nothing has been said of our multiple mega-projects: we need them, they are bottleneck-releasing investments, reflecting our changing, more upside identity. We will, however, have to cough up the cash to have them, from our own pockets, through taxes. Nor too have other routine transactional costs been mentioned, for example, to ramp up our educational and healthcare infrastructures, and to feed up to 200 million people later this century. In other words, the marginally bloated cost column of our ledger now will assume more obese proportions due to our graduation from a less-developed status into middle-income confines, while a future shift into a developed country by 2041 might expose to us how our fiscal and financial budget will be increasingly punctured.

Shifting from those secular macro-level developments into our own micro-level world, we get a better appraisal of this consumption cancer. Our trade deficit has the unique claim of being perpetually negative, hovering between 5 percent and 7.5 percent of our GDP since the mid-1980s, indeed doubling in size in only the last five-odd years.

How do we get out of this mess, that

others. Should we end up discarding the leftovers? If so, how, when, where, and in what other ways can we turn to so as not to steal our children's future through pollution? Production is, of course, king, but diversified production might carry a magic we might completely miss if we just do not experiment, innovate, and jump out-of-the-box once in a while. In the final analysis, once we see ourselves as a cog in the wheel, a tree in the forest, or a Bangalee in the global commons, we might get the looks of a well-outfitted emperor/empress befitting his/her station.

Ramadan carries a message precisely for such an occasion: to revitalise by cutting back and conserving. Others have spoken how, as one of the year's biggest shopping moments arrives, every new upgraded cloth we purchase means that much more of the imperilled-environment we endanger, and for every delicious meat-based meal we savour, how much poorer the verdant country's grassland becomes. We could show our royalty credential by curbing our shopping instinct and taming our gluttony. The Eid fun would return resplendently to our own backyards.

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## Urgent action vital to stop nature's destruction and climate change

ANDREW NORTON

THE Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services' report on the global state of biodiversity is shocking but not entirely surprising. The question is, how much more evidence and repeated warnings will it take for governments, companies and financial institutions to wake up to the urgency and act?

The accelerating destruction of nature and climate change are the twin emergencies threatening humanity today. There is no more time for inaction or delay—the report's findings are loud and clear.

The report lays out the scale of the unfolding crisis. Around one million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction, many within decades. Three-quarters of the land-based environment and about two-thirds of the marine environment have been significantly altered by human actions.

With new areas such as the high seas and Arctic increasingly accessible due to technological developments and climate change, this will increase if urgent and effective action is not taken.

We are all dependent on the rich diversity of nature for our quality of life—and ultimately for our survival. But our actions, from over-fishing to the pursuit of monocrops and the destruction of natural forests, are undermining the complex natural world at an unprecedented rate.

This is everybody's problem. For years, the issue of biodiversity and its fate have been treated as niche subjects. But without stopping the acceleration of its destruction, none of the environmental and development challenges—from tackling climate change and upholding the Paris Agreement to achieving the UN



Drought in the province of Jowzjan, north of Afghanistan, making land unproductive. PHOTO: V TAN/UNHCR

Sustainable Development Goals—can be achieved.

Radical, comprehensive changes are needed to save the diversity of life on which we all depend. The climate crisis amplifies the threat to global biodiversity in multiple ways.

The accelerating die-back of coral reefs due to rising ocean temperatures is a striking example. Acting with urgency to get to net zero greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible is absolutely key to protecting nature and people alike.

Governments must act immediately to end the destructive subsidies, including for fossil fuels and industrial fishing and agriculture, which are driving us towards ecological collapse. These encourage the plundering of the land and ocean at the expense of a clean, healthy and diverse environment on which billions of

women, children and men depend now and in the future.

The money saved should be used to support sustainable industries that provide livelihoods for men and women living in poverty, such as small-scale fisheries and give incentives for the preservation of the natural world on a global scale.

Such resources could be used to support a green jobs guarantee whereby people can be supported to work on both the energy transition and on maintaining landscapes that are carbon and biodiversity-rich, safeguard key habitats, and provide the multiple benefits to human society that come from healthy ecosystems.

Importantly, the report highlights the key role that indigenous peoples and local communities' play in the fight to

save nature. Although biodiversity is declining in their areas due to land being under increasing pressure from extractive industries, infrastructure development and agriculture, it is declining more slowly, reflecting the valuable role they play in the stewardship of the natural world.

It is imperative that greater attention is given to strengthening indigenous and local communities' rights to manage their land and resources sustainably. They must be able to play an active part in all efforts to conserve biodiversity, while their right to use nature is protected.

People who are living in poverty are being disproportionately hit by the destruction of nature, which as the report shows, is accelerating faster than at any other time in human history. From rural women in poor countries who have the responsibility to gather wood for fuel, to people in informal settlements who are becoming more vulnerable to storm damage due to the loss of such natural barriers as mangroves, poverty goes hand-in-hand with precarious lives that are extremely vulnerable to ecological collapse.

It is crucial the progress that has been made in development is not undone by the interconnected crises of biodiversity loss and climate change.

The contribution that diverse nature and natural ecological systems make to development—for both rich and poor—needs to be included in economic decisions made by governments and business. Without it, development gains will increasingly be lost and ultimately, the foundations of our economies and societies will be threatened.

Andrew Norton is Director of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). Courtesy: Inter Press Service

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Every day should be Mother's Day

Mother's Day is celebrated in many countries of the world, including in Bangladesh, on May 13. In the US it is celebrated on the second Sunday of May. In most Arab countries, Mother's Day is always celebrated on March 21, which is the Spring equinox. In the UK and Ireland, it is celebrated on the fourth Sunday of May.

I personally think that every day should be Mother's Day. All of us are deeply indebted to our mothers—a debt we can never repay.

Sadly, we increasingly see people abandoning their parents today. They are most unfortunate as they wilfully abandon one of the greatest treasures each of us are given in life.

Nevertheless, let Mother's Day be a reminder of how we should care for our mothers, as they cared for us, and continue to care for us, all throughout our lives.

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