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Districts in Focus

Bogra potato growers in tight corner

HASIBUR RAHMAN BILU, *Bogra*

POTATO growers in Bogra villages are losing profit while middlemen are thriving on high yields of the crop.

Saidul Islam, 22, says middlemen have cut into his profit by dictating prices on the wholesale market. "Last year, I made a profit of Tk 3,000 from the cultivation of potatoes on 14 decimals of land. But this year, I lost Tk 500 despite harvesting more potatoes from the same land," he says.

Hundreds of potato growers in Shibganj upazila in the northern district have earned less than expected this season, says Islam, a farmer from Uttar Shyampur village. Farmers cultivated a wide variety of potatoes, inspired by their high rate of production, but it failed to boost their income.

Middlemen established controls over the Mohasthan wholesale vegetables market and fixed the selling prices for potatoes. The farmers have no option but to sell their produce accordingly.

Shawkat Hossain, who identifies himself as a so-called commission agent, says he is getting Tk 15 in commission from a vegetables-wholesaler in Tangail for every 90 kilograms of potato purchased. Under pressure, wholesalers increased the commission from Tk 12 to Tk 15 for the season.

On average, 70,000 tonnes of potatoes change hands every day at the Mohasthan market, a popular joint on the outskirts of Bogra city. The large quantities of potatoes are being dispatched regularly to several districts, including Dhaka.

"Last year, I purchased 40 kilograms of large potatoes for Tk 800, but this time the cost of the same quantity is as low as Tk 400," says 70-year-old Shah Jahan Ali, a trader. He has been pur-



Farmers pack potatoes in sacks at the Mohasthan wholesale vegetables market in Bogra.

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chasing different varieties of potatoes from several markets since the beginning of the season.

A local variety of potato sold for Tk 460 per 40 kilograms last year is now up for sale at Tk 210 this year, he says.

Speaking to The Daily Star by phone, potato grower Tajkin Byapari,

50, of Shyampur says he harvested about 2,400 kilograms of potatoes on 33 decimals of land this year. Last year, he got only 1,000 kilograms with the same inputs.

"I sold every 40 kilograms of the crop for Tk 700 in January last year. Whereas, a couple of weeks back, I sold the same quantity for Tk 500,"

says Byapari.

An official from the district office of Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) says potato farming has increased to 4.65 lakh bighas this year from 4.05 lakh bighas a year ago in terms of lands in Bogra.

"We are expecting 12 lakh tonnes of potato this year. It was 9 lakh

tonnes last year," says Md Altaf Hussain, deputy director of DAE's Bogra office.

"Potato growers have to sell their produce because of a lack of cold storage in the district," he says. There are 28 cold stores in the district with a capacity to store only 1.8 lakh tonnes, according to DAE officials.

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A village of potato growers

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GREENERY surrounds Sekandarabad, a village with a difference in Bogra, a true depiction of the pristine village landscape of Bangladesh.

About 12 kilometres west of the Bogra town, begins one of the oldest cities in South Asia, Mahasthangarh. From here, a red mud road of 3-4 kilometres leads to Sekandarabad.

Potatoes and other robi crops will enchant the passers-by. Not only that, many archaeological sites of different dynasty, including the Gupta and Pala, are still visible on both sides of the road.

Most areas are covered in green carpets for boro seedlings. The irrigation drains resemble a line graph, connecting the archaeological monuments. The simplicity of the villagers says they are far from the harshness of modern life.

"I have leased a piece of land of 0.13 hectare from my neighbour at Tk 70,000, to cultivate an early variety of potato this year," says Mokhlesur Rahman.

The economic lifeline of the people of this area is potato farming, he says. Most of the potato growers in Shibganj upazila of Bogra district have earned handsome amount of money from this crop, mainly by selling the early varieties at the begin-



Potatoes pile up at the Mohasthan wholesale vegetables market in Bogra before being packed and sent to other districts, including Dhaka. The potato is the main cash crop in the area.

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ning of the season.

He produced 2.64 tonnes of potato by cultivating 0.26 hectare and by spending Tk 10,000. He bagged Tk 1,000 for every 40 kilogram in the beginning of the season when the crop hit the market.

Rabiul Islam, another potato grower, says their family has been cultivating potato for many years.

"My grand father used to cultivate the local variety of potato every season, all his life. My father has also been cultivating the local and high

yielding varieties," he says.

Islam made a profit of Tk 3,500 by selling 6 tonnes of an early variety this year. However, he expected a profit of Tk 1 lakh from 0.53 hectare of land this year. Last year, he earned Tk 95,000 by selling 5.2 tonnes of the

high yielding variety on the same area of land.

"I have plans to start a poultry farm in my village to generate jobs for locals, using the profits from potato farming. Meanwhile, I have completed making a shed for the poultry farm," he says.

He says the main cash crop of the villagers is potato, after boro paddy. Sub-Assistant Agriculture Officer for Raynagar area Abdur Razzak says farmers produced more than 594 tonnes of the local and high yielding varieties on 40 hectares in Sekandarabad.

"You will not find a single land owner here who has not cultivated potato," says Kahinoor Islam, secretary of Raynagar Union Parisad of Shibganj upazila.

"I made Tk 8,000 profit by cultivating the early variety on my 0.13 hectare of land," says another potato grower, Abdul Matin.

"I bought books along with other reading materials for my two children with the money in the first week of January."

But he could not buy his son a bicycle due to the low price of the produce, he says.

Sharecropper Mojahar Hossain made profits worth Tk 1,000 only by selling the early variety, as he sold his potato late. He spent Tk 10,000 for potato cultivation on his 0.13 hectare and harvested 1.04 tonnes.

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