



Districts in Focus

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Leaving it to market forces

Farmers are becoming dependent on the market for seeds, leaving behind traditional methods of seed preservation

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IT may be satisfying for firms to invest in the seed business. But for a person who would like to see the century old tradition of seed preservation to flourish, hope is dimming.

Farmers are giving up on the traditional practice of preserving seeds from their own harvest in hopes of purchasing better quality seeds for good crops.

It is mainly because of an increase in the availability of high-yield and hybrid seeds, mainly of rice and vegetables, which are marketed by public sector agencies, private firms and non-government organisations, promising good harvests.

Many farmers, like Mohammad Wali Ullah of Barisal and Md Ripon of Kishoreganj, believe the seeds purchased from the market are of better quality than those produced from their own harvests.

"My grandfather used to grow crops using the seeds preserved from our own harvests. But my father started using seeds bought from the market," said Md Ripon of Mithamoin, Kishoreganj.

"We get good yield with the purchased seeds, rather than the seeds from our harvests," added the young farmer who has grown hybrid rice.

The thirst for high yields continues as growers look to produce an increasing quantity of surplus crops to take advantage of better prices amid growing demand.

And to meet farmers' demands, public sector agencies and seed firms have developed their own brands of packaged seeds and are supplying those at village bazaars and groceries.

The supply of seeds of the high yield variety (HYV) and hybrid rice is likely to rise to 181,999 tonnes this fiscal year from 141,479 tonnes a year ago. The supply of rice seed stood at 109,490 tonnes in fiscal 2007-08.

A bulk of the supply of rice seeds came from Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC), according to data by the seed wing of the agriculture ministry.

Seed sellers and agriculture officials said such an increased supply is making farmers gradually dependent on the market for seeds.

"Farmers are showing a growing interest in buying seeds from the market as they see that quality seeds are available," said Mohammed Masum, chairman of Supreme Seed Company Ltd. "Even if they have to spend extra money to buy the seeds, they are getting good prices," he said.

Such dependence on the market for seeds began a decade or more ago. The number of seed selling firms has also plummeted to meet demand that stands at an estimated 10 lakh tonnes a year.

Now, farmers are almost fully dependent on the market for maize seeds, with growing reliance on the seeds for rice (both HYV and hybrid), wheat, jute, potato and vegetables, according to a publication of the agriculture ministry.

In fiscal 2009-10, the public sector agriculture agencies, private firms and NGOs supplied 44 percent of the rice seeds required; two years ago, they accounted for 35 percent.

The agencies also met half of the demand for quality wheat seeds and a third of vegetable seeds, according to seed wing data.

"Farmers' interest in using quality seeds is rising every year. Now, the ratio of quality seed use stands at 25-26 percent of the total seeds used for cultivation," said Nesar Uddin Ahmed, chief seed technologist of the seed wing.

In fiscal 2008-09, the supply of quality seeds was 17 percent of the total demand for seed, according to a seed wing publication.

Seed sellers and some growers linked farmers' rising dependency on the seed market to a lack of proper skills and knowledge on how to maintain the quality of seeds preserved from their own harvests.



HASIBUR RAHMAN BILU

A view of a seed store in Bogra. The government should monitor and ensure the quality of seeds, said farmers and researchers.

Campaigns on the benefits of quality seeds by both the government and private firms made the farmers more reluctant to preserve seeds on their own, a farmer said.

"The tradition of seed preservation is losing its appeal among many of my neighbours. A majority of growers in my village prefer to use seeds bought from the market, instead of preservation," said Mohammad Refayetullah, a farmer at Pirgachha of the north-western division of Rangpur.

Risks

The quest for quality seeds has made the seed business buoyant, but it has raised some concerns among farmers and ecological agriculture campaign groups.

Both Refayet and Wali are not comfortable with this growing dependency, as there are risks of crop failure because of bad quality seeds bought from the market.

"Last year, a number of people in my village incurred losses by cultivating hybrid rice," said Refayet.

"If our market dependency increases, we will not only forget the techniques of seed preservation but also become vulnerable to the prices charged by companies."

"If the seed companies increase their prices on high demand from farmers, we will have nothing to do. It will also cause extinction of various indigenous varieties that are suitable for different weather types."

Farida Akhter of Nayakrishi Andolon, a platform that campaigns for ecological agriculture, agreed with Refayet.

"If farmers do not have control over the seeds, they will never

be able to decide what type of crop they will grow. Because they will have to depend on farming based on the seeds available in the market," she said.

"It will lead to an extinction of many local varieties."

"Farmers will have no control over the quality of seeds. Thus, they will lose control over agriculture," she said, demanding that the government take initiatives to protect ecological zone based local varieties of rice and other crops, to conserve biodiversity.

Training and vigilance

Farmers and agriculture officials urged the government to provide training to farmers on how to produce and preserve quality seeds of HYVs to trim their dependency on the market.

"It is easy to preserve the HYV seeds. The government should train the farmers on how to produce quality seeds and preserve those," said Refayet, who received training on seed production.

At the same time, the government should strengthen market monitoring to stop the sale of bad quality seeds, he added.

M Asaduzzaman, research director of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), said the seed market needs to be regulated.

"There is nothing wrong if quality seeds are sold in the market. It will benefit the farmers and facilitate production."

The problem in the market is "sheer-dishonesty," he said.

"The government should make arrangements to monitor the quality of seeds to protect the farmers from being cheated."

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"If farmers do not have control over the seeds, they will never be able to decide what type of crop to grow. This is because they will have to depend on farming based on the seeds available in the market. It will lead to an extinction of many local varieties of crop. Farmers will have no control over the quality of seeds and thus, they will lose control over agriculture"

A living out of seed cultivation

HASIBUR RAHMAN BILU, Bogra

MANY women and even men in Bogra and Joypurhat have recently been engaged in producing seeds. They are making a profitable and lucrative form of living under the "Women in Seed Entrepreneurship (WISE)" project being implemented there.

"I plan to buy a cell phone with a colour monitor with Tk 1,700 or so," said Chandana, a 25-year-old housewife from the Shariakandi upazila of Bogra.

Like many other housewives of the Char Dighapara and Char Nayapara villages of Shariakandi, Chandana was also drawn into quality seed production a year back in the charland (shoal) of the Jamuna river.

"Prior to this project, I used to sell the traditionally produced seeds of various vegetables, at a minimum of profits. Now I deal in quality seeds and earn good money," said Chandana.

Her husband, Sukumar of Char Dighapara, is a landless farm hand with irregular income. Initially,



A housewife sells loose seeds to a farmer in Bogra.

RDA

Chandana got engaged in the seed business to make whatever little money possible to financially support her family.

"At first, I used to sell traditionally produced seeds but now, the Rural

Development Academy (RDA) has created opportunities for us to produce quality seeds in the

charlands."

Bogra-based government run research organisation RDA initiated a 15-month training programme on quality seed production, preservation and marketing in March 2010 in the two northern districts of Bogra and Joypurhat.

Assisted by Department For International Development (DFID), UK, and Norwegian Agency For International Development Co-operation (NORAD), the project 'Women in Seed Entrepreneurship (WISE)' is currently being implemented in 30 villages of Shariakandi, Bogra Sadar and Shajahanpur upazilas. The project came at a price tag of Tk 34 lakh for cycle-I, Project Director AKM Zakaria told The Daily Star.

"Last season, some 1,000 women were involved in seed production under the project's action research phase and another 600 men and women have been included in its current cycle activities."

Trained farmers and housewives produced 80 tonnes of quality rice seeds and four tonnes of vegetable seeds under the project, he added.

"I spent Tk 3,000 to buy corrugated iron (CI) sheets to roof my house. Of the total cost, Tk 2,000 came from the profits of my seed business," said Helena Begum, 30, a housewife of Char Nayapara village, who raised 13 kilograms of quality vegetable seeds.

She earned Tk 5,000 by producing seeds on seven decimals of land at a cost of Tk 1,500. "I want to set up a tube well for drinking water for my family next season from the sale of preserved seeds."

"I paid the school admission fees for my son and daughter. I even purchased books and dresses for them, from the proceeds of my business," said Rubi Begum, 28.

Rubi started producing seeds last year. She made more than Tk 3,000 selling vegetable seeds in the local market since the time she began.

Morsheda Begum, 25, of Char Dighapara, earned about Tk 7,000 after investing Tk 1,000 to produce quality vegetable seeds on 20 decimals of land.

All the beneficiaries of the WISE project have at least doubled their investments, said the project director.