

## Another display of abuse of power

### Chattogram councillor found involved in illicit cigarette market

An investigative report by this paper has brought to light another disgraceful case of power abuse by a public official. A councillor of Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) and his brother have been found to be involved in illicit cigarette market, having majority stakes in two companies that have a significant share in this market. As indicated by an ongoing investigation by the NBR's Central Intelligence Cell (CIC), the two companies have been making fake versions of foreign brands and putting counterfeit banderoles on their cigarette packs. These fake cigarettes have entered major markets, including Dhaka and Chattogram, where they are being sold at lower prices compared to the authentic ones.

As this is an illicit trade, the country loses about \$100 million in tax revenue, and the two companies are largely responsible for it. CIC officials suspect that they have been evading tax by illegally importing raw materials through phantom entities. What is more surprising is that a city corporation councillor could have carried out such activities undetected. Obviously, his position gave him a great deal of impunity and power to carry on without any hindrance. It is laudable that the NBR took the initiative to investigate allegations that the two companies were selling fake brands of cigarettes. Our report in this regard has further revealed a complex web of illegal activities involving the two.

In the last few weeks, such blatant examples of abuse of power to enhance personal wealth have been exposed through the media. A recently murdered MP was allegedly involved in a massive gold smuggling racket. A former army chief was sanctioned by the US Department accusing him of engaging in corruption and assisting his brother to evade accountability for criminal activities. A former IGP and his family members were accused of amassing 114 acres of land among other possessions.

That these individuals in such prime seats of power could abuse their position for so long and so blatantly demonstrates the lack of accountability of public officials in a system that enables criminal behaviour. It seems being connected to power automatically gives individuals a shield of immunity, allowing them to go on violating the law for personal gain. This serves to amplify the anxiety and insecurity of the ordinary people whose interests these public officials and leaders were supposed to protect.

It should be recognised that relevant state organisations are trying to unravel some of these cases of unbridled corruption. But this is more likely to be the tip of the iceberg for public officials involved in illegal activities. Unless the government clamps down on the criminal activities of all those in powerful public positions, the hydra of corruption will continue to grow exponentially, damaging the country's image abroad and leading to a nation that is haemorrhaging economically and morally.

## Sylhet flood victims need urgent help

### Govt must critically assess the situation, intervene properly

We're worried about the evolving flood situation in Sylhet that came hard on the heels of another severe calamity in the form of Cyclone Remal earlier last week, the effects of which are still very much felt. While the nation's focus remained fixed on cyclone-hit communities in southern Bangladesh, the north-east—Sylhet district in particular—was hit by flash floods that began on Wednesday night due to torrential rains and onrush of water from upstream in India's Meghalaya. Since then, at least 6.43 lakh people have been marooned across eight upazilas in Sylhet, according to a report by this daily.

The deluge has swept away many houses and submerged schools, roads, farmlands, and fish enclosures in about 48 unions, compounding the suffering of the victims. Acute shortages of food and drinking water have been reported. True, the district administration set up 547 shelters—housing about 3,739 people on Friday, down from 4,802 the previous night—but many more people are in need of shelter, support and rehabilitation. The stories of some of the villagers approached by this daily are heart-wrenching yet familiar, as flash floods triggered by water influx from upstream areas as well as lack of preparation on our side have ravaged these communities many times in the past, most notably during the devastating 2022 flood that went down as a “once-in-122-years weather event” in the region.

While the geopolitics of transboundary river management can complicate things for a region dealing with such events, many after the recent flood have rightly questioned the government's preparations, especially its river dredging programmes which are supposed to help manage water flow and reduce erosions. Experts have also highlighted the importance of preventing encroachments on floodplains that have been quite prevalent in recent years. Clearly, we need to consider both short-term and long-term interventions as we prepare for yet another monsoon season.

Right now, the priority is to ensure that the affected communities in Sylhet, especially those stranded, have food, clean water and medical supplies delivered to them as soon as possible. Since the floodwaters have begun to recede in many areas, the administration must also focus on repairing critical infrastructure including roads and schools. Many have lost their homes and means of livelihood, so they will require financial assistance to rebuild their lives. The district administration and local representatives must engage with all villagers to ensure that they get the help they deserve.

#### THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Elizabeth II crowned queen

On this day in 1953, 27-year-old Elizabeth II, the elder daughter of King George VI, was crowned queen of the United Kingdom at Westminster Abbey, having taken the throne upon her father's death in February 1952.



50 percent of the world's jute is produced in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: STAR

# A symbol of our degradation

It is a rare instance in the world when a country is sending its raw materials—jute in the case of Bangladesh—abroad without utilising it themselves



Dr Serajul Islam Choudhury  
is professor emeritus,  
Dhaka University.

#### SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

A truly unforgettable representation of the poor farmer can be found in the character Gafur from Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's short story “Mahesh.” While a century has passed, this Gafur is still present today, in the same old form, for the kind of suffering may have changed but the cause has not. And the reason is our prevailing social system.

Over a hundred years ago, Gafur fled his village for the city in the dead of night, to work at a jute mill. He didn't want to go at all. Gafur was deeply worried that Amina, his only child—that too motherless—wouldn't survive in the slums where jute mill workers lived. But he still had to go, because he had committed a terrible crime in a village ruled by a Brahmin landlord: he had killed a cow. It wasn't as if the cow belonged to someone else, it was his own. He had named it Mahesh.

As the story goes, Mahesh was extremely close to Gafur, whose ancestors were weavers. The East India Company had swallowed up the looms, so Gafur had to become a farmer. But he didn't have the materials needed to farm. There was no land, and his plough was broken. He had put his trust in Mahesh, who had grown old. There was a severe drought in the village, and drinking water was hard to come by. Amina had a lot of trouble fetching water from the distant tube-well. She had to walk carefully, lest she touched a high-caste Hindu woman by mistake. On a hot summer afternoon, she brought a pitcher of water, and a parched Mahesh broke the pitcher while drinking. Blinded by anger, ego, and grief, Gafur hit Mahesh on the head with the share of his broken plough. Mahesh died immediately after, forcing Gafur to flee the village.

The Gafur of that time, who was from West Bengal, living near the capital Kolkata, could still put his faith in jute. There were many jute mills around Kolkata, jute used to come from East Bengal, while the mills were in Kolkata. It was the only marketable asset of East Bengal to speak of, before and after partition. But East Bengal wouldn't get the profit from the sale of that jute: it went to Karachi, then to Rawalpindi. A new capital was built in Rawalpindi, partly from the money obtained from selling jute. Jute money also started buying weapons, which, in 1971, were used against the unfortunate East Bengal. Being from West Bengal, Gafur was at least able to get a job in a jute mill. If he were a resident of present-day East Bengal, he wouldn't have even gotten that.

There is jute, but no jute mill: in this circumstance, a few mills were set up in East Bengal after 1947. Knowing that there would be good profit, two or three of the 22 famous industrial families of the time invested in the jute industry. And, indeed, the profits were good. Adamjee's mill was said to be the

best, not only in Asia but also the world. After Bangladesh's independence in 1971, many mills were closed down. Meanwhile, Adamjee's fall was monumental. However, Adamjee did not fall because of its workers, it fell because of mismanagement.



The main reason behind the high yields of jute is the labour of farmers.

PHOTO: SUZIT KUMAR DAS

The Bangalee managers, after gaining independence, embarked on committing such robbery that far from profits, it became “impossible” to manage losses. Adamjee fell, but almost immediately across the border in West Bengal, there was a flurry of new jute mills. And the jute went from Bangladesh. The old system was revived: raw material were from here, but the factories were there. Right after independence, Adamjee's non-Bangalee general manager—who was very efficient—moved to the other side, and was welcomed graciously by industrialists there. Who will confirm whether this was part of an alleged Pakistani conspiracy after independence?

In an independent Bangladesh, jute mills were either closing down one by one or going under private ownership. It was understood that capitalism had been liberated; it would not tolerate any obstacles and would display its ruthless activities. Privatising state factories was government policy. Even though the government changed several times after independence, the policy did not. Those responsible for looking after state industries were the ones who transferred them to private entities. Some officials of Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation received cash bribes, some were given ownership of the mills. The good people just watched on with their eyes wide open.

After independence, it was even

heard that jute has no future: it will walk the path of the once-famous indigo. But that did not happen; it survived, because jute possesses utility. It is eco-friendly. On the contrary, polythene and plastic are engaged in constant hostility against nature. And it's not like only sacks are made from jute: it's also used for making carpets, clothes, and furniture. And that's why jute did not fall to its demise. It is being cultivated in large quantities in other countries. But still, 50 percent of the world's jute is produced in Bangladesh. However, other countries do not want to export their jute. India strictly does not export at all, but Bangladesh does.

It's a rare instance in the world that

want Gafur; they want Gafur's teenage daughter Amina. Because Amina doesn't know how to negotiate, and if she disagrees, there are other Aminas at the ready. Amina will work like a slave, the way tea plantation workers do. Another secret of private profits is tax evasion. Their skills in this regard are immense. Besides, they can't think of buying rotten jute from the market; they buy the best, and as a result, the product quality is better. It's also heard that some stamp India's seal on their products, hoping to get a slice of that market.

The bustling jute industry of the Pakistan period is now on the verge of destruction. When the country was

a country is sending its raw materials to foreign nations without utilising it themselves. Most of the jute is exported to our good friend and great neighbour India. The country procures the best consignment of jute at cheap prices during peak season, while Bangladesh is left with the worst quality of jute, with which it is impossible to produce excellent products. According to experts, 78.54 percent of the total raw jute exports in the world now go from Bangladesh. The market for jute products is growing, but Bangladesh has been cornered. Neither are its jute products of high quality, nor is there any state effort to enter the market.

The main reason why government jute mills are incurring losses is the corruption of managers. They come to the market late to buy jute, by which time the good jute has already been sold. They buy low-quality jute for cheap but show high prices on paper. Jute is bought from areas near the mills but the account states faraway places, so that travel and vehicle expenses are high. The surplus money goes into their pockets, and so, losses are inevitable. As a result, workers don't get their salaries, and frustrated, they go on strike. Production stops, losses mount, and the field is set for the establishment to be padlocked, or sold off to the private sector at a dismal price.

In comparison, private mills are doing well, the main reason being they employ cheap labour. They don't

divided in 1947, many thought East Bengal would not survive. How could it? Where were its factories? It could only rely on paddy and jute. Rice would provide the food, and money would come from jute. Although the plan to get money from jute didn't work out that well, paddy did save us. The main reason behind this wasn't nature, but rather the labour of farmers. The same is true for the high yields of jute.

After independence, the US said Bangladesh would be a basket case, while many others grinned and nodded. But the reason the country did not drown, and even made some sort of progress, is down to the farmers. Most of those who go to distant countries, take on inhumane jobs, and send money back without having proper meals themselves are also children of peasant families.

These families fought in 1971. After March 25, the invaders quickly took possession of our big cities, but faced trouble while attacking the villages. The groundwork for the invaders' defeat was laid in the villages, although the theatre of surrender was staged in the capital. Most of the three million people whose sacrifice we boast of were farmers and their children. Most of the three lakh women who have lost their dignity were the wives and daughters of labourers. This should always be remembered.

**Translated from Bangla by Shoaib Ahmed Sayam.**