



Work is going on in full swing to construct the rail track from Nilphamari's Chilahati station to the Indian border as the authorities concerned are expecting inauguration of the third direct train communication with the neighbouring country by July this year. PHOTO: EAMASADUZZAMAN

THIRD RAIL LINK WITH NEIGHBOUR

Train journey to India via Chilahati likely from July

EAM ASADUZZAMAN, Nilphamari

The third direct train connection with neighbouring India, through bordering Chilahati station in Nilphamari, is likely to start in July this year as half of the work for the purpose has been done in six months.

The construction work of rail lines from the station to the border is going on in full swing to connect with Indian tracks at Holdibari station of Kunchbihar district in west Bengal, said officials of Bangladesh Railway (BR).

Two existing rail routes with India are Dhaka-Kolkata-Dhaka and Khulna-Kolkata-Khulna.

For better connectivity with India, the Bangladesh government launched a project to construct 6.724-kilometre-long rail line from Chilahati station to the border and 2.636-kilometre loop line at the station, colour light signalling, telecommunication system etc in June last year, said Touhidur Rahman, senior sub assistant engineer of BR.

Max Infrastructure Ltd got the Tk 69 crore work order for its completion by one year, said the official, who monitors the work.

Bangladesh Railways Minister Nurul Islam accompanied by Indian High Commissioner Riva Ganguli inaugurated the work at Chilahati station in the middle of last year.

In the ceremony, the minister expressed optimism that prime ministers of both the countries will inaugurate the route by July 2020 through a video conference.

The rail route was operative till 1965. Darjeeling Mail, running from Kolkata's Shialdah railway station via Ranaghat of West Bengal, entered this country [then East Pakistan] to touch Bheramara, Hardinge Bridge, Santahar, Hili, Parbotipur Nilphamari and Chilahati before reaching Indian territory in the north to go to Darjeeling via Holdibari, Jalpaiguri and Shiliguri," the Indian envoy said at the inaugural function.

She also hinted that the coming rail link

might be a similar one.

"After completion of the work, BR will be able to operate in Dhaka-Shiliguri-Dhaka route, facilitating passengers to visit nearby Indian tourist spot Darjeeling. And India is likely to operate a train on Kolkata-Shiliguri route, which will shorten the existing 537-kilometre distance by 200 kilometres," said BR's Additional Director General Shahidul Islam.

However, the arrangement will be finalised after discussion between the Bangladesh and Indian authorities, he said.

Project-in-charge Rokonzaman Shihab said the work will hopefully be complete by June as 50% of it is already complete.

By this time, Indian authorities completed construction of 6.50 km rail lines in its territory from Holdibari station to the border adjacent to Chilahati and conducted trial run of trains in the section, said Md Mobin, stationmaster at Chilahati.

Squash farming sees success in Gaibandha

The foreign vegetable helped Siddique, once a broke, to turn around

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gaibandha

Squash, a foreign variety of winter vegetable, sees successful cultivation at Refayetpur village in Gaibandha Sadar upazila, thanks to the endeavor of Abu Bakkar Siddique, a local.

Five years ago, Siddique went to Dubai for work but he remained virtually hiding in remote area as the overseas employment agent concerned had arranged his journey there with a fake work permit.

"There I worked in a squash field. After a few months, I was arrested and sent back to country, almost penniless," said Siddique.

With the seeds collected from an NGO, I started squash cultivation on a piece of land beside my home four years ago.

"As the work turned profitable, last year I took lease of two bighas of land on a five-year contract and started growing squash and other vegetables. This year I cultivated hybrid squash on

38 decimals of land.

"About 2,000 saplings of squash can be planted on one bigha of land and it needs Tk 10,000 to Tk 12,000 as input cost. Each plant yields 10 to 15 kg of squash and sells at Tk 20 to Tk 25 per kg in the wholesale market.

"The vegetable, new in the area, is gaining popularity among locals. The farming helped me to turn around after the failed attempt to seek fortune abroad," said Siddique.

Idris Ali, a vegetable grower of the same village, said after seeing Siddique's success, he started cultivating squash on three decimals of land last year and got better return than other vegetables.

Masudur Rahman, deputy director of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Gaibandha, said, "Squash is rich in vitamins A, C, E and K, carbohydrate and protein. We have taken an initiative to encourage cultivation of the foreign vegetable in our area."



Abu Bakkar Siddique's Squash field at Refayetpur village in Gaibandha Sadar upazila. PHOTO: KMREZULHOQUE

Dishari, a light of hope for underprivileged kids

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Manikganj

Some school and college going students have brought hope for underprivileged children of Manikganj town.

Over 40 underprivileged kids have been receiving basic education from Dishari Pre-primary School besides books and educational materials free of charge for the last three years.

The funds for the charity work are coming from the money a group of school and college going students save up from their pocket money every month.

The students are the members of a voluntary organisation named Dishari. On January 13 in 2017, the organisation was founded with an aim to provide education to underprivileged children of different slum areas in the town.

Marking its 3rd founding anniversary, Dishari held a special programme at Bandutia Baganbari in the town on Monday. Games, sports and cultural activities were arranged on the occasion. The children of Bewtha slum and their parents took part in the event.

District Primary Education Officer Nilufar Rahman, Assistant District Primary Education Officer Josna Khatun, Deputy Director of National Consumers Rights Protection Directorate Monjur Mohammad Shahriar, Additional

Superintendent of Police Mohiuddin Ahmed Mukul and Zahangir Alam Biswas, adviser of Dishari, among others, were present.

Hasan Shikdar, president of the organisation and a second year honours student of Manikganj Government Devendra College, said around 100 members of the organisation have been giving away school supplies like books, notebooks, pencils and pens from a portion of their pocket money every month since 2017.

They also distributed winter clothes among the children besides providing free health service to them, said Hasan.

The children can study at Dishari Pre-primary School upto Class III, said Hasan, adding that they later help the kids to enroll in mainstream schools.

All members of Dishari pay Tk 50 per month, which is spent on the children's welfare, he said.

Six-year-old Khadiza, a pre-primary student of the school, said the teachers are very caring and cooperative here. They often give the kids chocolates.

"The teachers also give us new dresses during Eid," she said.

Khadiza has been living with her grandparents in a slum of the town since her father and mother died five years ago.



Hardly any birds are seen at Baikka Beel, a protected sanctuary for birds and fish in Moulvibazar's Srimangal upazila, this time around when the wetland usually brims with thousands of migratory birds. A rise in human habitation, inset, in the protected area is one of the reasons why the birds are avoiding Baikka Beel this year, speculated bird watchers. The photos were taken recently. PHOTO: STAR

Bad time for birds at Baikka Beel

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

Baikka Beel is witnessing a sharp fall in arrival of migratory birds this winter, a situation that is worrying bird watchers and environmental activists.

The marshy wetland, spread over 1,000 hectares of area in Hail Haor of Moulvibazar's Srimangal upazila, was declared a bird and fish sanctuary by the government in 2003 with an aim to protect and restore aquatic biodiversity in Hail Haor.

Winter is the peak season when the beel is usually seen swarming with migratory birds that start arriving in early December. But in the middle of January this year, their number seems unusually low in comparison with previous years, wildlife activists and visitors said.

The birds might be avoiding the beel due to unabated poaching and an increase in human habitation in the protected area that used to be host to at least 40 species of birds in the winter season, they also said.

Mirash Mia, who was assigned the task of looking after the beel by Center for Natural Resource Studies (CNRS), a non-governmental organisation, said the birds started coming to the beel two to three weeks back.

He is in no position but watch a good number of locals catch the birds unlawfully with traps set in paddy fields scattered all around the beel, Mirash said helplessly.

Baikka Beel has been a popular destination for bird lovers from near and far, said Mithun Kurmi, a student at Moulvibazar Degree College.

"At the beginning of winter, some guest birds were seen flocking at wetlands around the beel. But now, barely any birds are seen at the beel," he added.

A frequent visitor to Baikka Beel, Zakir Hossain from Dhaka, said, "There are fewer birds this time. How would the birds come to the sanctuary with so many people living around?"

"All of us, especially the government, need to take proper care and steps for the protection of the birds. Otherwise, our next generation will be deprived of seeing these beautiful creatures."

A scarcity of natural aquatic plants might also be the reason for the birds' reluctance in visiting Baikka Beel this year, said Minnat Ali, general secretary of Baragangina Byabosthapon Sangathan, an organisation for the protection of Baikka Beel.

"Padmo [lotus], Shapla [water lily] and grass are all rotten in the beel this time of the season. Without those, the birds are facing a feed crisis. Number of birds at Baikka Beel might have fallen due to this," he speculated.

Poachers are one of the reasons why the birds might be avoiding the beel this time around, said Swapan Deb Sajal, director of Bonyo Prani Seba Foundation, a Sreemangal-based organisation working for the protection of wildlife.

"Many rare species of birds visit the beel each year. But with a large number of poachers roaming around the beel with traps, the birds are feeling threatened and staying away from the beel."

Some of the birds might even go extinct as many of the poachers are using poison traps, he added.

Moniruzzaman Chowdhury, site officer of CNRS that worked for the protection of Hail Haor under a project titled 'Climate Regional Ecosystems Livelihood', said before the project expired in July of 2018, when they had seven staffers, they were able to seize several poison traps in Baikka Beel.

"Now I am the only one working there and it's quite difficult for one person to cover such a huge area," he said, hoping that the number of migratory birds might increase in the beel if a safer environment can be ensured for them all year round.

Although it is a punishable offence to kill, catch or sell migratory birds, poachers are doing all that in a sanctuary such as the Baikka Beel and the law enforcers are not taking any action against them, alleged Nurul Mohaimin Milton, general secretary of Environmental Journalists' Forum.

When this correspondent raised the concern with Range Officer Monayem Hossain of Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Division (WMNCD) in Moulvibazar, he acknowledged the rise in human habitation and poaching activities in Baikka Beel.

The WMNCD will launch a campaign in the beel area next week to raise public awareness in this regard, he also said.



Children rejoice during a programme marking founding anniversary of Dishari at Bandutia Baganbari in Manikganj town on Monday. PHOTO: STAR