

Rise of a flower kingdom

SHYKH SERAJ

Happy New Year.

Dear readers, I first visited the flower kingdom at Godkhali, located in Jashore's Jhikargachha upazila in 2005. There was a woman named Barisan, who became extremely famous for cultivating rose and used to live in a mud hut then. In a few years, she built a concrete building. The news spread all over the country through Hridoye Mati O Manush that a woman entrepreneur made her own building with the earnings from flower cultivation. Prior to that, you probably would recall Sher Ali, the first-ever commercially successful flower farmer. He comes from the same region. Godkhali became a successful hub for flower farming over the years which produced so many varieties of flowers from across the globe.

Sher Ali later made a poly-shade, made of bamboo, over his paddy field. He started cultivating European cut flowers, especially gerbera. The long journey towards flower farming has branded the area of Godkhali, 'Flower Kingdom'. During early 2013, I brought the then US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Dan Mozena and also the then Mission Director of USAID, Richard Greene to Godkhali. They learned about the difficulties that flower farmers were facing then. I have been to Godkhali, a few days back to learn about the latest scenario of flower cultivation in the area. My purpose was to identify the areas where farmers need infrastructural development.

It was great to be in company of colour and fragrance at the beginning of the New Year 2020. First I went to the market and



Some flower farmers talk with Shykh Seraj at Godkhali flower market in Jashore's Jhikargachha.

PHOTO: HRIDOYE MATI O MANUSH.

Shykh Seraj is Bangladesh's pioneer development journalist. He received country's two highest civilian honours, Swadhinata Puroshkar and Ekushey Padak, respectively. He is an Ashoka and Bangla Academy Fellow. He also received highest award for agricultural journalism from the United Nations, FAO A.H. Boerma Award, Gusi Peace Prize (Philippines) and many other prestigious accolades at home and abroad. At Channel i, he's the Founder Director and Head of News. He's also Director and Host of Channel i's popular agro-documentary, Hridoye Mati O Manush.



talked with some traders and farmers.

"How many flowers do you cut daily?"

"400."

"Where do you send the flowers?"

"Dhaka. Daily earning for these flowers are around Tk 2,000 (USD 23.55)."

"I once came here with the then US Ambassador. Do you remember?"

"Yes, USAID Chief also came with you."

"What developments have taken place following their visit?"

"We are having stores for preservation and also better connecting roads."

"That's good to know."

Now agriculture means flower farming to the Godkhali farmers. I have witnessed the farmers in Godkhali getting involved with flower cultivation, one after the other in the past 15 years. Most of the farmers say they are now living a much better life than before. Their fates have changed quite positively.

"Previously, we had nothing, but now, we're doing great. My children can go to school," says a flower farmer.

"Our livelihood status improved a lot. Flower cultivation is much profitable in

Godkhali," says another farmer.

Every morning the flower farmers bring their produce to the market right beside the highway. They're pretty much happy selling flowers.

"I spent nearly Tk 80,000 (USD 942.25) to prepare my rose orchard. I'm getting good price for my produce and can provide necessary support to my family," says a happy flower farmer.

Everything in Godkhali has changed. The beautiful fragrance of the flowers gives much delight to people living here. People engaged with the flower trade are also happy to see this success. I talked with some such successful traders.

"What is your daily budget for buying flowers?"

"Nearly Tk 35,000 (USD 412.23)."

"Where do you send it?"

"Bogura and Satkhira."

"What's your daily profit?"

"It's about Tk 4,000 (USD 47.11)."

There are about 120 wholesalers who work on a daily basis at Godkhali flower market. Since the visit of US Ambassador Mozena and USAID Mission Director

Richard Greene in February, 2013, infrastructural changes for the flower farmers started taking shape. That was the most promising factor for the farmers. Hridoye Mati O Manush played a key role in this regard.

Farmers are happy here that foreign donors have made shades for them. Many of these farmers started with rose cultivation, but later on started producing European cut flowers.

A local teacher, Ataur Rahman said if farmers need any financial support such as bank loans, they can get it. This flower kingdom is truly turning into an extraordinary field. Agro tourism has also a great prospect here. People come to visit Godkhali from different regions of the country. The most aspiring thing is the once neglected and poverty stricken Godkhali is on its way to become Bangladesh's Netherlands not only for its flower fields but also for infrastructure. Sponsored by USAID, a specialised flower processing centre and market, for flower collection, grading, sorting and cooling, is under construction. LGED is

implementing the project.

The flower processing centre at Godkhali will be a modern centre of flower trade. It will run many activities including farmer training, flower processing and packaging. I talked with Abdur Rahim, president of Bangladesh Flower Society, about the ongoing construction.

"I am highly thankful to Hridoye Mati O Manush and specially you for showing the world our prospect. That's why Ambassador Mozena and USAID came forward and that's how the plans are implemented for an even better future for the flower farmers," said Abdur Rahim.

Under the project of LGED, 12 modern markets and 12 collection centres will be established in different villages of Jashore. A specialised centre for flowers will also be established in Godkhali. Jashore LGED Executive Engineer Mirza Iffekharul Islam Haque said the cooling centre will have 1,617 square metre floor space. The first floor was funded by USAID. The top floor is totally being done by the funding of Bangladesh government.

"What is the total project cost?" I asked Iffekharul.

"Tk 18 crore for the building. The boundary adds another Tk 10 crore. Including the 100 km road and culvert, its total cost is around Tk 35 crore (USD 4.1 million)," Iffekharul said.

There are tea stalls, fast food shop and definitely the tourists around Godkhali. A flower based community has changed the lifestyle of people here and around the region.

Furthermore, BADC is also working on poly shades, deep irrigation and so on. They are also helping farmers to produce export quality flowers. Now their aim is to export these flowers abroad. They demand to stop the availability of plastic flowers.

Godkhali represents a new field for the country's agricultural economy. According to Bangladesh Flower Society, flowers are commercially cultivated on at least 12,000 acres of lands in 24 districts of the country. Two million people are directly and indirectly involved in flower farming and trade. In 1983, by cultivating tuberose on 30 decimals of land, farmer Sher Ali began commercial flower cultivation in Bangladesh. Now, flowers of several colours and different varieties are seen on over 15,000 hectares of land in Godkhali alone. Now more than 100 thousand people of 75 villages are involved in flower farming and trade. After the success in shrimp and vegetable production in country's southern region, flower is working as a revolution in southern agricultural economy. Hridoye Mati O Manush has always been involved in this prosperous economic agriculture expedition. I wish you all a Happy New Year once again and wish you all the best.

3 INTERCITY TRAINS

Cancellation of Tangail, Mirzapur stoppages draws flak

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

The decision of cancelling stoppage of three intercity trains at Tangail and Mirzapur stations has produced an outpouring of protests on the social media.

According to a Bangladesh Railway decision, the revised schedule for trains would be effective from January 10, said Sohel Khan, the Tangail station master.

As per the new schedule, intercity trains Sundarban Express and Chitra Express – operating between Dhaka and Khulna – will no longer stop at Tangail and Mirzapur stations.

The third train that will not stop at Tangail station is Nilsagar Express, between Dhaka and Chilahati, Sohel said, adding that an instruction in this regard has already been received at the station.

If the decision is implemented, Tangail residents travelling to Ishwardi, Jessore, Kushtia, Khulna, Saidpur, Nilphamari and Chilahati towns will need to board buses run by private operators.

Residents of greater Khulna region who are studying at Tangail's two major educational institutions – Sheikh Hasina Medical College in Tangail Sadar and Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University in Santosh – will also feel the impact of the revised schedule.

Besides, around 40,000 employees of different factories in Mirzapur's Gorai

industrial area as well as students and guardians of Bharateshwari Homes, Mirzapur Cadet College and Kumudini Medical College will encounter sufferings due to the new schedule.

Many in their posts on various social media outlets alleged that the decision was made to serve the purpose of different vested interest groups.

They demanded the authorities withdraw the decision immediately or else, they would wage a befitting movement including creating obstruction to train movements in Tangail.

Drawing attention of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, a number of others requested her to intervene and reverse the decision for the sake of nearly 40 lakh inhabitants of Tangail district.

Tangail resident and employee of a private firm Rashed Ibne Kurban said on one hand the prime minister is asking all to reduce pressure on the capital city, while on the other, the railway is making a decision that will make it impossible for students and job holders from surrounding districts to commute to and from the capital.

If unable to commute, they will ultimately be forced to reside in Dhaka for their livelihoods and studies, he also said.

On January 6, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Stujan during a news briefing said a revised schedule of 35 intercity trains would take effect on January 10.



A scene of the congested set-ups occupying a portion of Kuakata beach near Zero Point.

PHOTO: SOHRABHOSSAIN

Sprawling untidy set-ups a nuisance for Kuakata tourists

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, Patuakhali

Over 200 congested structures built near Zero Point of Kuakata sea beach badly affects natural beauty of the famous tourist spot, in addition to impeding free movement of visitors.

Md Shahjalal, owner of 'Hotel Sunrise' in Kuakata, has reportedly built the tin-shed structures during the ongoing tourist season and rented them to small traders who are running cheap eateries, tea stalls and handicraft shops, there.

Those were rented for Tk 20,000 to Tk 50,000 each for using from November to April when a large number of people from home and abroad come to the picturesque beach area.

"The wood and tin structures, built on the sandy beach on wooden pillars, are very risky. The sheds could be blown away by a strong wind any time," said Salim Hawlader, who rented a stall to set up a restaurant that serves dishes mostly of sea fish.

"The illegal structures spoil the beauty of the area, threatens the natural environment and cause a nuisance for the tourists," said a local,

seeking anonymity.

Md Jasim Uddin, a tourist from Patuakhali town, said they face problems while walking on the beach due to the untidy structures.

Contacted, Shahjalal said, "I and eight others bought a total of 7.15 acres of land from locals during 1996 to 2006. I started building the tin-shed structures after taking permission from the court, and a case filed in 2017 is pending with Patuakhali District Judge's Court to settle ownership of the land."

Kuakata municipality Mayor Abdul Bareq Molla said he has informed the higher authorities about the matter.

Patuakhali Additional Deputy Commissioner (Revenue) Md Mamunur Rashid said, "We couldn't take steps for removing these structures as a case is pending with the court."

On June 2 in 2011, the High Court (HC) issued a directive, asking the authorities concerned to immediately remove all illegal structures from the Kuakata sea beach and take necessary steps to stop encroachment, earth filling and construction of structures

on the beach.

The directive came after a writ petition was filed the same day by Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh (HRPB) on the basis of a report headlined "Realtor faces eviction case in Kuakata", published in The Daily Star on June 1.

The HC also ordered the deputy commissioner of Patuakhali to have Kuakata sea beach area demarcated by forming a special committee.

On January 18 in 2012, a HC bench declared the construction of private structures on sea beaches and shores illegal and directed the government to draw up a master plan to turn Kuakata sea beach into an ideal tourist destination.

Following the court directive, Patuakhali district administration removed a good number of structures from the beach but later a few people including Shahjalal filed cases, claiming ownership of lands in the area, locals said.

Some unscrupulous people also built new structures there, they added.



A large number of vehicles got stuck in an hours-long tailback in a 20-kilometre stretch of Dhaka-Tangail highway on Tuesday night and yesterday morning as poor visibility due to dense fog made their movement awfully slow while an accident at Rabna bypass in Tangail Sadar upazila and the ongoing works of a four-lane project of the highway added to the situation. The photo was taken from Khudirampur in Sadar upazila in the morning.

PHOTO: MIRZASHAKIL