

Rapid increase in land used for tobacco cultivation

S DILIP ROY AND ZAHIDUL
NAIM ZAKARIA, from
Lalmonirhat

The cultivation of tobacco has seen a sharp rise in Lalmonirhat and the rest of the country. The lack of awareness about its bad impact on soil fertility and the profitable offers from different tobacco companies are the main contributing factors. Farmers have also diverted to tobacco cultivation as the low and uncertain price of rice has discouraged them. Some farmers, who are aware about the harmful impact on soil fertility, want to stop tobacco cultivation (they don't get expected output for other crops in the land where tobacco is cultivated later on), but they have no option but to continue to produce tobacco since it allows them to make money, thanks to easy market access and different attractive incentives from tobacco companies.

Nazrul Islam, 50, a tobacco grower at Sapatibari village of Aditmari upazila said, "I have cultivated tobacco on eight bighas of land but these lands were used for paddy in previous times. I hope I will earn at least Tk 64,000 from tobacco selling this year as a tobacco company's representative assured me that they will buy my produce at fair price. Last year, I faced a loss of Tk 5,000 due to low prices, I was farming paddy then. Like him, many farmers in the villages have switched to tobacco cultivation this year. Shamsul Islami, 56, another tobacco grower at Kamapur village in Lalmonirhat sadar upazila said, "I have lost my interest in paddy cultivation as I don't get a fair price. I know tobacco cultivation is



PHOTO: STAR

Farmers engaged in the cultivation of tobacco in Aditmari and Kaliganj upazilas in Lalmonirhat.

ful for the soil but it yields profit. I have cultivated tobacco on twelve bighas of land this year, whereas I cultivated it on only one bigha in the last year."

"We advise farmers not to cultivate tobacco, but they don't listen to us since tobacco companies make them offers which they find profitable," informs Lalmonirhat Sadar Upazila Agriculture Officer Mohammad Nuruzzaman. Though an awareness campaign is going on in the area which succeeded to some

extent in making the farmers aware, the crop is still being farmed in large scale in the district, said Aditmari Upazila Agriculture Officer Hamidur Rahman.

According to figures from the Department of Agriculture Extension, about 108,000 hectares of land are being used to cultivate tobacco this year, which is significantly higher compared to last year's figure of about seventy thousand. Of the current total land, 37% or 40,000 hectares of land is in Kushtia, 26% or 28,000

hectares in Bandarban, 28% or 30,000 hectares in Nilphamari and Lalmonirhat and 9% or 10,000 hectares in Rangpur. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Bangladesh has 8.52 million hectares of cultivable land, which, according to a 2013 research study by the UNFAO, is shrinking by 69,000 hectares every year due to various reasons.

According to the Lalmonirhat Agriculture Extension Department (AED), last year, in 2013, farmers cultivated tobacco

on 25 thousand hectares, which is on the rise this year. Tobacco was cultivated on 16 thousand hectares of land in 2012 in Lalmonirhat, increasing from 6 thousand hectares in the year 2011. In 2002, only four thousand hectares of land was used for tobacco cultivation in Lalmonirhat, which has been gradually increasing from 2003.

Nilphamari and Lalmonirhat districts are new additions to tobacco farming; interestingly however, tobacco farming has seen a reduction in Rangpur, an area which has seen much success in the past. In a 2013 research paper, researchers Md. Moyazzem Hossain and Md. Mahabubur Rahman of the Department of Statistics, IU, Kushtia, Bangladesh, identified that, "For decades tobacco production has moved from one location to another, not due to the increased interest of farmers but rather due to the loss of soil fertility and destruction of sources of fuel wood in areas under production. This trend can be seen from government records showing that tobacco leaves are produced between 36,755 metric tons in 2000-01 to 40,272 metric tons in 2008-9 with virtually no increase in land area (73,870 acres in 2000-1 to 73,811 acres in 2008-9)."

Hazrat Ali, 55, a tobacco grower at Kakina village at Kaliganj upazila said, "I have been cultivating tobacco on my land for the last ten years, but nobody cautioned me about the harmful effects of it." Apart from interest free loans, freely available tobacco seeds, fertilisers and insecticides, tobacco companies also provide other technical support. They even turn up on

my doorstep to purchase the produce giving fair price," he said, pointing out why tobacco farming is the obvious choice. The Agriculture and Environment Coordinator of RDRS Bangladesh, Mamunur Rashid said that it could be possible to grow at least 120 thousand tonnes of additional paddy in the district if tobacco was not cultivated. Abdul Mazid, The Deputy Director of Lalmonirhat AED said, representatives of at least six tobacco companies are working in the district to encourage the farmers to cultivate tobacco. They are alluring farmers with lucrative offers, which include interest free loans, free seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. Besides, the farmers are also provided health services and money for education of their children, he said. However, a few representatives of different tobacco companies in Lalmonirhat district, who requested anonymity, denied these claims. They said they don't encourage the farmers to cultivate tobacco instead of paddy, instead they only advise the farmers on how to cultivate large quantities of tobacco on small pieces of land using modern technology.

Lalmonirhat is now home to two groups of farmers; one which has made the easy choice to switch to tobacco, and the other who, worried about future soil fertility, continue to urge the authorities concerned to create awareness among farmers and take necessary steps so that farmers do not have to worry about their livelihoods if they cultivate paddy on their lands. Will farmers realize how they are crippling their own future with tobacco? Or will



PHOTO: STAR

Advocate Golam Hasnayan and Anwarul Haque of Pabna showing a child how to write Bangla alphabets.

Traditional Hatekhari for kids in Pabna

AHMED HUMYUN KABIR
TOPU, Pabna

It was a unique day for the young kids of Pabna who had their first lesson of Bangla alphabets on the International Mother Language Day. The kids were lucky, since the 'Hatekhari' was given by language veterans and the prominent educationalists on the occasion. Around 50 children were participated at the program held at the Ekushey Book Fair in Pabna town hall premise on Friday (February 21, 2014) afternoon marking the international mother language day.

Like other years, Gonoshilpi Shongstha, Pabna, a leading cultural organization of the district, arranged the special event for children below school-going age. Advocate Golam Hasnayan and journalist Anwarul Haque, both renowned language heroes of Pabna as well as veteran educationalists, Professor Md. Nurunnabi, Professor Shibojit Nag of the district were present on the occasion.

A discussion program was held chaired by President of Pabna Gonoshilpi Shangshtha Professor Shibojit Nag. Among the language heroes, Advocate Golam Hasnayan, Journalist Anwarul Haque, former principal of Bulbul College Professor Md. Nurunnabi, retired teacher J A Sufia Chowdhury, Mahamuda

Parvin spoke and also gave the lesson of Bangla Alphabet among the kids in traditional Hatekhari program.

The speakers focused on the heritage of the traditional 'Hatekhari' program. "Once upon a time parents use to organize Hatekhari to start formal education of their children. Traditional festivity is not seen as commonly as before due to the influence of modern technology of education. Through this program, we have brought traditional festivity back again," the speakers said. The speakers stressed the need to teach mother language at the beginning phases of education, adding "If we do not have sufficient knowledge of our mother language we will be unable to move forward."

The parents and guardians of the children expressed their happiness following the event, "This is a unique day in my children's life. My child is blessed to meet the language veterans, and learn about the Bangla alphabets from them. This is remain an inspiration in my child's life," said Md. Abdul Awal, a parent.

President of the Pabna Gonoshilpi Shibojit Nag said that the kids present aged from three to four participated at the traditional Hatekhari program. This is the seventh consecutive year that the program has been arranged marking the international mother language day in Pabna.

বাংলাদেশ ফার্স্ট-এর চ্যাম্পিয়নদের অভিনন্দন

দেশকে জানার এ মিছিলে, আমাদের সাথে যারা ছিলে
সবাইকে আন্তরিক শুভেচ্ছা



জাহিদুল ইসলাম এবং পার্থ সারথী সাহা
ক্যান্টনমেন্ট পাবলিক স্কুল এড কলেজ, ময়মনসিংহ