

Boon of orange farming in Panchagarh

Farmers of the extreme northern district produce oranges aplenty but are still in need of technical support

SHYKH SERAJ

I recently visited Bamonpara, situated in Bangladesh's extreme northern district, Panchagarh, under Panchagarh Sadar. You've heard a lot about Tetulia, which is nearby. The nature of Panchagarh is different than any other regions of Bangladesh. Farmers grow tea, orange, betel nut and other cash crops here. The Panchagarh we used to know twenty five years back has come out of poverty. Orange cultivation turned out to be a blessing for the people of this region. In today's article, I am specifically going to elaborate on the orange development project of Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

Farmers were inspired to grow orange and as a result, there are around 300 orange orchards here. You'd probably remember the time when I brought images of successful orange farmers of Moulvibazar's Juri to the limelight. Orange cultivation is spreading. As this is true, there are many stories of obstacles in the advancement of such a success. As the government project is over, the orange cultivation extension is not moving onward in the pace that it should.

The consumers also have an inclination to not buy home-grown oranges, and prefer foreign products. Government assistance is urgent to resolve many issues. Government should help farmers so that Bangladeshi oranges flood the market with pride. Likewise, we can easily disregard imported fruits since we already have home-grown varieties. It is really surprising to see orange orchards on plain lands, located in Panchagarh, situated at the extreme north of Bangladesh. It seems to us that we've mistakenly came to the orange mountains situated in Moulvibazar's Juri upazila. Here in Panchagarh, people have orange orchards in their home-yards, not in the mountains.

I met a farmer named Salahuddin. He's from Borobari and has been associated with orange cultivation for a long time. He took me to his new orange orchard.

"How many orange plants are here?"
"More than four hundred."
"What's your profession apart from farming?"
"I'm an Assistant Professor teaching at a college."
This graduate from Dhaka University's sociology department has truly devoted himself to orange cultivation.

Oranges love to grow under shades. The betel-nut is providing a lot of care to it. Even for the lotkon (Burmese grape) trees, shade is an ideal natural input. We've spotted lotkon trees growing in comfort at this region also. Khashia Paan (Betel-leaf) is climbing up the trees with ease. However, from a commercial perspective, oranges are far ahead compared to these other crops.

"There are many complaints that Bangladeshi oranges are not sweet. Is this true?" I asked Salahuddin.

"People have very little idea on Bangladeshi oranges", replied Salahuddin.

"I have around 4000 oranges here and you can taste one by yourself", he added.

I tried one and it was really juicy and very sweet indeed. Salahuddin earns Tk. 40,000 from 4,000 oranges from one single plant. This is really impressive! The orange tree seemed to be to be a money tree!

This is how orange orchards have spread across Panchagarh district- and it's like a silent revolution. Many



PHOTO: IFTEKHAR WAHID IFTEE

Shykh Seraj investigating the oranges.

people started off with the venture of orange orchards in the region, looking at its immense potential. But, at one point many doubts appeared. After intense research, DAE found the perfect rate of acid in soil; yearly rainfall and the overall climate were perfect too for oranges to grow in Panchagarh.

Then the DAE began a project focused on development of orange cultivation. The project covered districts like Panchagarh, Tangail, Mymensingh, Gazipur and Bandarban. Panchagarh ranked at the top in respect of possibilities. In 2006, a five-year project was initiated. To materialize the project, 540 farmers were trained to grow orange in Panchagarh Sadar, Tetulia, Atoari, and Boda upazilas. 4,888 orange plants were sown as part of the project's activity. Taking advantage of the technical assistance facility, more than three hundred orchards grew with high potential. However, when the project ended, farmers faced various crises. Pradhan started his orchard in 2002, four years before the government project had started. The entrepreneur informs they came close to great achievements, but now they face many difficulties.

"We got really good advices and found the right direction

from the project but now we are on our own. There is no one to guide us", said Pradhan. "They used to give a medicine called silver-mix which helped the oranges grow bigger and made them sweet. Now, farmers are not getting that facility."

"You can't buy it from the market?"

"No, it comes from abroad and we used to get it for free from the government project."

Local farmers and entrepreneurs started their orchards with high expectations. Many young people didn't hunt jobs but wanted these orange orchards to be their safe and profitable workplace. Sarwer from Katunhari village in Boda upazila is one of those young entrepreneurs.

Sarwer shared his thoughts with me.

"How many orange plants do you have here in your orchard?"

"Three hundred. I invested around Tk. 3 lakh."

"Could you make profit after this invest?"

"Yes, I'm running fully on profits."

Narayan Chandra Jha from Jatanpukuri village in Panchagarh Sadar is one of those entrepreneurs who built orange orchards during the government project. On 12

acres of land, Narayan has 300 orange trees. Most of these trees planted in 2009 are now full of juicy fruits. The green-yellowish oranges were shining on the sun. Stems were bent with the wright of lots of oranges.

Almost all the people in the region now well understand what the real essence of orange cultivation is. Many know the taste of the home-grown oranges. Narayan's orchard is really huge. He is concentrating more on oranges than any other crops planted on his 12 acres of land. He wishes for the orange development project to start again as farmers' need more technical support and agricultural inputs.

Farmers are marketing the oranges quite professionally. They pluck the oranges from the trees and directly sell it to the wholesalers. The wholesalers are also happy to sell the home-grown oranges. We spoke to the wholesalers regarding many issues.

"How do you buy from the farmers?"

"I take it on KGs."

"Not single pieces...?"

"No."

"Farmers were saying per orange price is Tk. 10."

"Yes, that is the unit price it comes to when I buy per KG. I pay them Tk. 80 per KG. There are eight oranges in one KG, sometimes nine, but on average it's mostly eight."

If the farmers had received the right advice and technical information, there could have been at least another three hundred orchards in the region. But, keeping these orchards alive has become a recent problem.

After seven years, we're hearing that risks are rising in regard to orange cultivations in Panchagarh. Doubts have spread among the farmers of Moulvibazar and Bandarban since the farmers are not getting assistance. I learned more about this from Anwar Hossain who has vast experience on orange cultivation. Few years back, he retired from his government service. "As per the regulations of the project, farmers will get support during the project, but not after it. Farmers have to learn everything when the projects are on the field. Afterwards, they'll have to solve their own problems", said Mr. Hossain. DAE has taken a new project in hand last year, known as 'Citrus Development Project'. I spoke to agriculturist Keshob Laal Dash, who doesn't agree with the crisis that Panchagarh farmers are facing. "If you call it crisis, I don't agree. It's not actually a crisis. We've just started another project which will also try to solve the problems of the past project" said Mr. Keshob. He's very hopeful that problems faced by farmers will be overcome.

I believe that the government will take immediate measures to keep the orange revolution alive in Panchagarh. There is no doubt that this Vitamin C-rich fruit has great demand and is precious in ensuring livelihoods of thousands. Round the year, the imported oranges secure most of our markets. We can easily come out of this dependence on import.



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Fortune fails to smile on Pabna farmers

Vegetable prices lower than production cost



AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR
TOPU, Pabna

Bumper yield of winter vegetables fails to make farmers in the famous vegetable producing district happy as excessive supply has led to serious price fall of the items.

A kg of radish is selling for as low as Tk one.

"I have cultivated radish on five bighas of land spending Tk 30 thousand and got over 500 maunds of yield. Usually it would earn me Tk 50 thousand but now I am uncertain about recovery of even half of the production cost due to alarming price fall in last few weeks," said Md Abdul Gani of Char Shanikdiar village in Pabna Sadar upazila.

Prices for all other vegetables have fallen too, said Md Shahidur Rahman, a vegetable wholesaler of Shahpur village.

"I have cultivated cauliflower on three bighas of land spending Tk 1.4 lakh and got 18 thousand pieces of the vegetable. Production cost per piece stood at Tk 7 but I have to sell it for Tk 5 to 6 in the wholesale market," said Montu Mondol, a farmer of Bokterpur village.

Wholesale price of a maund (40 kg) of cauliflower is Tk 200, brinjal Tk 200 to 250, bean Tk 200 to 300, turnip Tk 160 to 200, said sources of vegetable wholesale markets in the district.

Aubergines sell at Tk 5-6 a kilogram, while its production cost stands at Tk 10 per kg, said farmer

Siddiqur Rahman Moyez of Joynagar in Ishwardi upazila.

However, carrot and *piazer ful* are selling for a bit good prices -- Tk 600 to 800 per maund.

"I supplied five to six truckloads of vegetables daily during the peak of winter vegetable season last year but in this year I cannot supply more than two to three truckloads of vegetables due to the poor demand," said Md Sohrab Ali, a vegetable wholesale of Ishwardi.

Vegetable growers and traders would face huge losses this year due to the low market prices this year, he added.

Twenty-four thousand hectares of land in the district has been brought under winter vegetable cultivation and four lakh tonnes of yield is expected, said Al Shahin, development officer of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in the district.

"The district sees increased production of vegetables in recent years. The production in last five years are 2.15 lakh, 2.33 lakh 2.51 lakh, 3.31 lakh and 3.54 lakh tonnes respectively," he said.

"Due to the suitable weather farmers got bumper yield of winter vegetables this year. As the supply is more than the demand the prices saw serious fall," said Md Mostafizur Rahman, deputy director of DAE, Pabna.



PHOTO: STAR

A contractor in Galachipa upazila of Patuakhali kept construction materials on the entire playground of Purbo Pardakua Government Primary School, depriving the students of sports and games for the last six months.

Mindless act of contractor

Kids cannot play for last 6 months as construction materials occupy school ground

OUR CORRESPONDENT,
Patuakhali

A contractor has kept construction materials on the playground of a primary school in Galachipa upazila of the district, hampering sports and other physical activities of the students.

Locals said the contractor, Mahfuz Khan, owner of a construction firm named M Khan Group, has been using the entire playground of Purbo Pardakua Government Primary School for six months to keep construction materials as the firm is building a bridge on the nearby Dakua Canal.

The students cannot play games during leisure time while school authorities cannot hold assembly

before the start of classes every day.

While visiting the school recently, this correspondent saw the playground have been filled with construction materials, including bricks, stones, sands and steel rods. He also found a brick crushing machine in the southern part of the field.

Abdullah, a class four student, said the playground has remained occupied by the contractor concerned for at least six months. "We cannot play games at the leisure time due to lack of space."

When the diesel-run brick crushing machine goes on, it greatly hampers the academic activities, alleged teachers and guardians.

Bela Rani Kundu, headmistress of the school, said she repeatedly requested the contractor concerned and staff of his firm to remove the construction materials from school playground, but to no effect.

"I also informed the authorities concerned of the matter, but no step has been taken yet," she added.

Md Motiur Rahman, chairman of the school managing committee, said M Khan Group's men requested me to give them a space on the playground to keep the construction materials only for a month, but they did not remove the materials even after five months.

"I gave them permission, considering the suffering of

the local people as well as the students of the school for want of a concrete bridge on the canal".

Contacted, Galachipa Upazila Education Officer Md Mahtab Uddin said, he was not aware of the matter. "I will take necessary steps as soon as possible to recover the playground."

This correspondent could not contact contractor Mahfuz Khan as his cellphone remained switched off. One of his staff later told the correspondent over phone that they couldn't remove construction materials from the field as there was no other place in the area to keep them. "We are trying our best to complete the construction work as soon as possible," he said.

PHOTO: STAR

Ishwardi farmer Akmal Hossain's hopes were dashed when the price of radish came down to Tk 1 a kg. He is now in a dilemma whether further harvest of the vegetable would be at all wise at the moment. Similarly, farmer Moyez sells aubergine at Tk 5-6 a kg, while its production cost was Tk 10.