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Districts in Focus

Puja logs brisk business for them

AZIBOR RAHMAN, Jhenidah

A good number of people of Hindu Mali community are now busy producing flowers and other items from *shola* (sponge-wood) ahead of puja festival in Jhenidah to make a brisk business.

Residents of Bhatpara village under Kaliganj upazila and Solaimanpur under Kotchandpur upazila say they will earn a significant amount of money during puja next week.

They make good profit as they need not buy *shola*, the main raw material for making the flowers or puja items. They collect *shola* from the nearby water bodies.

Shola -- also known as sholapith or shola pith or Indian cork -- is a dried milky-white spongy plant matter which can be pressed and shaped into delicate and beautiful objects of art.

Shola grows wild in marshy waterlogged areas. Traditionally sholapith products were used in decorating Hindu idols and in creating the headgears of brides and grooms for a traditional Bengali wedding.

Around twenty families in Bhatpara village and 40 families in Solaimanpur village make many puja items including flowers of *shola*.

In the run up to the weeklong festival for the Hindu community, they make at least five types of flower, and crowns and garlands that cost from Tk 6 to Tk 600.

On the occasion of Monsa puja, they also make paper-made pots.

Most of the female members make these flowers and other items staying at home. Of them, the girl students also earn money. During holidays they make flowers, contributing economically to their family.

They can make a substantial amount of profit from the *shola*-made articles as the main raw material costs them a little.

Krishna Malakar, who provides the shoal-made articles to wholesalers, said they collect *shola* from water bodies free of cost. They dry them in the sun and wash. Later, they cut those in different shapes



Members of a Mali community at Bhatpara in Jhenidah produce *shola* flowers for the upcoming Durga puja. The flower makers expect brisk business in the run-up to the Hindu religious festival.

AZIBOR RAHMAN

Residents of Bhatpara village under Kaliganj upazila and Solaimanpur under Kotchandpur upazila are producing sponge flower, puja items and other articles ahead of the next week's puja festival

and make flowers and other items.

They also add colours and thread to the items to make the profit margin much higher.

Ananda Malakar, 73, of Bhatpara village, has

been making flowers for the last forty years. He said he can make any kind of flower from *shola*.

"The demand for the flowers is high. If I get an order from any company, I will be able to make the flowers."

Anjana Rani Malakar, a housewife of Bhatpara village, said her husband collects *shola* from water bodies and she makes different items from *shola* and earns a good amount of money ahead of Durga and Laxmi puja.

Nanda Rani Malakar, 65, of the village, said it is profitable as it costs less. "We can make different items staying at home."

She also said she can earn Tk 80 a day. "It is better to earn something instead of wasting time."

Poly Malakar, a HSC girl student of Mahtab Uddin Degree College, said she also earns while studying so that she can buy books and other study materials for her.

Dipti Malakar, a student of class VI of Bejpara High School, said her father cannot afford her

educational expenses. So, she works to earn money.

Anjoli Rani of Solaimanpur village under Kotchandpur upazila said: "Ours is a Hindu majority upazila. We not only supply the *shola*-made flowers and other items ahead of Durga puja and Laxmi puja, we also supply those to Magura and Kushtia districts."

A wholesaler, Naru Gopal of 17 number Faridpur district said he very often comes to Solaimanpur ahead of Laxmi puja to collect the *shola*-made articles and earns a good amount.

Another wholesaler Probir Kumar Das of Solaimanpur said he comes to collect the *shola* from water bodies and make flowers and supply those to different parts of the country. They make a good profit.



Shopping bags that give jobs to women

AZIBOR RAHMAN, Jhenidah

PLASTIC shopping bags have brought some luck for women in Jhenidah.

Around 400 women at Helai village under Kaliganj upazila in Jhenidah are involved in making the bags from used plastic bags that were used to carry fertiliser.

Most of the workers are housewives and girl students who sew the bags with their machines at home and earn something for living in the gap of chores and study.

Big players in the field do not only depend on the used plastic bags. They bring plain plastic sheets from Dhaka, Noapra and Bheramara, and supply those to village women for sewing after cutting those in different shapes.

All the bag makers work under four traders in Helai village.

Md Salam Uddin, a bag trader in the village, said they purchase plain plastic sheets at Tk 90 a kg.

"Around 48 to 50 bags could be made from a kg of plastic. A maker can produce 15 dozens of bags a day and earn Tk 52, as they get Tk 3.50 for sewing a dozen of bags."

The process of making the bags is not so hard, said Ilias Hossain of the

village. "We supply plastic sheets to the respective houses where the workers want just to make the procedure easy for women."

"We also supply thread and other required equipment, so that the housewives can do their everyday works and earn something for their family while staying at home."

The bags are also a source of earning to girl students, he said, adding that there are many such girls in the village who bear their educational costs by making the bags.

Customers do not like to buy expensive shopping bags while they roam kitchen shops, said a large-scale plastic shopping bag maker in the area. "They prefer our bags, which are found in two sizes. The small ones are priced at Tk 5 and the big ones at Tk 7."

Morzina Begum, 60, of Helai village, said she sews the bags in leisure time. Morzina said this work had made her able to buy household articles and dresses for her family members for the first time.

Another bag maker of the area, Mitali Khatun, 45, said it was hard for her day labourer husband to maintain their family.

"Now, my daily earning of Tk 70 does a lot for our family." She said

she is honest with her work, and strongly believes that her work will not bring any bad reputation for her family which always happens while a village woman works to earn a living.

Eti Khatun, a student of class IX in Salimunnessa Girls' School in Kaliganj, said she sews the bags in the gap of her study. She can make

10 dozens of bags a day that helps her to buy teaching materials.

Housewives and girl students are hugely benefited from the trade, said Solaiman Hossain, a primary school teacher in the village.

It has brought a radical change in the lives of the womenfolk, Hossain said, adding that the wages of the bag makers should be increased.

"The bags are sold like hot cakes," said Haren Biswas, a shopkeeper in Kaliganj Natun Bazar. Most of the customers buy the bags for shopping, as they are cheap, Biswas added.

A wholesale buyer of the bag, Abdul Kalam of Jhenidah town, said he buys the bags in big numbers and sell those in different markets

and neighbouring districts.

"This plastic sheet is a 'petrochemical' product," said environmentalist Mohidul Haque Khan in Jessore. The sheets are available in the market, as they are widely used in producing bags for fertiliser.

He added that the government has not yet banned the shopping bags like polythene.



Left, Workers in Helai village in Jhenidah make plastic shopping bags at home. A woman, right, carries plastic bags.

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