

# Soma Tea Estate leads tea plantations

Creating employment opportunity for many others

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

A woman has successfully farmed tea in the mainland at Bicchandai village of Hatibandha upazila in Lalmonirhat. She started tea farming on about 8 bighas of land in 2007 and now her farm has grown into about 25 bighas. Her Tea garden is named "Soma Tea Estate" and, in addition to being a new source of occupation, it makes the village quite beautiful. Soma Akhter, the woman who took the risk of farming tea on land which people believed were not favourable for tea, has not only creates a means of livelihood for herself, but has created work opportunity for poor women of the village. Over a hundred women are working at Soma Tea Estate.

After achieving a Master Degree from Carmichael University College, Soma Akhter from Bicchandai village of Hatibandha upazila in Lalmonirhat joined a NGO. She was encouraged on Tea farming after visiting different Tea Estates in Sylhet and Panchagar since 2004 to 2006. Soma shared her idea with her husband Ferodus Alam, and after receiving his support, Soma Akhter started farming tea in the mainland after soil test in the village in 2007. "In the beginning, I had to face a lot of criticism and negative attitude of the local people, as they never wanted to believe tea farming is possible in the mainland but now they are also interested in tea farming," says Soma Akhter.

Her tea leaves are being sold at the rate of tk 26 per kg in Panchagar. "I produce tea from some leafs for selling in the locality at fair prices as the local people are highly interested to purchase tea from me," she added.

Soma Akhter now gets 8,000 to 8,500 kgs of tea leaves from her tea estate every month in an average, and each kg is being sold at tk 26 in Panchagar, as there are no tea processing machine in Lalmonirhat. "Now I able earn a profit of tk 70 to 80 thousand after bearing all expenditure including labour and transport costs every month. My tea estate has also turned into a tourist spot in the village, where many travelers come to visit and they also purchase tea from me," she added. According to Soma, her husband is very keen to help her and she could lead such a large endeavor only because her husband's encouragement and support. Soma's husband Ferdous Alam said, "My wife has set an example of tea framing in the mainland for the first time in the northern bordering district Lalmonirhat. She has made me proud. Seeing her, many local farmers have already started farming tea in their lands."

Rashed Begum, 52, who has no means of earning money before in the village said that she earns tk 100 and gets lunch every day for working at the tea estate. Like her, many vulnerable women have found means of earning



Soma Akhter and her employees collecting green leaves of tea in Soma Tea Estate.

money and have been able to transform their labour into a better life. All these women are grateful to Soma for taking this initiative.

Tea Board official sources at Hatibandha upazila said that now tea is being farmed at 26 gardens on 70 acres of land at different villages in Lalmonirhat. These tea gardens did not exist even a few years ago –

they've all been encouraged to invest and establish tea farms following the example set by Soma. Her success of tea farming in the mainland has changed perceptions, and lead to the creation of jobs for thousands of people. Official sources also added that, in light of the increased interest, 700 farmers in the district were given training on tea farming in the area

last year. The Senior Field Officer of Hatibandha Tea Board, Mizanur Rahman said, a tea processing machine is going to be set up at Hatibandha in mid-2014. Once the processing station is established, tea growers would be able to earn a lot more from tea farming since they will be able to offer a more refined final product.

# Early Boro harvesting proves successful

IQBAL SIDDIQUEE, Sylhet

It was a joyful day for over a thousand farmers from Derai and Dakshin upazilas who joined a crop cutting event and farmers' rally in April. The festive event, organized to mark the harvest of two early varieties of boro paddy, was held under the open sky at the remote village of Taila under Dakshin upazila of Sunamganj district. BRI-28 and BRI-45 varieties were cultivated successfully under a special program styled 'Economic Empowerment of the Poorest (EEP)', being implemented jointly by the government and some other organizations in the region.

Released by the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), the two varieties are suitable for cultivation since these can be harvested much ahead of the Boro season in the haor (low-lying) region like in the Sunamganj district, which is prone to early flooding every year. Kulsuma Begum of village Durgapur said that during periods of end Choitra and Baishakh (March-April) almost every year, the region suffers a lot and apprehend early floods since the whole region is low-lying and prone to flooding. "Boro paddy is the only crop of ours," said farmer Md. Azizur Rahman, "so we need the early harvest varieties, which can be cropped before major natural calamity like hailstorms and floods appear."

Along with the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), DAE and BADC, Helvetas Swiss Inter cooperation, an international development organization, has been working in Sunamganj in acquainting



PHOTO: STAR

People celebrating the success of early harvesting of Boro.

farmers with early varieties of Boro paddy since 2005, the organizers informed. Deputy Commissioner of Sunamganj, Md. Yamin Chowdhury, was the chief guest at the event while Inter Cooperation's Project Manager Salah Uddin, upazila chairman Abul Kalam, farmers Kulsuma Begum and Md. Azizur Rahman also addressed the farmers. The chief guest said the advanced varieties of paddy needs to be popularized in a big way in the haor (low-lying) region of the country since the farmers here suffer crop loss every year due to early floods.

Chairing the rally, Deputy Director of DAE, Sunamganj, Md. Abul Hashem said that the per hectare yield of these varieties varies from 4.5 tons to 5.5 tons. But these are much safer for the farmers of the haor region. Boro paddy was cultivated on 2,16,648 hectares, including 93,158 hectares of BRI-28 and 7600 hectares of BRI-45 of land, targeting the total yield at 8.5 lakh metric ton in the district. As the 2 varieties are drawing farmers' interest, BADC this year supplied 1,712 tons of seeds in the district this season.

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PHOTO: STAR

Sacks of wheat bought from farmers by influential traders are kept at Tebunia Haat in Pabna district before supply to the government godowns. The official rate for procuring wheat this season eludes the farmers as traders and middlemen virtually prevent the growers from selling the crop directly to the godowns.

# Bumper wheat yield fails to make farmers happy

Prices of the crop remain low from the outset of harvesting season

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPI, Pabna

Bumper yield of wheat in the district fails to make the farmers happy as the prices are too low to bring any profit.

The district produced 1,12,920 tonnes of wheat on 37,023 hectares of land this season, said district officials of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE).

But the prices in wheat markets of the district have remained low from the very outset of the harvesting season, said growers.

Now high quality wheat is selling at Tk 830-850 per maund while it was Tk 900 to 940 just a week ago, said the retailers.

ward trend but farmers have to sell their produce for low prices to repay the loan they took with a high interest rate for the cultivation.

"The selling prices of wheat are barely enough to recover our production cost," said Md Abul Bashar, a farmer of Matiabari village in Sadar upazila.

Meanwhile, the government's wheat procurement programme that started on April 1 to support the farmers has virtually failed to serve the purpose as the growers have to sell the produce for much lower than the government rate of Tk 1,080 per maund.

"I have cultivated wheat on two bighas of land. I wanted to sell the crop at government godowns but there is no scope to supply it

directly there as influential people are controlling the warehouses. Finally I have sold it the local market for low price," said Md Siraj Pramanik of Hemayetpur village.

During a recent visit to different markets in the area, this correspondent found the traders and middlemen purchasing wheat from the farmers and packaging for supplying to government godowns.

"After collecting wheat from the local market, we sell it to the traders and influential leaders for supplying to government godowns," said Md Mukul Hossain, a middleman at Tebunia market.

The farmers cannot sell the crop directly to the government godowns as

influential people control the procurement drive.

During visit to different government godowns, this correspondent saw men of influential traders unloading wheat from the trucks.

Seeing six wheat-laden trucks arriving at the 'Local Supply Depot' in Sadar upazila, this correspondent wanted to know if there was any farmer among the suppliers but failed to get anyone of the category.

Md Main Uddin, district controller of food, claimed there is no scope violation of rules in the procurement programme as they are purchasing wheat from the listed farmers who possessed 'Agriculture Assistance Card'.

# 11 arrested for looting bus passengers in Habiganj

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Police arrested 11 people on charge of committing robbery in a Dhaka-bound passenger bus on Dhaka-Sylhet highway in Nabiganj upazila of Habiganj district on Monday night.

Around 20 people on Monday reserved a bus of Ananda Paribahan (Sirajganj JA-11-0001) and started for Sylhet from Dhaka, hanging a banner inscribed with 'Major visit', police and locals said.

They took Sylhet-bound passengers from places,

looted their belongings and dropped them at places before reaching Sylhet in the evening.

Then they took three passengers from Goalabazar for Sherpur and dropped them at Kagoipur in Osmaniganj police station area after looting their things. As the victims raised a hue and cry, locals informed the men of Sherpur toll plaza of the matter but the gang managed to cross the barricade put on there.

Meantime, a passenger who boarded the bus at Aushkandi for Shaistaganj in Habiganj shouted for

help when the vehicle reached near Rustampur toll plaza. As people came up the miscreants got down from the bus and attempted to flee through Rustampur village, but the locals caught seven of them.

Police later caught four others of the gang from nearby Aushkandi.

"The 11 'robbers' were handed over to Osmaniganj police in Sylhet. The bus was seized but its driver and helper had managed to flee," said Jahangir Alam, officer in charge of Nabiganj police station.

Sub Inspector Shah Alam of Osmaniganj Police Station filed a case against the 11 arrestees and they would be produced before a judicial magistrate's court tomorrow [Wednesday], said Zuber Ahmed, officer in charge of the police station.

The arrested are Ibrahim, Liton Mia, Mohiuddin, Saddam Hossain, Faruque Mia Rony Khan, Shahedul Islam, Md Sajib Kazi, Russel, Md Shahin Alam and Md Kamal Hossain.

The alleged robbers, all aged below 30, hail from different districts.



PHOTO: STAR

Madarbumia Primary School in Patuakhali Sadar upazila lies damaged as a nor'wester lashed the area on Monday night.