

BJMC is still incurring losses!

Govt must overhaul the jute sector, revive its past glory

It is surprising that more than four years after the Awami League government closed the 25 state-run jute mills, the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) is still counting losses for them. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, in FY 2023-24, the corporation incurred a loss of over Tk 180 crore, while over Tk 137 crore was spent on salaries and allowances for employees who are sitting idle. For instance, the Demra-based Latif Bawani Jute Mills Limited, which was shut down in July 2020, is still having to pay its 184 staff members. A similar situation prevails in other closed jute mills. The question is, why has the BJMC failed to take a decision about its idle workforce in all these years?

Back in 2020, the government had promised that all the mills would be reopened after equipping them with modern technologies under different types of ventures such as public-private partnership, etc. It also promised to give jobs to the laid-off workers once the mills reopened. However, we have not seen any such initiatives since. What BJMC did instead was that it leased out 14 of the 25 mills to different private organisations. Unfortunately, half of them reportedly do not even have the expertise to run such facilities, and therefore couldn't start their production. On what basis were those mills leased out then? Also, isn't leasing them out to private entities without modernising them a clear breach of the government promise?

Given the worldwide demand for jute-based products and the potential of this sector within the country, we think the interim government should take urgent initiatives to revive this sector. Of course, if needed, the government can work together with private institutions but there is no alternative to revamping the BJMC so that it can take the lead in this regard. This would also create job opportunities for thousands of workers including those who used to work in the sector and are now living in dire conditions.

Reviving the sector is all the more important because of the global campaign to reduce the use of plastic products. Bangladesh can be a part of this drive by rejuvenating the sector since jute-based products can actually be a great alternative to plastic goods and bags. Our scientists have invented some jute-based products, such as the biodegradable Sonali Bag, which has a great potential. However, we have not succeeded in popularising them due to the reluctance of the relevant authorities. Such attitudes must change.

About the idle BJMC workforce, we think the government should take a quick decision about transferring them to other government factories or institutions. Another option is to let go of these officials by paying them their dues since the BJMC should not be incurring such huge losses year after year. However, the government's long-term goal should be to completely overhaul the BJMC and the jute sector so that the latter can make profits again.

We must undo legacy of data distortion

BBS must be able to provide accurate data

Bangladesh has long suffered from a lack of reliable official data thanks to the Awami League regime that often fabricated data to align with its political narratives and cover up unflattering truths. From economy to public health to education to energy, this trend was allegedly prevalent across key policy areas. While we are yet to learn of the full extent of data manipulation or the damage caused by it, a report by *Bonik Barta* digs deep into the economic sector, highlighting how top officials were involved in such practices.

Reportedly, former finance minister AHM Mustafa Kamal, particularly during his tenure as planning minister in 2014-2019, played an active role in this regard. Under his leadership, an influential syndicate within the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) controlled data processing to manipulate key economic indicators such as inflation and growth, leading to misguided policies that failed to address the real economic conditions and ultimately hurt the country. For example, from 2015 to 2019, Bangladesh's growth was overstated by 3.5 percent, according to World Bank. Such manipulations allowed the government to show continuous growth in line with its Five-Year Plans. The BBS also manipulated the Consumer Price Index (CPI) by increasing the number of items in the inflation basket from 420 to 749, thus diluting the impact of rising prices for essential goods and keeping inflation figures artificially low.

The trend of data distortion was not limited to Kamal's period at the planning ministry, nor was BBS the only party complicit in it. In fact, many key state institutions were also similarly compromised, which shows how centrally planned this whole data propaganda campaign was. It was only in July that we got to learn of a shocking discrepancy of \$14 billion in our export data, which was apparently orchestrated by officials at the National Board of Revenue (NBR) and Export Promotion Bureau (EPB). Instances like this likely abound, even if those were not always reported. It is because of such statistical manipulations that the World Bank's Statistical Capacity Indicator showed a fall in Bangladesh's methodology score from 70 in 2014 to 30 in 2020.

Against this backdrop, the importance of overhauling our entire data regime cannot be overstated. Accurate data are the backbone of effective policy-making, whereas manipulated data can lead to disastrous consequences, as it has in our case. To address this problem, experts have made various recommendations including establishing an independent data commission to oversee the data evaluation processes; appointing seasoned statisticians to key positions in BBS instead of admin cadre officers; conducting regular external audits of official data to detect discrepancies; and implementing legal reforms to criminalise data manipulation. These steps have become essential to undo the damage done by the previous regime and put Bangladesh back on a path of progress.

Charting a new course

Political settlement and constitutional reform in post-autocratic Bangladesh



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Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture following the fall of Sheikh Hasina's regime, with renewed discussions on state reform and political settlement. The process of constitutional reform is crucial to re-establish democratic governance and stability. Currently, three schools of thought dominate the discourse: revolutionary constitution-building, standard constitutional reform coupled with a referendum, and reform based on Professor Mushtaq Khan's political settlement theory. Here, I would like to explore each approach in detail, highlighting their implications for Bangladesh's future.

Revolutionary constitution building
Revolutionary constitution building involves drafting a new constitution by the parties that led the revolutionary movement. This approach allows the architects of the revolution to embed fundamental changes that address systemic issues and rectify power imbalances. Advocates of this method argue that it can create a constitution that is truly reflective of the revolutionary ethos and aspirations of the populace.

Nevertheless, this approach is fraught with challenges. The exclusion of other political forces in the drafting process can lead to a lack of consensus and national unity. Moreover, the revolutionaries may lack experience in statecraft, leading to practical difficulties in governance. There is also the risk of replacing one form of autocracy with another, as the new constitution could entrench the power of the revolutionaries without adequate checks and balances.

Proponents argue that while constitutional change was not the initial target of the movement, the dire need for reform has emerged following mass killings and severe human rights abuses under the previous regime. These actions transformed the state into a one-party system, undermining democratic rights and stifling opposition through extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances.

Given these circumstances, scholars supporting this school of thought contend that a revolutionary constitution is necessary to eradicate the old power structures and prevent a recurrence of such autocratic practices. This approach aims to embed new democratic values and frameworks reflective of the people's aspirations for a just and equitable society.

Standard constitutional reform with referendum

Standard constitutional reform involves amending the existing constitution through legal procedures and ratifying these changes through a public referendum. This process ensures that the populace has a direct say in the governance structures that affect their lives. Proponents argue that this method enhances the legitimacy of the government and ensures that reforms reflect the will of the people. Moreover, it allows for gradual change, which can maintain stability during the transition period.

However, this approach faces



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significant challenges. There is a risk that entrenched political interests may influence the reform process, potentially undermining the democratic aspirations of the population. Additionally, public opinion can be swayed by populist rhetoric, which may lead to decisions that do not necessarily reflect long-term national interests.

After the mass upheaval and the interim government's rise to power, the urgency for constitutional reform has intensified. Advocates argue that reforms validated through a referendum will have legitimacy and sustainability. This method emphasises the political process, highlighting the importance of political parties and the elite power nexus in adhering to new legal frameworks.

This school of thought stresses the necessity of integrating reforms across society and politics, ensuring that changes are not only top-down but

also enjoy grassroots support. Political parties must pledge to implement these reforms as part of a broader political settlement, involving businessmen, bureaucrats, agencies, and civil society. This comprehensive approach aims to foster a participatory democratic process where students and labour groups can protest against misdeeds, keeping the political settlement open and accountable.

Reform based on the political settlement theory

Professor Mushtaq Khan's political settlement theory offers a different lens for constitutional reform. This theory emphasises the importance of acknowledging the distribution of power and interests among various groups in society. By considering the existing power dynamics, reforms can be more inclusive and pragmatic, potentially leading to greater political and economic stability.

Implementing this theory involves complex negotiations among different power holders, ensuring that reforms are inclusive and pragmatic. However,

this approach faces resistance from dominant groups reluctant to cede power. Despite these challenges, Khan's theory provides a pathway to achieving a balanced and stable political settlement.

However, in the process of implementation, there are several questions to be raised and points to be considered. When it comes to state reform versus political settlement through exercise of power, how can a well-crafted constitution mitigate the tendency of the current power structure in Bangladesh to foster dictatorial governance? Additionally, can a near-perfect constitution eliminate authoritarian rule, financial exploitation, and discrimination? The power players in Bangladesh—politicians, businessmen, bureaucrats, and other influential power elites (partners in crime)—often operate beyond the bounds of existing

boats and other necessary equipment. However, the current government, being newly in power, may not be fully prepared to take immediate and decisive action. Instead, it is engaging in heavy rhetoric, often adopting an aggressive stance toward India, which is not the right approach. The situation should be handled diplomatically, with a proper understanding of the hydrological dynamics of the Ganges, Teesta, and other rivers. A well-informed strategy is essential. The government should consider ratifying the United Nations Watercourses Convention of 1997, which has been pending in Bangladesh for a long time. This could be a significant step forward. The interim government's adviser on environment and water resources, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, has suggested taking the river

as difficult as it may be. In situations like this, panicking can often cause further trouble. People who have their own families to look after should treat them as a first priority. Apart from that, individuals whose families are not dependent on them may engage in volunteering in the flood-affected areas, if they have a financial surplus or can collect funds for flood relief. As for precautionary measures for future disasters, there isn't a lot to be done on an individual level. As flooding is a recurring natural event in Bangladesh, it is often difficult to avoid it completely.

In recent years, the number of young children who cannot swim has gone down significantly compared to the number from a few decades ago. Therefore, parents should take the initiative to teach their children how to swim, which is an essential life skill even without considering the floods. Being more proactive in learning how to swim, as well as teaching others, is something all of us can focus on. On an institutional level, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, as well as the Ministry of Youth and Sports, should utilise their resources to provide relief and support. The army has already assisted in rescue operations, which should inspire the relevant ministries to use their resources and use self-motivation to help in any way possible. Even though the interim government is still in its early stages, they should guide the individual efforts by different groups of volunteers in conjecture with utilising the state apparatus. This can ensure that the flood-affected victims are getting the help that they need.

As for our roles as ordinary citizens, first, we must refrain from panicking,

What made the flood so severe



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In the case of the recent flooding, the precipitation centre that caused it is in Tripura. As a result, the areas surrounding Tripura are experiencing severe floods. Brahmanbaria is situated to the south of Tripura, while Moulvibazar and Habiganj are located to the east.

This situation has led to widespread flooding across these regions. The intense precipitation in Tripura has caused several rivers to overflow. Some rivers have flowed towards the south, some to the north, and others to the southeast, creating an unusual situation.

Rivers in Bangladesh typically flow from the north to the south towards the Bay of Bengal, but that is not always the case. For example, the Gomati River flows from the eastern side of Tripura, through the Dhalai district, passing between two mountain ranges. There is a dam on the first mountain range, where water is collected to produce electricity. Such reservoirs are also used as flood control mechanisms. In the event of heavy precipitation, the dam gates can be opened slowly to release some water, but this has a limit. When the water exceeds this limit, the dam overflows, leading to flooding.

However, the flooding is not solely

due to the dam overflow. For instance, the Khowai River originates in Tripura, and there is a barrage at its mouth. There is also a barrage at the origin of the Gomti River. These barrages don't hold much water, so opening or closing them does not directly cause flooding. The flooding is more connected to the opening of gates at the Teesta River, which is connected to the Ganges and the Farakka Barrage.

The situation should be handled diplomatically, with a proper understanding of the hydrological dynamics of the Ganges, Teesta, and other rivers. A well-informed strategy is essential. The government should consider ratifying the United Nations Watercourses Convention of 1997, which has been pending in Bangladesh for a long time.

These barrages can hold a significant amount of water, and when they are opened, the heavy flow contributes to flooding downstream.

This time, the flooding was primarily caused by excess rainfall. The army, when mobilised with proper resources and coordination from the state, can play a crucial role in managing such disasters by providing logistical support, such as speed

sharing issue onto international platforms, but to do that, Bangladesh first needs to ratify the convention, as going to the UN without accepting the convention will not be effective. Some have alleged that the previous government did not accept the convention due to India's influence, but this government should not adopt the same stance.

As for our roles as ordinary citizens, first, we must refrain from panicking,