PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

An aerial view of a vast expanse of land used for shrimp enclosures in the south-western district of Khulna. Increasingly, farmers are abandoning shrimp farming and returning to crop cultivation due to abrupt losses caused by prawn disease outbreaks, saline water damaging soil fertility and changing climatic conditions.

Farmers giving up black tiger shrimp cultivation amid losses

DIPANKAR ROY, *Khulna*

Noni Gopal Baidya, a resident of Sutarkhali union in Dacope, a southwestern coastal upazila under Khulna division, began farming exportable black tiger shrimp on his 6-7 bighas of land in 1991.

Encouraged by the high profits in a short time, he later leased an additional 15 bighas from neighbouring farmers to expand black tiger shrimp farming, locally known as Bagda, once dubbed as "white gold".

At that time, he and others in his locality farmed black tiger shrimp under shared arrangements. People became shareholders in shrimp farms based on their investment capacity.

Baidya, too, was part of such a collective farming venture.

A few years later, he partnered with seven or eight local farmers and leased 200 bighas of land in a neighbouring union, Banisantha, for shrimp farming. However, due to continuous financial losses and growing campaigns against shrimp farming by locals and NGOs for holding saline water on farmlands, they abandoned the farm within six years and returned to their native areas.

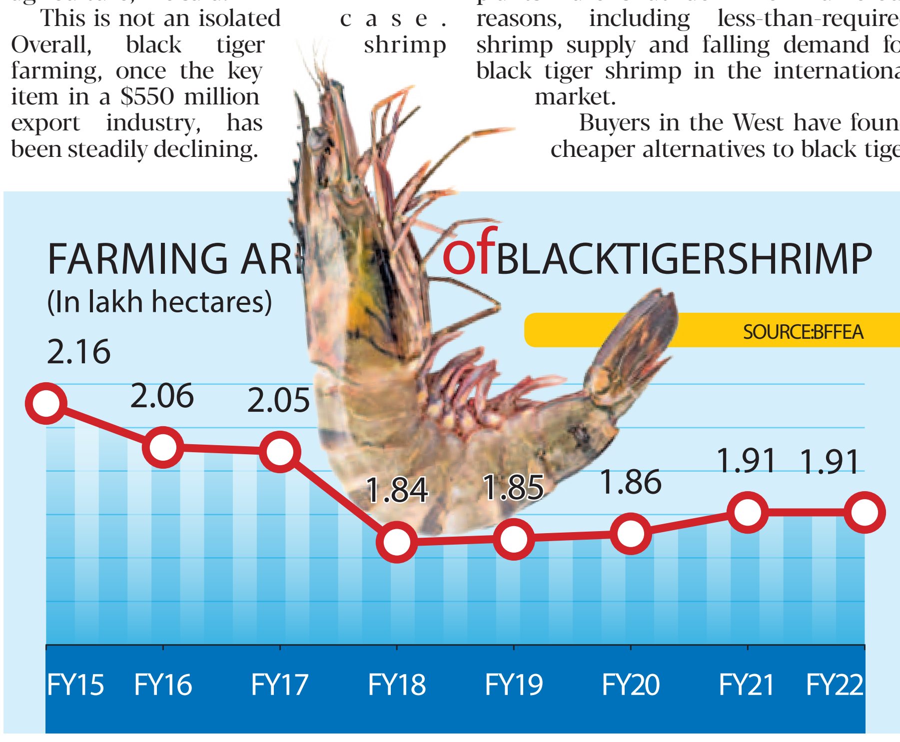
By 2008, Baidya had completely stopped black tiger shrimp farming and never resumed it.

In Baidya's locality, nearly 800 families were once involved in shrimp farming. Today, almost no one in his area, which once had 20,000 acres of land under shrimp cultivation, is in the trade. The people of the union have completely abandoned brackish water shrimp farming.

"Due to continuous losses from high mortality and low prices compared to costs, we had to give up the farm," said Baidya.

"Shrimp farming is such a business that even if you suffer losses for two years, you might break even in the third year. If you're lucky, you might make a profit in the fourth year. But suddenly, without warning, you might lose everything. That uncertainty made me leave shrimp farming and return to traditional agriculture," he said.

This is not an isolated case. Overall, black tiger shrimp farming, once the key item in a $550 million export industry, has been steadily declining.



For example, black tiger shrimp was cultivated on over 216,470 hectares in the fiscal year (FY) 2014-15. However, the farming area of brackish water shrimp fell to 191,000 hectares, marking a 12 percent decline in eight years.

Production also dropped -- from 75,270 tonnes in FY15 to 70,220 tonnes in FY22, according to the Bangladesh Frozen Foods Exporters Association (BFFEA).

This decline has affected shrimp processing plants that mushroomed on the banks of Rupsha river in Khulna to capitalise on shrimp exports to the West in the 1980s and 1990s.

More than half of the 109 registered plants have shut down for numerous reasons, including less-than-required shrimp supply and falling demand for black tiger shrimp in the international market.

Buyers in the West have found cheaper alternatives to black tiger shrimp -- whiteleg shrimp or vannamei.

In Khulna, only 30 processing plants are now operational. In Chattogram, the number of functioning factories is 18.

The BFFEA said the combined capacity of the factories is around 4 lakh tonnes per year, but they receive only 7 percent of their required shrimp input.

Baidya once thought he had made a mistake quitting shrimp farming.

"But now, I feel I made the right decision."

He said that because of the indiscriminate use and holding of saline water on land for black tiger shrimp farming, paddy production had fallen as low as 6–7 maunds per acre. Vegetation was lost. Now, they produce 20-25 maunds per acre. Trees have returned, and they are growing watermelons.

"Now, some in my locality are cultivating freshwater shrimp," he said.

Like Baidya, around 30,000 farmers have gradually quit brackish water shrimp farming in Dacope upazila under Khulna district alone. The situation is similar in other places such as Satkhira and Bagerhat in the southwestern region, where shrimp farming was once the main source of income, thanks to exports.

"The biggest problem was disease outbreaks," said Abdul Malek, a 55-year-old farmer from Kharnia in Dumuria, Khulna.

He started black tiger shrimp farming in 1998 on 50 acres of leased land. At that time, shrimp farming was highly profitable. Malek is now struggling with losses and trying to quit.

He incurred a loss of Tk 7 lakh five years ago due to disease outbreaks in his enclosures and cyclones.

Farmers said recurrent cyclones such as Aila, Amphan, and Yaas over the past one and a half decades washed away their investments. The natural disasters also resulted in waterlogging, preventing farmers from practising agriculture.

Malek also blamed the government's restrictions on the intrusion of saline water into the polder area for his losses.

"Last year, I barely cultivated six bighas of land. I switched to paddy and watermelon farming," he said, urging the government to provide insurance schemes and ensure the supply of pathogen-free shrimp larvae to revive the export-oriented industry.

READ MORE ON B2

Caring and sharing for building a happier organisation

SAZZADUL HASSAN

In 2012, the UN General Assembly declared 20 March as the International Day of Happiness to recognise the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal goals and aspirations in human lives. "Caring and Sharing", the theme of this year's International Day of Happiness, highlights the fact that lasting happiness comes from caring for each other, feeling connected, and being part of something bigger. This theme holds significant relevance for business organisations amid a paradigm shift in consumer and regulatory mindsets, with both increasingly conscious of societal well-being.

In a business context, caring refers to adopting policies that support employee well-being, while sharing involves distributing resources, knowledge, opportunities, and recognition among team members. In summary, caring and sharing nurture a workplace culture that promotes collaboration, empathy, and mutual support among employees while extending this spirit to customers and the community. This theme is not merely a moral obligation but also a strategic approach that leads to greater employee satisfaction, higher productivity, and increased customer loyalty.

Studies show that when knowledge, resources, and responsibilities are shared among employees, it fosters innovation, collaboration, and efficiency. Caring, on the other hand, builds trust, loyalty, and a sense of belonging. Organisations need to make genuine efforts to bring this theme to life.

To foster a caring culture, companies should focus on a healthy workplace, physical and mental health support, work-life balance, and flexible work arrangements. A study conducted by QC Tanner found that 25 percent of companies with the largest health promotion budgets saw an 8 percent year-on-year improvement in the proportion of employees in good or excellent health and a 16 percent year-on-year reduction in productivity loss.

Developing employees and providing opportunities for their professional growth demonstrate a strong sense of caring. Recognising employees' contributions and rewarding them helps build a motivated team that enhances productivity.

Engaging employees in volunteer activities promotes a sense of purpose and belonging. Organisations that support community service initiatives not only contribute positively to society but also foster teamwork and camaraderie among employees.

Several global organisations exemplify the "caring and sharing" theme. TOMS Shoes operates on a one-for-one model, donating a pair of shoes to a child in need for every pair sold. This philanthropic initiative is highly appreciated and has helped the company build a loyal customer base, significantly contributing to its growth.

Salesforce, through its 1-1-1 model, dedicates 1 percent of its product, 1 percent of its equity, and 1 percent of its employee time to charitable causes. This initiative not only fosters a caring culture within the organisation but also motivates employees to engage in community service, leading to higher job satisfaction and retention rates.

Caring and sharing are not merely ethical values but pivotal elements in building a resilient, innovative, and happy organisation. By nurturing a culture of collaboration, empathy, and mutual support, businesses can unlock the full potential of their workforce and create a positive impact on society. As we celebrate World Happiness Day, let us remember that true success lies in sharing our resources and caring for one another, both within and beyond the workplace.

The author is the chairman and managing director of BASF Bangladesh Limited

China has spicy menu of US trade war reprisals

REUTERS, *Hong Kong*

The second trade war between the United States and China has so far been more of a snack than a slap-up meal. President Donald Trump campaigned on a repeated promise to impose tariffs of 60 percent or more on imports from the People's Republic. In office, however, he has so far raised levies by just 20 percentage points. Beijing has responded with targeted and asymmetric measures. If Trump escalates, China has a banquet of spicy options to choose from.

When it comes to a straight tariff fight, China's capacity to retaliate is limited. The world's second-largest economy exported goods worth almost $440 billion to the United States last year, vastly more than the $144 billion it imported, making Washington's levies more painful. Authorities in Beijing have instead responded by imposing tariffs of 10 percent to 15 percent on $21 billion of largely agricultural goods from the US. That's not enough to stop trade, but sufficient to squeeze American soybean farmers, who sold more than half their total exports to Chinese buyers in 2024.

China also has a menu of non-tariff options for dealing damage to the American heartland. After the latest US tariffs took effect on March 4, Chinese bureaucrats suspended import licences for three US soybean companies, including farmer-owned cooperative CHS, on the grounds that they had detected harmful fungus on shipments.

Regulators can also impose wider bans like the one they recently slapped on US lumber, ostensibly due to detection of pests. China allowed customs registration to briefly lapse for American pork and poultry exporters, while those for hundreds of beef suppliers remain listed as "expired", Reuters reported on Tuesday.

Customs officials have a history of throttling imports by holding up shipments for inspection, as they did for Australian lobsters in 2020 after the government in Canberra called for an inquiry into the origins of Covid-19. Yet as China's $19 trillion economy struggles with sluggish growth, President Xi Jinping may be wary of dramatic moves that invite further disruption for the vital export sector.

MAIN COURSES

A better option could be to sample from options that strike at companies reliant on the Chinese market and manufacturers. After the latest US levies took effect in February, Beijing announced antitrust probes into search giant Google and chip designer Nvidia. These had little obvious effect. But a ban on imports of gene sequencers from Illumina, which became official on March 4, hit harder. Shares in the San Diego-based company are down 35 percent this year even though China only accounts for 7 percent of revenue.

The measures could be read as a warning to US companies which are much more dependent on access to China, such as Tesla and Apple. Beijing could make life difficult for the $800 billion automaker, which is the biggest foreign electric vehicle company in the country and a key source of wealth for Trump adviser Elon Musk. Last year, Tesla sales rose almost 9 percent in China despite falling elsewhere, while its Shanghai megafactory accounted for roughly half the company's global production capacity. Home-grown champions like BYD have overtaken Musk's firm, making it a more viable bargaining chip.

Apple is also vulnerable. Despite a growing presence in India, the company led by Tim Cook still depends on China for the vast majority of iPhone production. Like Tesla, the $3.2 trillion firm also depends on Beijing's good graces to operate in the country, which accounted for $27 billion of operating income in the 2024 financial year – more than a fifth of the global total.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE

Employees work on a circuit breaker production line at an electronics factory in Fuyang, China's eastern Anhui province. China exported goods worth almost $440 billion to the United States last year, vastly more than the $144 billion it imported.

Squeezing big US manufacturers would damage China's attempts to present itself as being open to foreign business. Given the recent damage Trump's policies have done to longtime American allies and trading partners, however, those countries may be less troubled by retaliation.

AND FOR DESSERT?

If Chinese policymakers really hunger for trade retribution, they can turn to the exchange rate. They have so far kept the yuan stable against the US dollar in the face of new levies, but would probably let it weaken if Trump follows through on his 60 percent tariff threat. Bank of Singapore Chief Economist Mansoor Mohi-uddin estimates the People's Bank of China could permit a drop of as much as 10 percent in a worst-case scenario. But he adds any fall would be carefully managed to prevent runaway depreciation, and officials will likely draw the line at around 8.2 yuan per dollar – the level of the dollar peg that China ditched in 2005 in favour of a managed exchange rate.

The last and potentially most damaging option on the menu would be for China to throttle exports of the rare earth metals that are central to manufacturing everything from semiconductors to electric vehicles. China accounted for roughly 70 percent of production of the metallic elements in 2024, according to the US Geological Survey, and has in recent years been establishing a system to better monitor and control their exports, although actual restrictions have been rare.