

People in chars deprived of fundamental rights

Health, education and agricultural support services almost absent

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Rokeya, Rehena, Jorina, and many other poor women at Char Paikhand village of Haturia-Nakalia union in Bera upazilla rush to the farmlands for work while their husbands go to the capital. There are differences in their lives but poverty binds them together in the same platform. They are deprived of fundamental rights such as food, access to health services and their agricultural needs. The case is the same for 35 thousand people in 15 other char villages of six unions at Bera upazilla. This kind of deprivation has been an integral part of their life. The struggle behind their survival circles around inaccessible communication system, infrastructural inadequacy, lack of employment opportunity and natural disaster.



PHOTO: STAR

Despite working as hard as men in farmlands, women of char villages at Bera upazila are deprived of basic needs.

happens. We cannot find physicians. During emergencies, we need to go to the upazila headquarters, which is difficult to reach due to the lack of easy transport. Sometimes we do not get any treatment at all due to the unavailability of health service providers."

Many children of the village are not covered under vaccination programs in these areas. "I could not give my child vaccine at the early ages. My daughter grew without vaccination and she is now vulnerable to various diseases", Fulbala, a housewife, mentioned. Again, child death and the death of new born babies is a common phenomenon in Char Paikhand village. A large number of new born babies

and young children die due to the lack of required health services. Villagers justify the deaths of their babies as a matter of fate. "It's my bad luck that my child died", said Monjuara Begum, wife of Shahed Ali of Paikhand village. Like Monjuara, most of the women of the village lost one or two children due to diseases but they simply had nothing to do in order to prevent the death of their children.

Md. Monzed Ali, Executive Director of 'Jamuna Somaj Kollan Shangshtha', a local NGO working in the chars, said at least 40 to 50 children used to die in 15 island chars of Bera upazila every year. When a woman conceives, she does not receive any

services from obstetricians or midwives.

"Children are God's gifts. I am not interested in resisting God's gift," says Rokeya Khatun, middle-aged woman of the village, who carried nine children in the last 20 years. These people do not have access to family planning services either. Rokeya said she has no concept about planning families as there is no awareness program. Monjuara, Shaheda, like Rokeya, are common faces of women at the village, each of whom have 5 to 10 children to look after.

In Char Paikhand village a primary school exists. There are four teachers but they are not available regularly so the students suffer. There are 16 primary

schools in 15 char villages. Most of the schools often do not perform properly due to lack of teachers. There is also very little support from the agriculture office. They do not get agricultural loan for cultivating their lands. Char people are deprived of government facility for seedlings, fertilizers and other agriculture facilities. Borrowing money from 'Mohajons', they cultivate their crops - but often end up not earning enough to turn a profit.

With the upazila headquarters 25 km away, the lack of easy transport and communication facilities makes life very difficult. People of the village go to union or upazila headquarters on boats. Farmers cannot

easily transport their goods to plain lands.

"We do not get proper price of our product as we do not carry our goods to upazila headquarters. How can we? Its too difficult and costly to do so," Md. Janey Alam, a farmer of the village said. About 15 other villages of nearby chars in Bera upazila are affected in the same way due to poor transport facilities.

The poor people of the chars, specially women, are working as the farmers in the fields. Male members of their families travel to urban centres in search of work. "There is no work facility in the chars for six months a year. This is purely seasonal and we cannot do anything about it. So we rush rush to urban areas for earning money for our families," said Shaheb Ali, another farmer of the village.

People of the char areas live in hardship due to the lack of government support. A few NGOs exist in the area who work to improve the lifestyle of the char people, but the impact it quite insignificant in comparison to the development needs of the people who live in the chars of the Jamuna. If one visits 15 char areas of the Bera upazila they will find the similar problems exist everywhere.

"NGO support is not enough for the vast tract of the char people here. Proper government support is needed," opined Zahid Rahman, Coordinator of Unnayan Shomonnay. "I think that the government should dedicate funds in the budget for the char people" he added.



PHOTO: STAR

Asma Begum tends to her cardamom plant.

Cardamom farming proves successful

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

For the first time in the region, a woman has successfully farmed cardamom, a spice item, in her nursery at Fulgachh village in Lalmonirhat sadar upazila. Thanks to her, local farmers are encouraged to farm this item in their lands as a result. Asma Begum, 38, wife of Fakar Ali, who lives at Fulgachh village, started farming cardamom in her nursery in 2012. "My husband purchased 50 plants of cardamom from a nursery in Bogra in the year 2012, and I planted these surrounding my homestead and nursery. I produced two kgs of cardamom in the year 2013, and I sold these at Tk 1,000 in the local market," Asma Begum said, adding that she expects to get at least 10 kgs of cardamom this year.

"I took a loan of tk 30 thousand from Muslim Aid Bangladesh after becoming a member of the organisation and I used it for farming cardamom and other crops," she said. Asma Begum's husband Fakar Ali informed that he also works in his wife's nursery. "For farming cardamom, we don't need fertilisers, pesticides but only need regular care. Clay soil with shade is perfect for farming this crop," he said. "A matured plant of carda-

mom can give at least one kg of output every year," he added, hoping they will be able to sell cardamom plants to the local farmers this year. Local farmers Kutub Miah, Abdul Hakim, Jabbar Ali and others in the village didn't believe that cardamom farming in the village was possible, as this spices item is crop believed to be feasible only in India and Bhutan. "Now we are interested to produce cardamom surrounding our homesteads and nurseries," they said.

The Lalmonirhat Branch Manager of Muslim Aid Bangladesh Jahedul Islam said that the organization provides loans for farming agricultural products. "We will support woman to extend cardamom farming on larger areas of land," he said. According to Scientific Officer in Lalmonirhat Species Research Sub-Centre Mostaque Ahmed Lelin, this is the black variety of cardamom, and this has been farmed in Hill Tracks and even in Bogra region. Dry and humid weather is perfect for cardamom farming. The In-charge Officer of the Species Research Sub-Centre Scientific Officer Ala Uddin Khan said that the soil of Fulgachh village is favourable for farming spices.



PHOTO: STAR

Farmers are busy threshing paddy using harvester machine in Nilphamari Sadar upazila. Eighty percent farmers of the district are now using the machine.

HARVESTING AND CULTIVATION

Farmers fast adopting modern agri tools

EAM ASADUZZAMAN, Nilphamari

Farmers in the district are fast adopting modern scientific tools for cultivation as it saves time, labour and money alongside bringing additional output.

During the last couple of years, the use of modern agricultural tools by farmers has increased tremendously in the district among big, medium and small farmers having at least 50 decimals of land, said officials of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in Nilphamari.

However, a section of farmers, especially marginal ones and landless sharecroppers still use traditional tools, they said.

About 90% farmers now till their land with tractors or power tillers, said Sub Assistant Agriculture Officer (SAAO) Shamsul Huda, who compiles and updates different agriculture related data at the district DAE.

"Eighty percent farmers use harvesters to thresh and clean paddy, wheat

and maize, 60% use weeders, 50% use LCC (leaf colour chart) machine for putting urea in their crops field without wastage and all the farmers use manual or diesel run spray machines for spraying insecticide," he added.

A good number of farmers like to test soil of their land in 'mini soil kits laboratory' set up in each of the 64 union parishad complexes of the district, he added.

"Modern cultivation method has become greatly popular as we are motivating farmers and providing them with modern agricultural tools at 25% subsidized rates," said SM Sirajul Islam, deputy director of district DAE.

Visiting different villages of the district during the last couple of days, this correspondent found extensive use of harvesters for reaping boro paddy.

"My harvester can thresh paddy of 20 bigha in a day. At the same time the threshed paddy gets clean as wind blows during the task," Golam Mostofa of Kundopukur village in

Sadar upazila, who cultivated boro on a 40-bigha land (1 bigha=30 decimal), said as he was threshing paddy with a diesel-run harvester.

Many farmers who have no harvesters of their own hire the machine for Tk 300 to 400 to thresh paddy of a bigha.

"I hired a harvester to thresh and clean boro paddy of my four-bigha land for Tk 1600. It will take only four hours while it would require engaging ten day labourers for a total of Tk 2500 and at least eight hours to complete the harvesting manually," Rabiul Islam, a farmer of Chhatnai village in Dimla upazila, said on Saturday.

Besides harvesters, other modern tools serve as effective and cheaper means for agricultural work, said farmers.

"It needs two times tilling in two hours by tractors or power tillers at a cost of Tk 800 to prepare a bigha of land for cultivation whereas it takes six times tilling with traditional ploughs and bullocks, costing Tk 1800," said

Low jhum yield causes food crisis at 7 CHT villages

OUR CORRESPONDENT,
Rangamati

Food crisis has been prevailing in at least seven remote villages in four unions under Baghaichhari upazila of the district for the last few months as the areas saw poor yield of jhum this year.

Suspension of communications through waterways due to sharp fall in water level in Shijog, Kachalong and Gongaram rivers over the last couple of months also added to the situation as people of those areas can not carry their agri-products to the markets for sale and buy essentials, including rice, from the markets.

Elected public representatives, headmen and village chiefs (karbaries) said more than 3,000 families at Batling, Shiyaldoi, Tuichhui, Bhuiyachhari and Gongaram villages in Sajek union and Dojor village in Baghaichhari union are greatly suffering from food crisis due to low jhum production in the areas.

They held a press conference at Baghaichhari upazila parishad office recently, seeking food assistance from the government.

Doya Sindhu Chakma, member of the ward No 9 under Baghaichhari union, read out a written statement at the conference where upazila chairman Boro Hrishsi Chakma, vice-chairman Diptiman Chakma, and chairmen of four unions--Sajek, Baghaichhari, Marishya and Bangaltoli—were present.

They said around 8,000 families, displaced from different parts of the district in late 1980, took sheltered in and around different areas of four unions. They mostly depend on jhum cultivation and forests resources for their liveli-

hoods.

People of the remote villages in four unions face food crisis due to poor yield of jhum and the ban on bamboo collection from forests imposed by the government, headmen and karbaris said.

They urged the district administration to take

immediate steps to meet the crisis at the villages.

"We face severe food crisis. Many villagers are passing days without food or keeping themselves half-fed," said Bhujan Tripura of Shiyandoi village in Sajek union.

"Famine like situation is prevailing in most villages

of the four unions. Many people of those villages told me about their hardship and they sought food assistance. I have already informed the district administration about the situation," said Boro Hrishsi Chakma, chairman of Baghaichhari upazila.

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