

Salt in the wound for tomato farmers

SHYKH SERAJ

Tomato farmers of Jazira are facing severe crisis as their produce has been burnt by an administrative drive without justified cause. Shariatpur's Jazira is an ideal spot for tomato farming right after Rajshahi's Godagari. In Jazira, tomato is being farmed on 400 hectares of lands, and the Department of Agriculture had a target of producing 30,000 Mt. tons of tomato on 600 hectares of land in six Upazilas of Shariatpur. In wide-ranging crises, how are the tomato farmers passing their days?

The tomato farmers of Jazira have been panic-struck since the day their tomatoes were burnt by the authority on field. "Government and its administration are farmers' friends. Bangladesh is surviving because we are producing food. And, now they're burning our crops", said a farmer. A new story was unveiled. Farmers informed me about the government drive that took place in Mollkandi, locally known as Old Jaynagar. Executive Magistrate of Shariatpur Firoz Ahmed led the team of administration who burnt the tomatoes. During the drive, Upazila Agriculture Officer Md. Habibur Rahman was also present.

I had to cross a narrow river to reach Mollakandi where the incident took place. Farmers generally harvest tomato and leave those at the river bank for ripening. Suddenly, a few days back, government took action and in a blink tomatoes of fifteen farmers were

burnt. Some had 30 to 50 maunds and some had more than 300 maunds of tomatoes which were turned to ashes. These sons of the soil are indigenous farmers since the time they started comprehending their own world. However, so far, they have never faced anything like this.

Many marginal farm-families were ruined on that day. Even the mats and garments of women farmers which covered the tomatoes were burnt. The wound is still there. How will they recover from this loss? A sight is still haunting my mind - I saw a farmer and his wife trying to find the good tomatoes from the burnt ones for their survival. What could be more pathetic a scene than this?

"The administration has prepared a list of farmers who used ripening hormones and the police has told to report each of the farmers at the station", a farmer complained. Most of the farmers are now hiding and some farmers said cases will be filed against them. Few other farmers said some police officers also demanded bribe from the farmers. If they pay, there will be no trouble at all. Another farmer gave me a horrible information that a group of local journalists unlawfully publish news that these farmers are using illegal 'ripening hormones' and through this they involved the police and administration to ensure that these kinds of drives take place. Mixing harmful chemicals in food is definitely a crime and is liable to be punished by the author-



PHOTO: HRIDOYE MATI O MANUSH
A tomato trader at a bazar in Sirajganj.



Shykh Seraj is an Agriculture Development and Media Activist. He is an Ashoka Fellow and an FAO A.H. Boerma Awardee. At Channel i, he is Director and Head of News. He is also Director, Planner and Presenter of the popular Agro-Documentary "Hridoye Mati O Manush".

ity. When farmers' goods are burnt in front of them, it certainly brings financial and mental trauma to them.

The first question naturally appears- why this drive and how the authority went to find whether growth promoter or ripening hormones were used and/or at what rate was it used? The second question- how does a farmer go about applying for approval to use such growth promoters? Third question- When the hormone already got the permission to be used, do the famers get training on how to use it and

what should be the rate of application? And the final question- what does the law say in burning the agricultural goods in broad day light? I have tried to investigate the whole issue and unearth the hidden motifs. I met DC of Shariatpur Ram Chandra Sarker. He referred to The Consumer Right Protection Act, 2009, Section 36. The section says if any investigation proves that a product is adulterated and if it is harmful for human health, that product could be destroyed. "Local Agriculture Officer ensured farmers have

harmful chemicals on tomatoes. That's why the administration took action", confirmed the DC. I wanted to see the official letter submitted by the unknown agriculture officer and the DC said he would give that later. I have sent our local Shariatpur correspondent to him time and again but I couldn't still get the official letter.

After I met the DC of Shariatpur, I talked with Upazila Agriculture Officer who said he was only present there when the administration burnt the tomatoes. When I asked the officer whether farmers have used harmful hormones he said, "I only assumed and heard farmers apply harmful hormones".

I collected bottles of growth promoters and ripening hormone from tomato farmers. On the bottles, it clearly has the registration number

approved by the DAE (Department of Agricultural Extension). I talked with the Pesticide Regulatory Officer Nazmul Ahsan of the DAE regarding this issue. He clearly mentioned that this hormone is not at all hazardous for health but there is a rate of applying. "If the farmers use this product, The Consumer Right Protection Act has nothing to do with it", says Nazmul Ahsan. I also talked with former Magistrate Rokon-Ud-Doula who has been shot to fame with his anti-adulteration drives. He was very frustrated to know about this and said, "When you conduct any mobile courts or drives, you have to depend on the evidence. Agricultural goods that help us build a better GDP, before being destroyed, must be verified - there should be proper monitoring, examination and concrete evidence", added the former magistrate.

These farmers have lost at around 1200 maunds of tomato, worth 3.8 million taka, only based on an assumption! Who will repay these farmers or cure their wounds? Who will recompense their loss and stand beside them? Before doing anything against the farmers, the concerned authority must gather evidence of wrongdoing, be careful, be investigative and be honest while conducting their drives. Because when the authorities burn agricultural produce without justified reasons, they aren't just burning hopes and dreams, they are snatching away the very food that keep the people of Bangladesh alive.

War heroine Rahela still at war with life

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR
TOPU, Sirajganj



PHOTO: STAR

War heroine Rahela Begum.

Rahela Begum, a war heroine (birangona), still fights for her existence - 42 years after independence. Despite her supreme sacrifice for the nation, Rahela is yet to get recognition from the authorities. She has to carry on the curse of history and face the harsh reality of revealing her tale, the tale of Rahela. One of her daughters were divorced while another daughter is yet to get married. Chompa Khatun, daughter of Rahela is now staying with her mother along with a three year old child. Chompa was divorced last year, after an interview of Rahela was telecast in a television channel.

"A television channel telecast my interview. After I revealed the tale of and curse of my life, my daughter was subject to immense torture from her in-laws. At one stage last year, she was divorced," Rahela told the Daily Star. Chompa was married to Milon of village Goalia in Sirajganj Sadar upazila in 2008. Rahela lamented that her younger daughter is yet to get married till now due to the curse of her life. Her son is yet to get better job for the same reason, according to Rahela. Lamenting her fate, she said, "I have not received recognition from the government even after 42 years of independence. There is nobody to look after my poverty-stricken family." Rahela, wife of Akbar Hossain, and her father took shelter in a house of Belgati village of Sirajganj district during the liberation war. That is where the occupation troops found them; and attacked and violated her. Her husband left her after the incident. "The men of the then Rokhhi Bahini men managed to save my family," she added.

Along with her children, she lives at a slum of Soyadhangora area of the district headquarter. Her divor-

cee daughter Chompa and her son work as day labourer to provide for the family. Rahela went to Shahbagh in February 2013 to join thousands of people demanding the punishment of war criminals. She also spoke out amongst mass rallies at Shahbagh. "We are so unfortunate that our names are not included in freedom fighter list since 42 years of independence. We do not get support from the government or the society despite our supreme sacrifice," cries Rahela.

Like Rahela, there are many women of Sirajganj who had suffered indescribable cruelties at the hands of the Pakistani army, the curse of which have to carry as long as they may live. Of them, 35 war heroines were identified after the liberation war. In 1973, Bangabandhu came to Sirajganj to meet them. "Just 22 out of 35 identified war heroines are still alive. They all are living in poverty and social negligence. They do not get social recognition as a freedom fighter so they are living in pain for decades," commented Freedom Fighter Amena Begum, who collected the list of war heroines. She urges the government to provide war heroines social recognition as freedom fighters. Talking to the Daily Star, Gazi Sohrab Ali, commander of Sirajganj district unit of Muktiyoddha Shangshad also demanded the recognition of war heroines as freedom fighters.

Water body owned by BR being filled up

OUR CORRESPONDENT,
Nilphamari

An influential person has illegally filled up a portion of a big water body owned by Bangladesh Railway (BR) at Banshbari in Saidpur municipality under the district to make his business centre.

An estate department official of BR in Saidpur on Sunday stopped the unauthorised act.

Visiting the site that day, this correspondent found 10-12 decimals of the 95-decimal water body filled up as Anwarul Huq, 30, nephew of Saidpur municipality unit BNP president Ashraful Huq, did the

callous act.

"I along with other locals opposed the illegal filling as Anwarul hired trucks to carry earth and waste materials from distant places for the purpose. But they continued the work to occupy the whole water body," said Nazrul Islam, an inhabitant of the area.

When journalists asked Anwarul the reason of the unauthorised filling, he claimed that he had taken 'genuine lease' of 70% of the water body from the department concerned of Bangladesh Railway and he wants to build a business centre by filling the

water body.

But he refused to show any document to locals and journalists regarding his claim.

BNP leader Ashraful Huq refuted the allegation of using his influence by his nephew to fill the water body.

"My deceased brother Shamsul Huq had taken lease of the water body long ago. After his death, his son Anwarul wanted to do something there," he said.

Getting complaint from locals, Golam Mostofa, sub assistant engineer of the railway estate department in Saidpur, went to

the spot on Sunday and wanted to see the documents regarding the claimed lease issued by railway department but Anwarul could not show any valid paper.

The official then ordered immediate stopping of the illegal filling work.

"Even if anyone has genuine lease documents, he cannot fill up a natural water body as it is not permitted by law. I shall bring the matter to the notice of the higher authorities and seek permission to file a regular case in this regard," he told journalists.

Jamaat calls hartal in Meherpur, enforces in Pabna

STAR COUNTRY DESK

Jamaat-e-Islami has called a half-day hartal (shutdown) in Meherpur today to protest the killing of its assistant general secretary Tarique Mohammad Saiful Islam in the district early Monday.

Siddiqur Rahman, Ameer of Meherpur district Jamaat, called the hartal after a meeting of the party held at the party office yesterday evening, reports our Kushtia correspondent.

Tarique Mohammad Saiful Islam, 35, son of arrested former Meherpur district chief of Jamaat Samir Uddin was killed during a "gunfight" between Jamaat-Shibir men and law enforcers at Bandar village of Meherpur.

Tarique was former president of Meherpur district Islami Chhatra Shibir, student wing of Jamaat.

He was accused in at least eight cases filed with three police stations in the district.

Meanwhile, the Pabna unit of Jamaat yesterday enforced hartal in the district, protesting the arrest of its secretary and former Shibir leader Abu Taher.

Activists of Jamaat and its student wing Chhatra Shibir carried out picketing in several areas including Rajapur, Dhupaghata, Madhupur and Gangarampur in Sadar upazila by setting tyres afire on the Pabna-Nagarbari Highway.

They also picketed at Natunhat, Battala, Chand Alir intersection and Kolerkandi on the Ishwardi-Dhaka Highway.

During the hartal, no long-route bus left or entered the district while rickshaws were seen plying the town roads.

Most of the business



PHOTO: STAR

Chilli farmer Abdul Haque of Sadhupur village in Melandaha upazila under Jamalpur district gives a bleak look as the young chilli plants on his one bigha of land are dying due to a bacterial disease.

BACTERIAL ATTACK ON CHILLI PLANTS

Growers in three Jamalpur villages having bad dream

ABM AMINUL ISLAM, Jamalpur

Massive attack of bacterial disease badly hampers green chilli cultivation at Sadhupur, Panch No Char and Charpolisha Uttarpara villages in Melandah upazila under the district, much to the worry of hundreds of growers, especially small and marginal ones.

The disease causes rotting of the stem of the plants and their eventual death with flowers and immature chilli, said farmers and upazila agriculture officials.

Drastic price fall of the popular item adds to the situation.

In last year, the farmers harvested 25-30 maunds of green chilli per bigha and got profit of Tk 25-30 thousand as the item sold for Tk 2,000 a maund.

But this time they hardly

expect 5-6 maunds per bigha while the price in the local markets is now around Tk 750 a maund.

The situation worries the growers as they had to spend, as production cost per bigha, Tk 20 thousand in addition to their own labour, said several farmers including Abdul Haque, Alam, Intaj, Dulal Miah of Sadhupur village, Wadud, Jinnah of Charpolisha Uttarpara village and Israfil, Khoka Miah of Panch-No Char village.

Most of the small farmers of the three villages, who usually depend on the earning from chilli cultivation for the immediate next boro cultivation, are in anxiety as the chilli plants are dying despite applying required amount of fertilisers and pesticides to the fields.

The farmers faced the problem for the first time this year and informed the upazila agriculture office of the situation in time, but no official visited the fields or gave any advice to solve the problem, said several growers including Abdul Haque, Humayun and Mominur of Sadhupur village.

Contacted, Hassan Imam, Melandah upazila agriculture officer, said, "The chilli plants at the villages are dying due to attack by bacterial diseases this season. But we have nothing to do this time. With the co-operation of the experts of Regional Agriculture Research Station, Jamalpur, we will take a massive plan to give proper and adequate suggestions to the farmers to save their chilli cultivation next year."



PHOTO: STAR

This water body belonging to Bangladesh Railway in Saidpur municipality area under Nilphamari district faces threat of disappearance as a relative of a local BNP leader is illegally filling up the area for setting up a personal business centre there.