



A farmer in Rangpur tending his tobacco field

PHOTO: HRIDOHYE MATI O MANUSH

A farewell to tobacco

Farmers of Rangpur gradually stepping out of crop's shadow

SHYKH SERAJ

Rangpur, an ancient tobacco growing region in Bangladesh. This region has been cultivating tobacco for a long time. Because, it's still the cash crop for the local people, farmers know that they have certain market for tobacco. The tobacco companies buy tobaccos directly from the farmers. Many a times, they pay in advance. As a result of crop diversity, in recent times, people are gradually stepping out of tobacco cultivation. Now, they're doing potato, corn, IRRI rice and also fish farming.

Farmer says at the beginning they made profit with this cash crop, but now, they are not making good profits anymore. They can't even get out of this cultivation easily. Tobacco farming needs lots of fertilizers and pesticides and it needs a lot of hard work as well to produce. They gave priority to profits more than the food crops.

It's been quite long that peace has flown away from the agricultural regions, located by the Matamuhuri riverbank of Chittagong. Tobacco



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farming in every household has become the biggest enemy against agricultural production and rural life.

In Bandarbands, in the mountains of greenery, no doubt you would find the kingdom of tobacco. You wouldn't understand the real picture from the main highway. The more you go inside, you find more and more tobacco lands. The arable lands where farmers used to grow IRRI and Boro rice, have now become landscapes of tobacco. I climbed up on a little mountain to see the real picture of tobacco farming. As far as my eyes could see, I only saw tobacco lands, gradually grasping the rural arable lands, ruining them.

Likewise, by the Jamuna riverbank, in Tangail's Kalihati and different agricultural regions of B h u y a n p u r , T o b a c c o

comprehensively captured the arable lands.

The health impact of tobacco farming is severe, specially for the ones who are directly working with tobacco leaves at the chimneys. The health difficulties are caused by the smoke and others. Most of the time, the labours and farmers feel sick. Their hair becomes gummy and hands bitter. Even if they use soaps, they can't wipe out the bitterness.

Even the most agriculturally enriched region of Bangladesh, Chalan Beel (Wetland) could not get rid of the curse of tobacco farming. Paddy is the only beauty on these lands during Boro season. This has been the same for ages. Boro is the major crop for the farmers of this region. They get good crop as Tarash and Sirajganj are agriculturally enriched region. Right beside the croplands I noticed an

entirely contradictory image. Some specialized houses were there and not familiar to everyone. Farmers burn tobacco leaves in these houses.

Tobacco was the major crop in most of the regions of Rangpur, specially in Gangachara and Kaunia upazilas, by the riverbank of Tista. Still marginal people of Gangachara heavily depend on tobacco farming and it's easy to read what they have achieved and lost so far. I went to Uttar Panapukur region. There is not a single farmer who's not cultivating tobacco here. Farmers are only victims to the certainty of market price.

Tobacco is all around but I found a potato land in the middle. In recent times, Rangpur is growing potato extensively. I talked with a potato farmer who used to farm tobacco in the past. Now, he's not doing it anymore and making good profits from potato. It's obviously true that tobacco farming needs a lot of hard work than doing any other crop. From this aspect, many farmers are thinking to leave tobacco farming.

It's true that an unseen battle between food crops and tobacco has already started in the region. Farmers are now considering- food or tobacco...poison or food? And, food crops are the winner in this battle, for sure. I talked with the local farmers and one of them was very confident about leaving tobacco farming.

"Will you increase tobacco farming?"

"I will reduce it down for sure as I'm not getting good price now."

"So, what's the alternative?"

"I'll grow potato and rice."

Farmers now have a clear conception on how they're losing everything as they're not getting good price for tobacco. And, how their hard work and investment goes in vain. Unsold tobacco will not meet the hunger.

Dear readers, Rangpur farmers are now stepping out of tobacco farming. This is a positive sign for our farming sector. I believe, farmers will stop tobacco farming and grow food crops and other alternative crops. However, they should be informed on cultivating alternative and profitable crops. If BARI (Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute) and DAE (Department of Agricultural Extension) take effective imitative, farmers will definitely reach their destination- that's what I expect earnestly.

Woes of a non-Bengali freedom fighter

S Dilip Roy, Lalmonirhat

Johir Khan is well known at J u m m a p a r a , Lalmonirhat as the non-bengali freedom fighter. There are not many like him who bravely fought in the 1971 liberation war even being ethnically a Urdu-speaking Bihari. Also physically impaired, all the odds didn't stop him to take part in liberation war.

Unfortunately, even after 40 years of indepedece he is yet to recieve any official recognition from the government for contribution to this nation.

He lost all his property during the liberation war by his fellow Urdu-speaking Biharis, most of whom actively opposed it. His home was burned down.

Now he is maintaining his livelihood running a makeshift shop at Mogholhat railway gate in Lalmonirhat town. He earns between Tk. 70/100 per day.

He was declared "Kawmik Gaddar", meaning "enemy of lineage" by his fellow Urdu-speaking Biharis opposing the war.

During the war, the enemy kidnapped him from his residence. After torture, he was freed with the life threatening condition that he no longer help Bengali freedom fighters.

"I didn't follow the position taken by my fellow Biharis during the war - I helped Muktibahini and other Bengalis from the clutch of Biharis and invading Pakistani soldiers in Lalmonirhat town" he said.

Later, during the war, Johir Ahmed Khan had to flee from his residence as the enemy attacked his home. He moved to India through Mogholhar border. He hoped to take war training there, but was denied due to his physical impairment - his left leg is impaired.

After a week, he returned back to Bangladesh. But for obvious reasons, not to his home. He went to his maternal uncle Rosul Mahmud's place at khotkhotya village in Rangpur.

From his uncle's place, he again started helping freedom fighters of Rangpur. As he



PHOTO: STAR

Johir Ahmed Khan

was unable to take up arms, he was instrumental in gathering much needed intelligence. His ethnicity and fluency in Urdu language enabled him to easily gather vital information of the enemy.

Johor Ahmed Khan's father Wasid Ahmed Khan and his grandfather Ture Ahmed Khan came at Lalmonirhat town from Bangladesh from Asansol in India during British period for railway job. Many Urdu-speaking Biharis lived there working for the railway. Johir Ahmed Khan was born on 1st January in 1947. His father, Wasid Ahmed Khan and mother Bibi Khtun Khan died after

the liberation war.

Johir Ahmed Khan still works for the rights and welfare of the freedom fighters. He joins any gathering demandin trial of war criminals. He even financially helps poor fighters with what little he earns from his makeshift shop.

"I submitted 15 applications to the ministry in the last five years to get recognition as a freedom fighter, but no respond till now.

His wife Johara Khatun said that she, her husband along with one daughter and and three sons always identify themselves as Bengali. They speak Bangla at home and never pose themselves as Urdu-speaking.

Freedom fighter's organizer under sector 6 in Lalmonirhat, Ex-MP Alhaz Abul Hossain said, Johir Ahmed Khan played a very important role during the war. He helped freedom fighters and non-combatant Bengali people in Lalmonirhat town.

District Commander of Lalmonirhat District, Mukti Jodhdha Sangsad Alhaz Usuf Ali said freedom fighter Johir Ahmed Khan's appeal for a freedom-fighter certificate should get prime importance. He claimed that his name will be enlisted in the final list of freedom fighters by June 2013. He added that an inquiry report has been sent to the ministry on the first of December 2012.



PHOTO: STAR

Sunflowers flourish in a field in Sadar upazila of Pirojpur district. Cultivation of sunflower gains popularity in the district as farmers earn a good profit by selling its seeds.

Sunflower farming in Pirojpur shoots up

HABIBUR RAHMAN, Pirojpur

Cultivation of sunflower in the district is increasing every year as its seeds bring more money to the farmers.

District agriculture office sources said about 116 hectares of land have been brought under sunflower cultivation this year whereas it was only 12 hectares last year.

Of them, five hectares have been cultivated in Sadar upazila, 20 hectares in Zianagar upazila, 86 hectares in Nazirpur upazila and the rest in Mathbaria upazila.

To make the farmers interested in the cultivation, leading NGO Brac extended necessary help to the farmers.

"We gave the farmers Tk 7,500 for each acre of land under 'agriculture and food security project", said Zulfikar Rahman, agronomist of Brac Pirojpur branch.

"Keeping the market price in mind, we bought sunflower seeds from the farmers at

Tk 1,800 a kilogram last year", he said.

But, the price may go up to Tk 2,000 this year, said the agronomist.

More than 260 farmers cultivated sunflower on 185 acres of land this season under our supervision, he added.

Talking to this correspondent, Mohammad Gani, farmer of Sikdar Mallik village in Sadar upazila, said he spent Tk 18,000 to cultivate sunflower on his one acre of land and expected to earn a profit of Tk 20,000.

Farmers are now taking more interest in sunflower cultivation due to good market prices, said Md Nasir Uddin Khan, deputy director (DD) of the district.

However, the growers also faced some problems as several storms lashed the area recently. It happened as they did not sow the seed timely, said the DD.

Despite all, they are expecting a bumper production of the crop this year, he said.

JCD faction vandalises BNP office

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

A faction of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) Pabna Sadar upazila unit yesterday vandalised the district BNP office at Zilapara in the town to press home their demand for dissolution of the newly formed JCD upazila committee.

JCD Pabna district unit approved the committee on Monday with Kamruzzaman Prince as president. Immediately after the declaration, the JCD men, who have been dropped from the committee, staged a demonstration in the town.

At around 9:00am yesterday, the aggrieved JCD men led by Md Saddam Hossain attacked the district BNP office (temporary office) where the district JCD office is located. They tore party banners and posters and locked the office.

They alleged that the district unit leaders formed the committee, sidelining the dedicated JCD men. They rejected the committee and demanded immediate formation of a new one with the dedicated leaders and activists.

This correspondent could not contact district JCD President Ilias Ahmed alias Himel Rana and General Secretary Taslim Hassan Sweet for their comments on the issue as their cellphones were switched off.

Contacted, BNP Pabna district unit General Secretary Habibur Rahman Tota said the incident occurred due to internal feud of the JCD over formation of the upazila committee.

Pabna district unit of BNP is carrying out its activities from a temporary office at the house of Shamsur Rahman Shimul Biswas, personal assistant to BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, as the party office is now under the control of the rival faction.

Canal disappearing fast as land grabbers filling it up

ALAM PALASH, Chandpur

A canal flowing through Paschchim Tarapurchandi village under Sadar upazila of the district is disappearing as land grabbers continue to fill up the water body with sand.

Locals said the grabbers are filling up the canal and its adjacent khas land to prepare plots for sale as prices of land in the area, close to the district town, have shot up.

They said one Faruk Sardar and his associates are lifting sand from the Meghna River by using dredgers to fill up the canal and its adjacent government land as each decimal of developed land in the area is now priced at Tk 5-6 lakh.

While visiting the area recently, this correspondent saw a portion of the canal, a lifeline for local farmers, has already been filled up. It (canal) has become a playground for local children.

Md Sirajul Islam, 60, of the village said local farmers won't be able to cultivate Irri-boro and other crops from the next season as the canal, the lone source of water, is dying fast.

The area will also get flooded after a brief shower as all mud drains, connect-

ing the canal have been blocked, he added.

Being informed by locals, Tarapurchandi Union Parishad (UP) Chairman Rafiqul Islam visited the spot a few days ago, but he did not take any move to stop the callous act of the grabbers.

Despite repeated attempts, this correspondent could not contact the UP chairman for his comments on the issue as his cellphone was switched off.

Contacted, Arefin Badal, deputy director of the Department of Environment, said they are

aware of the matter. "We are going to serve notices on the grabbers, asking them to stop filling up of the canal and khas land. If they fail to comply with the order, necessary actions will be taken against them," the official said.



PHOTO: STAR

Grabbers continue to fill up a canal and its adjacent khas land in Chandpur Sadar upazila to prepare plots for sale as prices of land in the area, close to the district town, have shot up.

HUMAN CHAIN IN NETRAKONA

Inter-city train service demanded

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Netrakona

A human chain was formed in the town yesterday, demanding intercity train service on Dhaka-Mohanganj route.

The participants at the programme said, although thousands of people from the district travel by trains daily, they have to face

untold sufferings for want of adequate number of trains.

'Jonoudjog' Netrakona and 'Netrakona Juboforum' jointly formed the human chain in Mukterpara Bridge area.

Among others, convenor of Jonoudjog Kamruzzaman Chowdhury, secretary of the press club Mokleshur Rahman and noted cultural activist Tapan Saha, took part in it.

If a smooth rail communication could be ensured, a huge number of students in the district, who study at different institutions in Mymensingh, would attend their classes timely, said the participants.

Despite repeated pleas, the authorities are yet to take any initiative in this regard, they said.

They called upon the

government to introduce intercity train service on the route without much delay.

They also threatened to go for tougher programmes including hartal if the demand was not met immediately.

Later, they submitted a memorandum to the prime minister through the deputy commissioner in this regard.

Nine girls back from India

OUR CORRESPONDENT, BENAPOLE, JESSORE

Nine Bangladeshi young girls returned home on Monday from India after languishing in jail for 18 months in Mumbai.

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) handed them over to the Bangladesh authorities at Benapole check post around noon.

The girls are aged between 17 and 19 and hailed from different areas of Jessore and Faridpur districts.

Benapole check post immigration sources said human traffickers took the young girls to India promising to arrange good jobs for them.

However, they were arrested by Mumbai police and later sent to jail.

The home ministry took an initiative to bring them back and finally they returned home on Monday through travel permits, said officer in-charge of Benapole check post immigration police Ali Ahmed Masud.