

# Stones taking over farmlands

Stone lifters ravage nature and farming in Patgram



PHOTO: MUKUL HOSSAIN

Rudimentary machines pulling stones from under the water.

SHYKH SERAJ

The Kamarerhaat region of Patgram reeks of prolonged devastation of the local agrarian community caused by illegal stone lifters. The entire region faces man-made devastation. Although the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources directed that some non-mechanical machines may lift stones, hundreds of dredgers are lifting stones from beneath the soil. As a result, the whole area is now under severe threat. There are water bodies in the region but in reality those are man-made 'look-alike' ponds and go as deep as possible with endless holes, as local people say.

The depth is at least seventy to eighty feet or even more. Dredging has created mysterious holes under the water. All these lands were arable lands, but now, there are only ponds with heavy dredgers lifting stones. Locals believe anytime the community will face severe destruction, one created by man. There are allegations that at least 600 dredger machines (Boma machines) are being used for stone lifting in Lalmonirhat's Patgram upazila. I have heard that there are occasional drives from the administration to stop this rampant activity, which began in 2001. However, it was never completely stopped. Once stone lifters had to obtain legal permission from the government. Near the Patgram city from Dharla river, stone is being lifted from

under 60-70 feet. A large part of the community may suffer a landslide at any moment.

Dredgers are causing devastation of arable land. The depth of the water bodies is now seventy to eighty feet. When I arrived here, they stopped lifting stones. One dredger machine ruins about one acre of land. The stones and sands ruin another two acres. If there are two hundred machines, an approximate estimate is that six hundred acres of arable land is being ravaged. Wherever you look in Patgram, you'll see people are working with stones. Most of the people don't know the right or wrong about the stones. From over the Burimari Dharla bridge, I could notice how the community is being affected due to stone lifting. Setting a dredger machine within 100 metres of the bridge is completely forbidden but I saw machines all around. Anytime, the bridge may collapse.

Stone lifting has grabbed this agrarian community. Nature, soil and everything else is under the control of stones. Almost everywhere around the region farm labour has turned into stone-labour. Home yard, where farmers used to be busy with daily chores, now see stones crushed on the soil. Ladies, children don't know how much grief these illegally lifted stones can cause. I was travelling from one village to the other with Patgram upazila Chairman Ruhul Amin Babul. He gave us plenty of valuable

information. "We've set demands that stone lifting should be banned. Mineral resources ministry is neglecting the matter", said Ruhul. "They have given some licenses without any monitoring", he added.

I talked with some stone-labourers and asked them why they're doing it leaving farming behind. "People are very poor in this region. The local people earn some by lifting and breaking stones", said a stone labourer.

Some have already lost their land as a result of careless stone lifting. What is most alarming is very young boys, girls and elders are dying while accidentally falling into the deep water holes created by stones lifting. "Three days back, my nephew died falling into the deep water", said a local hapless man.

Meanwhile, another three or four children died the same way. This is because once they fall in the holes, the sand makes it next to impossible to escape. When the kids go for a swim, they don't realize the level of water. They don't realize that amidst shallow pool there are sudden plunges to extreme depths.

A primary school teacher, Masud Alam came to meet me when he heard I was filming in Patgram. According to him, the number of child deaths are increasing every day.

"I know about eight to ten kids who died falling into the holes."

"When?"

"All in the the past two months. Yesterday a six-year old child died this way."

Immediate measure is needed to stop this activity in order to save the local community. Not only in Lalmonirhat, but stories of stone lifting can also be heard in Nilphamari. In Doholpara, 12, East Khariabari, 15, Ektar Char, 8, Tepakharibari union, 21, Goyabari union, 13, Chhotokhata, 7 and in Baishpukur, 10, dredger machines are being operated.

Due to unplanned stone lifting in Panchagarh, every day, arable land is

decreasing. The government can't earn any revenue from this illegal lifting as the landowners are lifting from their own lands. Environmentalists fear that the worst disaster hasn't hit yet, and this activity is causing the potential disaster to build up. In Lalmonirhat, the arable land is about 111,337 hectares. Barren land is about 800 hectares and stone is being lifted from 200 hectares of land.

Some are lifting stones, some are crushing them. It's so horribly noisy all around. This illegal stone lifting has become a serious threat to people's lives and health. As if death by falling in the holes were not enough, but, to add salt to the wounds of the community, the dusts caused by crushing create a serious health hazard. Many have died so far due to the excessive inhaling of heavy dust. According to local newspapers and inhabitants, this number is around thirty. I spoke to Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) regarding this issue. "While they crush the stones, the dust that emerges from it seriously affects their lungs which eventually give birth to a disease called silicosis," says Assistant Director Syed Sultan of BILS. As per their research in Patgram alone, thirty three people have already died in this manner. This not only affects the labour, but their families are also affected severely. "The government must ensure citizens' safety," adds Syed.

Stones are mineral resources which should be used for human welfare. To lift this from beneath the soil, a scientific and sustainable method should be followed that does not create unnecessary harm of human habitat. As these are not followed at all, stone lifting has become a serious threat to public health. While protecting the farming sector and environment, government should take strict measures to stop illegal stone lifting. These measures need to be taken immediately, or else, the local community here will perish in the near future.



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".

# Makeshift market shines light on char people in Lalmonirhat

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

A makeshift market brings new opportunities to the people of the Teesta River basin Island char at Char Kalikapur village of Totmari union at Kaliganj upazila in Lalmonirhat. The market plays a significant role in making the lives of thousands of char people at Char Kalikapur, Char Sholmari, Char Totmari, Kalikapur Deep Char and Char Shalhati Nohali easier, as they get all their daily commodities at the market. However, a few years ago they had to travel six kilometers to the mainland through sandy terrain in order to visit the market.

The makeshift market was set up thanks to an NGO called Own Village Advancement (OVA)'s initiative titled "Nodi O Jibon". The project was jointly funded by CONCERNED Worldwide, Irish Aid and JOBS two years ago, since then, the people of the Island char have been using the market, which now houses around 45 different shops where the char people can have their daily needs fulfilled.

Char farmer Nazer Ali of Char Sholmari village said, "I am greatly benefitting from the market, as it plays an important role in decreasing our pain for walking six kilometers on sandy land." "We get everything from this market at the same price as the mainland market. Now the char people gather together in the market, and talk about the hardships we once suffered," he said.

Rasheda Begum, a small shopkeeper at the market said, "We sell daily commodities to char people at the same rate of the mainland market. We don't pay any tolls for

trading here, we just donate some money for the char village's education sector," she said. "Now we can strengthen our ties with our relatives if they ever visit since we get everything we need to accommodate them from the makeshift market, we couldn't do this before as we had to travel a long distance to the mainland," said char farmer Tamiz Uddin at Char Kalikapur village.

Local Union Parishad member Mobarak Ali said, the makeshift market on the Island char village plays an important role in bettering the lives of the people. "Char people also get health and education advice from the NGO OVA at the market. This has turned the market into a meeting, gathering place for the char people.

The Project Manager (PM) of NGO OVA's Nodi O Jibon project, Ohidul Islam said, they set up the market after witnessing the pain the Island char people had to go through. "We always monitor the market, and are upgrading it day by day," he added.

The PM of NGO OVA's Char Health and Education Project, Ahasanul Kanir Bulu said, they conduct special advocacy on health and education to the char people and their family members since they all gather at the market. "After our regular monitoring and advocacy, the char and Island char people are more aware about their health and education and are highly interested in educating their children," he said.

The Executive Director of NGO OVA Suzit Kumar Ghosh said his organization is working for the char people, and since then the living standards of char and Island char people has been changing on a day to day basis.



A woman selling daily commodities at her shop in the makeshift market at Kalikapur Island char village of Totmari union at Kaliganj upazila in Lalmonirhat.

PHOTO: STAR



PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh Small Tea Garden Owners Association form a human chain in Panchagarh town yesterday demanding increase of tax on tea import and ensuring fair price of locally produced tea to help expand the industry.

# Increase import tax, ensure fair price of green tea leaves

Demand stakeholders at Panchagarh rally

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

Tea farmers and owners of tea gardens and factories formed a human chain at Chowrang Intersection in Panchagarh town yesterday demanding increase of tax on imported tea for saving the country's tea industry, especially the flourishing one in Panchagarh district.

The government should ensure fair price of green tea leaves to help expand the sector, speakers said at a discussion after the human chain.

With the initiative of present Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina tea cultivation was launched in Panchagarh in 2000 and it has now emerged as the third largest tea producing district in the country, they said.

14.65 lakh kg of tea from over 62.56 lakh kg of green tea leaves last year, according to Bangladesh Tea Board officials.

"Around 3,200 acres of land in the district has been brought under tea cultivation, which include 403 small gardens, 16 medium gardens and 23 tea estates," said Amirul Islam, tea development officer of Bangladesh Tea Board (BTB) in Panchagarh.

Around 16 lakh kg of tea is expected to be produced from 72.59 lakh kg of tea leaves this year, said officials of BTB.

Panchagarh bears bright prospect for expansion of tea cultivation as there are about 16,000 hectares of land suitable for tea plantation in the district, they said.

The domestic demand of tea is about 6-6.5 crore kg.

In 2013, about 6.30 crore kg of tea was produced in the country while 66 lakh kg of tea was imported from abroad, they said, adding that tea import sees a gradual rise since the relaxation of import taxes in 2010.

Tax on imported is 130 per cent in Sri Lanka, 110 per cent in India but it is only 72 per cent in Bangladesh, said Abdul Jabbar, general secretary of Bangladesh Small Tea Garden Owners' Association.

"The price of green tea leaves is decreasing while the cultivation cost including labourer's wages is increasing day by day, much to the frustration of small farmers in the district.

"Earlier Tea Leaves' Price Fixation Committee, comprising representatives of small garden owners, the chairman and members of BTB, and the deputy com-

missioner of Panchagarh, fixed Tk 25 as the price of a kg of tea leave, and Tk 1.5 its carrying cost for the current plucking season," he said.

But small growers are deprived as Tentulia Tea Company Ltd and Green Care Agro Ltd of Tentulia, two major tea factories who purchase maximum tea leaves from, are purchasing one kg of tea leaves at Tk 18 instead of Tk 26.50, Jabbar alleged.

Law maker from Panchagarh-1 constituency Nazmul Haque Proddhan addressed the discussion, among others.

Demanding subsidy on tea cultivation for flourishing the sector, small farmers submitted memorandum to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina through Panchagarh Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Salahuddin.

# Good yield of zinc-enriched rice inspires farmers

The short duration BRRI-62 cultivated on 100 acres of land in two upazilas of Jhenidah

AZIBOR RAHMAN, Jhenidah

Newly invented zinc-enriched rice BRRI-62 sees successful cultivation in the district, thanks to the initiative of Agriculture Advisory Society and Harvest Plus Bangladesh.

Invented by Bangladesh Rice Research Institute, the short duration rice variety can be harvested within 100 days after planting and yields well if nurtured properly, researchers said.

The National Seeds Board approved commercial cultivation of the rice in

2013. BRRI-62, developed through cross pollination with local variety, has been cultivated on 100 acres of land in different areas including Kushabaria, Ghorashal, Kalalaxmipur villages under Sadar upazila, and Natopara, Talian, Dulalmundia villages under Kaliganj upazila, said sources of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Jessore.

"The paddy will help mitigate zinc deficiency in human body. The local variety contains about

9/12 miligram zinc per kg while the newly invented variety contains around 21 mg per kg. This rice helps physical and mental growth of children," said Dr Alamgir Hossain of Harvest Plus Bangladesh, also a post doctorate fellow.

The researchers claimed the paddy will play a vital role in fighting diarrhoea and pneumonia in children.

Around 250 farmers have been provided seeds and technology as well as training regarding the usefulness of zinc

enriched paddy in the current ropa-aman season, said zinc enriched cultivation technologist Harun-Rashid, chief director of Agriculture Advisory Society.

"We are happy as the new variety matures within 100 days although it does not cost more than the local variety. I have got 31 maunds of yield per bigha this season," said Mohammad Ali, a grower of this variety.

Several other farmers including Kuddus Mollah, Shamser Ali, and Omar Ali echoed the same.



PHOTO: STAR

Farmers harvest zinc-enriched paddy at a field of Kushabaria village in Jhenidah Sadar upazila a few days ago.