

# Does anyone care about the jute mill workers?



RUHUL AMIN

Ruhul Amin is the coordinator of Sramik Krishak Chhatra Janata Oikya Parishad.

ON April 21, we held a human chain programme at Khulna Shivbari intersection demanding payment of arrears of jute mill workers and reopening of closed jute mills. At the end of the programme, when everyone was getting on a truck to return to Khalishpur, a worker of Khalishpur Jute Mill named Kohinoor Begum (age 51 or 52 years) grabbed my hand and said, "Baba, I will not get on the truck."

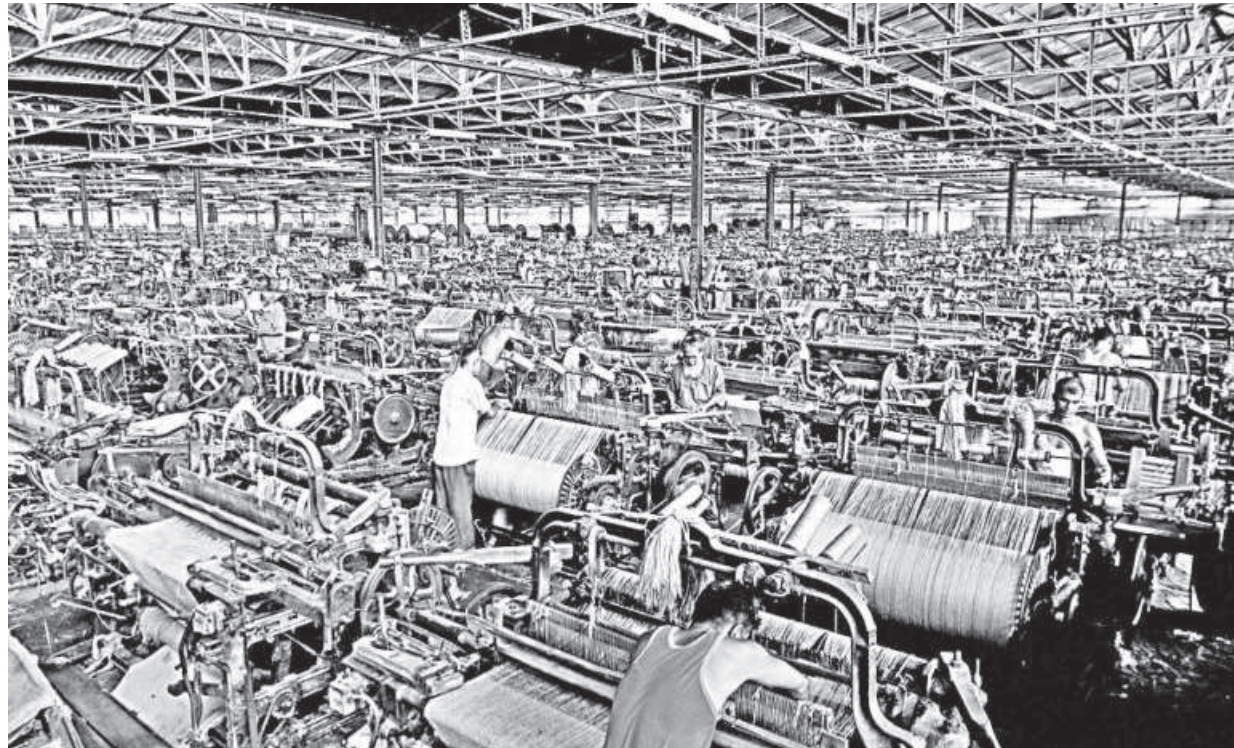
I was a little surprised and asked, "Why? How will you go?"

She replied, "I will walk around a bit. I cannot beg on familiar streets."

Kohinoor Begum, a worker at Khalishpur Jute Mill No 1, roamed around the crowded city seeking help. Other workers left for home after finishing the programme. But her hand, which was raised up earlier to claim her debt, went down asking for assistance.

The situation of a large number of workers, particularly women and elderly workers, in Khalishpur region, is similar to that of Kohinoor Begum. They are now helpless despite being skilled. After the closure of the jute mill, they have been living the life of a beggar without having a regular job. Their bold looks have faded away; they are almost unrecognisable today.

Alamgir, a former employee of Star Jute Mill, used to earn Tk 4,800-5,500 per week working six hours a day. Now, after 12 hours of night duty as a guard in Khulna



city (9pm-9am), he gets a monthly salary of only Tk 7,000. Additional six hours of duty in the day time provides him with Tk 5,000. How can a family survive on so little?

Today, a skilled jute mill worker has to work as a night guard in the city. There is no security in their lives. That is why Reshma, daughter of Khalishpur Jute Mill worker Badsha, could not get admission in a new class despite being first in her class.

Many helpless workers have joined private jute mills where the daily allowance is Tk 180-220. They get only 20-30 minutes of food break. There are no holidays. They don't have the right to form a trade union.

▲ The government closed all state-run jute mills on July 2, 2020, laying off 70,000 workers.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

As a result, workers have no freedom of speech.

If a worker has an accident while working, the mill authorities do not take any responsibility for it. There is no maternity leave. During the Covid-19 lockdown, almost all government and non-government workers in the country were given an allowance, but no worker in any private jute mills received such assistance.

The safety situation of women workers is extremely poor. Many female workers are being sexually harassed, especially while working in the C Shift (10pm to 6am). But there is no one to take care of these issues. If you complain, it is not taken into

account.

The largest private jute mill in the Khulna-Jashore region employs over 10,000 workers. The same situation prevails there. The union that the owner has formed to show the mill's foreign buyers is of no use to the workers. Rather, they work for the owner.

The skills acquired by the workers who have been working in the state-owned jute mills for 15-20 years are being sold today to the private sector at a very cheap price. Many workers, who now get one-third of the government's wage while working almost double, strongly believe that there is some type of government machination at work behind this whole process.

At a time when the demand for jute products in the world is increasing, and new private jute mills are being established, government workers are being handed over to the private mills as the government-owned mills are closed down. The plan is to exploit these helpless labourers because they don't know any other work.

On July 2, 2020, amid Covid lockdown, the government announced the closure of 25 jute mills and laid off 70,000 workers. Without paying the dues, the workers were evicted from the colony in clear violation of the labour law in Bangladesh.

About 11,000 workers of five jute mills, including Khalishpur-Daulatpur jute mill, in Khalishpur haven't yet received their arrears. Having to leave their earnings with the government, the workers are now starving.

Idris Ali, an elderly worker sitting at the mill gate, said in grief one day, "No one cares about us, the government has snatched our jobs, and now the Almighty has also turned his face away from us."

This article was translated from Bangla by Tanveer Ahmed Chowdhury.

# One SMS can save thousands of farmers



SAIFUR RAHMAN

Saifur Rahman is a senior IT specialist working in the Australian Public Service.

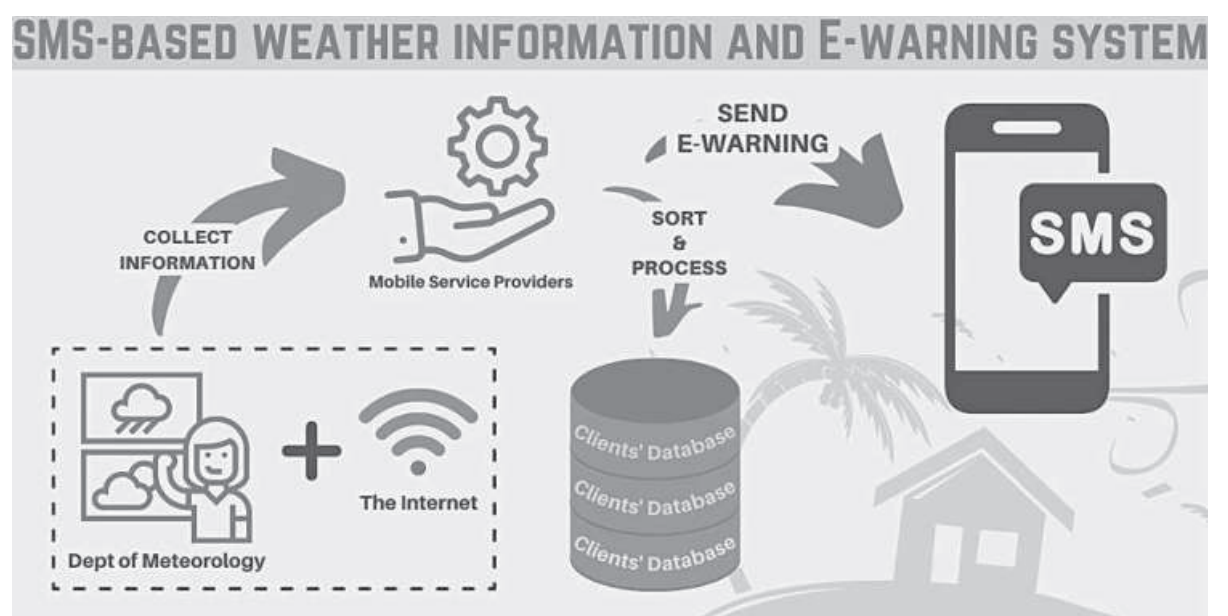
ON February 7 this year, an article by Mostafa Shabuj in *The Daily Star* Bangla titled "Why can't the government send timely weather information to farmers?" made me pause. The article mentioned an incident of heavy rainfall earlier this year that swamped vast areas of Joypurhat, Bogura and Dinajpur, damaging standing potato crops. It is assumed that had the farmers received prior information of the rainfall, they could have saved about 25 percent of their hard-earned produce. Such episodes are quite common, and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) suggests that calamities of various degrees cause about Tk 30,000 crore worth of damage to properties across the country each year, of which 40 percent is standing crops, poultry and fisheries. Such losses can be minimised by providing the farmers with timely weather information. It is vital for our agriculture, a sector that feeds the whole country and provides more than one-third of our total employment.

Bangladesh's weather prediction mechanism is modelled after US technology, which is capable of predicting weather events 16 days in advance. Mostafa Shabuj's article raises an important question: Why should farmers accept such losses in the day and age of technological excellence? One of the main objectives of a disaster management system is to warn the masses about an upcoming calamity.

Traditionally, radio and television channels have served that purpose, but with the advent of smartphones, the use of such old technologies has declined. Long- and short-term weather information are now available on different websites, but many farmers at grassroots level don't have smartphones or access to the internet. In order to overcome this bottleneck, the short-message service (SMS) on mobile phones can be utilised, since it does not depend on smart devices or the internet, and thus can reach any citizen in the country if they use a mobile phone.

There are two ways of transmitting SMS: a) the "Push type," where messages are sent to the subscribers without being asked (Govt Info is one such service that disseminates important information to the general public); and b) the "Pull type," where mobile phone users subscribe to an information relaying service (Bangladesh Railway has such a system that sends SMS with information about the location and arrival time of a train on request.) Mobile phone subscribers receive four to five push SMS daily on average from their service providers, most of which are informational or promotional. No weather information or warning as such is currently being transmitted via SMS.

The e-warning system is a communication strategy that gives people an early warning on all hazards and natural disasters to pursue effective response actions to tackle disasters before impact, thus dramatically reducing their effects on lives, properties and, in the case of farmers, crops and farm products. In order to be effective in Bangladesh, a) The system must be free, without requiring any registration or subscription; b) Users should not need a smart device or the internet—ordinary mobile phones should



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VISUAL: AFIA JAHIN

be enough; and c) Information must be delivered without request. An SMS-based weather information system can meet all these requirements.

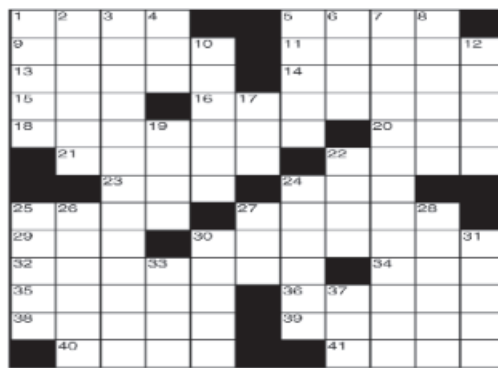
Now, who can provide this service? The Indian government launched an SMS-based cyclone warning in as early as 2014. Our government can launch a similar system, but I suggest that mobile phone service providers deliver such a facility as part of their social responsibility. These providers are best placed to develop such a system since they have information on the locations of their subscribers and can track them in real time. This data is at the heart of the whole system. In a nutshell, the application will collect short- and long-term weather information from the Met Office or acquire them from different weather forecast websites. That data would then be sorted and processed according to locations

(e.g. upazila based) and an SMS would be pushed with warning and weather data as per the location of a subscriber. The system can be powered by artificial intelligence (AI) and fully automated, reducing the cost of operation to a minimum.

There can be arguments against such a system, citing that not all farmers own even the simplest of mobile phones. But with the number of mobile phone subscriptions at over 170 million (2020), such an argument is extremely futile, if not outright wrong. SMS has been widely adopted in Bangladesh, so an SMS-based e-warning system can be one of the best suited solutions. Culturally, rural Bangladesh is still a close-knit society. If a single mobile phone owner in the whole village receives an SMS warning on an upcoming storm, that information would surely spread within minutes.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Jazz singing style
  - 5 Mexican peninsula
  - 9 Treated roughly
  - 11 Squirrel's find
  - 13 Ludicrous
  - 14 Poem feature
  - 15 Veto vote
  - 16 Spanish celebrations
  - 18 Thin shards
  - 20 Toronto's prov.
  - 21 Catch
  - 22 "And that's the way—"
  - 23 Braying beast
  - 24 Sturdy wood
  - 25 Citrus fruit
  - 27 Felt unwell
- DOWN**
- 1 Whirls
  - 2 Venice byways
  - 3 Classic carol
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  - 5 German cries
  - 7 Classic carol
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  - 10 Puts off
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  - 25 "Star Wars" creator
  - 26 Desperate for change
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  - 30 Glossy
  - 31 Annoying ones
  - 33 Slacker address
  - 37 In the past



## SUNDAY'S ANSWERS



## BEETLE BAILEY

## BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES

## BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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