

Mobarak Ali shows the way

Organic farming has changed the fate of an ideal farmer of Panchagarh



Smiling Mobarak Ali with his Sex Pheromone Trap.

(SHYKH SERAJ)

Few days back I went to Panchagarh district's Devidoba village in Deviganj upazila, and was happy to come across a very progressive farmer called, Mobarak Ali. He has been extremely successful by producing crops using organic methods. The farmer is so progressive and farm-friendly; he has revolutionized his fate in just a few years. His father gave him 12 bighas of land to which he added an additional seventy-five bighas with the earning from his farm over the past two decades. He also leased around three hundred bighas of land to grow vegetables and diversified crops. Mobarak cultivates different varieties of vegetables and crops including ginger, turmeric, onions, garlic, chilies, potatoes, egg-plants, cauliflower etc.

Mainly, ginger has really helped him revolutionize his fate. You may be aware about Hridoye Mati O Manush's 'Grow Green initiative', which is about convincing farmers to produce crops using organic methods, without pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Mobarak Ali is an ideal farmer in this regard.

Farmers' cultivating their lands is quite natural. However considering the present context, he has to be a scientist, a prudent trader, sound accountant, a manager, a friend to this soil and environment, sometimes an extension worker and sometimes a guide for others. This package of skills will lead a farmer to the pinnacle of success. To hold this success, farmer needs to be perseverant, honest and good organizers. All

However, Mobarak is a bit frustrated on current market trends of agricultural goods and import policies.

"I sold ginger at Tk. 130 per kilogram. Recently, when LC from Kerala came into the market, it took the price down to Tk. 80", said Mobarak.

At Mobarak's farm, on a daily basis at least 60 male and female farm-laborers' work regularly. The women who work at his farm didn't have any jobs in this region in the past. They were mostly engaged in household work. When Mobarak's huge agro-farm started its journey, the women were employed.

Although the women are paid Tk. 150, which is a hundred taka less than what the men get, they have no complaints over this issue as they had no financial resource few days back. Now, they're financially stable with this job. The most optimistic thing is, whoever produces fresh food, makes them happier than anything.

I also spoke with another farmer who was convinced to grow crops organically. Almost all farmers in the village and in the surrounding regions are inspired by Mobarak Ali.

"As we use natural fertilizers that we make ourselves, we get healthy crops and they look really good."

"Do your crops get attacked by pests?"

"No, not much...the organic vegetables we produce here have more demand in the market."

"Do you get a higher price for the organic ones?"

"Yes, definitely."

It seems the soil talks to Mobarak Ali every day. Crops tell him what's good and what's not. If you look at his agricultural plots - you would be amazed to see green and freshness over the fields. There is not a single unhealthy plant on his lands. This is what the prime success of a farmer is all about. All this was possible through the use of integrated organic methods Mobarak used on his farmlands.

Dear readers, the key policy organizations of the world and also UN's FAO have decided that in order to

PHOTO: IFTIKHAR WAHID IFTEE

these qualities are inside one farmer - Mobarak Ali. He has created a revolution over twenty years of farming. It was a great experience talking to this legendary farmer.

"When you started farming twenty years back, how much land did you have?"

"Only twelve bighas from my father, after which I expanded it by seventy-five bighas from my profits."

"So, you're doing pretty well, I see."

"Yes, both my sons have completed their post-graduation studies and I have built three houses."

Mobarak has realized deeply that if you don't concentrate on soil health, the soil won't respond equally to farmers. He also wants to ensure people get hundred percent pure food. Food safety is what he thought to deliver. That's why he stopped using pesticides long ago and reduced the use of chemical fertilizers.

"You don't need any pesticides?"

"Not at all, sex pheromone traps (organic technology to prevent pest attack) save a lot of costs."

"Where do send your agricultural goods?"

"To Karwan Bazaar and Islampur in Dhaka. I also send some to Konabari."

Mobarak was supported by bank loans to expand his farming. At first he wasn't really capable. But now, he's a big farmer of the region.

"I received bank loans at a 4% interest."

"This helps you a lot, right?"

"Very much so! I could develop more and it was fast."

ensure food security, family farming is becoming more and more indispensable. Mobarak Ali is certainly a success regarding this. When most land-owners are giving away their farmlands to sharecroppers and settling in cities, Mobarak is truly an exception, as he sticks to his roots firmly. Every year, he is expanding lands with the profits he makes. He educated and appointed his sons as farmers. I was lucky to meet his sons, Hamidul Islam and Hamidar Rahman.

"I have completed MBA from a private university. I didn't look for any job and now am a full-time farmer, working with my dad", said Hamidul.

"Why do you think organic farming is important for Bangladesh?"

"We aim at producing healthy food for the people of Bangladesh. That's why we use organic fertilizers. We don't use chemical fertilizers or pesticides."

The arable lands of Mobarak are like a learning centre for other farmers. Your eyes will be comforted looking at the fresh crops. You would definitely love to know how he made these crops look so fresh and healthy. Many farmers gather around Mobarak's plots'. He is a great analyzer. He believes if farmers are brought back to organic farming people will stay healthy, we'll be healthy. Most importantly farmers would be able to save a lot of money.

SAAO (Sub-Assistant Agriculture Officer) Abdul Majid is also doing a great job in assisting farmers in the region and enlightens them about organic farming. I feel if any region in the country has one ideal farmer and a dedicated SAAO, the entire region will develop in farming sector for sure.

Dear readers, almost all across Bangladesh, issues like saving soil health, growing organic food and cutting down production are inevitable. It is time to 'Grow Green' and we must revive the soil quality fast or else in near future, with excessive use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, the quality will be gone - that is one of the biggest threats that we face.

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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".

Char teachers' struggle with daily commute

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

220 teachers from 50 government primary schools at Teesta and Dharla rivers basin's different char and island char villages in Lalmonirhat are engaged in a constant struggle to teach their students. All teachers live on the mainland, but have to travel 5 to 7 kilometres every day. The teachers demand more pay for their strenuous conveyance as they are paid the same amount as primary school teachers in the mainland.

Hatibandha upazila's Char Holdibari Government Primary School's headmaster Shamim Kabir Patwary said, "I have to travel 5 kilometres on foot through sandy char terrain from my house to get to my school. Sometimes I am forced to wade through the Teesta River on foot if I can't find a boat," and added that he has to leave his house 3 hours before school starts to get there on time.

"My school is about 7 kilometres from my home, and I too have to walk across the river through sandy char land on foot," said Gargi Rani Roy, a teacher of Teesta River basin char Paschim Holdibari Government Primary School.

"I get tired after the long walk through the sandy land, as my school is also seven kilometres from my residence. I have to cross two branches of the Teesta River via boats that charge Tk. 5 for each trip, and two other branches on foot," said Merina Parvin a

teacher of the same school.

"We carry extra clothes daily, as we need to change at school after walking through the sandy char land. We come out of our homes early in the morning, and return in the evening. We struggle more than we should to teach char students, but we never get extra allowances from the government," said Haider Ali, a teacher from the Char Holdibari Government Primary School of Hatibandha upazila.

Moktar Hossain Khokon, headmaster of Island Char Kalikapur Government Primary School of Kaliganj upazila said he and four other teachers of the school come from the mainland after crossing around six kilometres of sandy char and three branches of the Teesta River every day but never get anything extra. "I become tired and hopeless after going through the sandy char and river water," he said.

The District Primary Education office sources said, there are 12,000 char children who get primary educational facilities at 50 government primary schools located at different char and island char villages of the Teesta and Dharla Rivers shoals in Lalmonirhat.

Feeling a necessity to provide char allowance for teachers working at the abovementioned schools, the District Primary Education Officer (DPEO) Nabez Uddin said he would submit their demand to the concerned authorities.

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Teachers in char areas cross the Teesta River on foot, at the Teesta River basin char village of Parulia under the Hatibandha upazila in Lalmonirhat.

PHOTO: STAR



Vehicles ply with the headlights on during the daytime yesterday as dense fog obscures the sun in a northern districts that see biting cold during the ongoing winter. The photo was taken from Thakurgaon-Phulbari road at Bottola in Dinajpur Sadar upazila.

PHOTO: STAR

7 JMB suspects held in Mymensingh

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Police in separate drives arrested seven suspected activists of the banned Islamic militant outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) from Phulbaria and Muktagachha upazilas on Monday.

The arrestees were identified as Abdul Berek Munshi, 45, teacher of Jorbaria Balika Dakhil Madrasa, Touhiduzzamn Chowdhury, 27, son of Nur Ahmmad Chowdhury of Radhakanai village, Abdul Hannan, 26, son of Shahabuddin of Echail Khamar Char village, Mohammad Twel, son of

Abdul Kashem of Tukkir Par village, and Tazamul Haque, 45, son of Hafez Ali of Chawk Radhakanai village in Phulbaria upazila.

Police also arrested Garib Ullah, 50, and Mohammad Ali, 45, from Muktagachha upazila.

The law enforcers conducted special drives in different areas of the upazilas and arrested them, said police.

They were taken to respective police stations for interrogation and then produced before a court seeking a seven-day remand.

However, no hearing was held on the day and the arrestees were sent to

jail.

Meanwhile, police arrested a suspected militant from in front of Jessore Medical College Hospital in Jessore district town on Monday night, reports UNB.

The arrestee was identified as Abu Sayeed Bipul, son of late Abu Zafar of Ghop area of the town.

Police said, on a tip-off, a team of police raided Bipul's medicine shop 'Bipul Drug House' in the area and arrested Bipul at about 10:00pm.

Police also recovered some anti-government leaflets from the shop.

The arrestee was wanted in several cases, said police.

Man killed in mud collapse

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A worker was killed in a mud collapse under Sadar upazila of the district on Monday afternoon.

The deceased is Abul Bashar, 40, son of Bashir Uddin of Palashbari village in Biral upazila.

Police said Bashar along with other labourers were busy digging a place in Balubari area at 5:30pm.

On completion of the work, when Bashar was coming out from the hole, a pile of earth suddenly collapsed on him.

The fire fighters rescued the victim and took him to Dinajpur Medical College Hospital where the on duty doctors declared him dead, said O C A T M Khalekuzzaman of Dinajpur Sadar Police Station.

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Khowai dying due to random encroachment, pollution

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar, back from Habiganj

The Khowai River flowing beside Habiganj town has turned into a narrow stream containing polluted water, thanks to mindless encroachment and dumping of human wastes.

The situation causes manifold problems concerning navigability, irrigation, ecology and environment.

"During my childhood, the Khowai was 250 to 300 feet wide and 25 to 40 feet deep," said Nil Chandra Das, 85, an inhabitant of Rampur village near the river.

Several canals once connecting the river with Machulia, Rampur and Sultanpur areas are now extinct, said a few elderly people of the area.

During this correspondent's visit to the riverbank at Rampur on December 3, several farmers, mostly marginal and landless ones, said the river contains very little water in the dry season and so, they face problem in cultivating crops.

They have urged excava-



Once profusely flowing Khowai River beside Habiganj town at places appears as a stagnant narrow stream.

PHOTO: STAR

tion of the riverbed and construction of sluice gates to facilitate irrigation.

"Due to irrigation problem, boro farmers in the nearby villages have switched to vegetable cultivation but it is also hampered in the dry session due to lack of water," said advocate Alauddin Talukdar, conveyor of Puraton Khowai Nodi Rokkha Committee.

With less availability of fish in the river, many fishermen, boatmen and other people, who were once dependent on the river, have changed profession. Pollution in the narrowed down river has taken a serious turn as chemical wastes from small industries, on or near the banks of Khowai River, are left there.

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The bank of the Khowai River has turned into a large garbage dumping ground, thanks to the callousness of town dwellers and negligence of the authorities concerned.

PHOTO: STAR