

# Growth of imports shake tea gardens of northern Bangladesh

## Tea cultivation growing rapidly, but facing falling market prices

SHYKH SERAJ

When people think of tea gardens, they immediately think of Sylhet or Chittagong. But these are not the only districts which are producing tea in Bangladesh. The extreme northern districts, Tetulia and Bediaganj to be exact have joined in. They have been cultivating tea on plain lands since 2000. But its history in the areas dates back to 1996. Five officials from Sylhet's Srimangal Tea Board came here on a visit and found a forest plant called 'Phutki'. The fact that this land could grow 'Phutki' was an indicator of potential of tea cultivation. Today, I'll tell you the story of tea-farmers of the north, their livelihood and how they are making a living from tea cultivation.

If you look at the tea gardens, you won't believe that you are looking at the northern part of Bangladesh. The northern districts are usually regarded to as the region of hunger, poverty and munga (extreme poverty). The sight of tea gardens are contrary to that impression. People never thought that tea could ever be an agricultural product here and tea was only used as raw material for the industrial goods. But now it's a hub for the investments from big industrialists and has huge commercial potential. Farmers were involved with the sector just to give their labour. Sylhet tea gardens have established this idea for the past 180 years. However, in Panchagarh, the notions have changed dramatically.

During 2005, many people started getting involved in tea cultivation, nurseries and its related industries. Like the tea-hillocks of Sylhet, here in Tetulia, you can smell the pure and fresh tea leaves in the very air you breathe. People here used to grow vegetables and mostly potatoes in the past. Now, all the lands have been converted into tea gardens.

During the past twelve years, the people of this region have seen a positive change. Like the green tea leaves, farmers' dream are also becoming broader and bigger. They didn't really think through the subtleties of com-



Tea tree leaves being processed.

PHOTO: HRIDOYE MATI O MANUSH

merce agriculture properly. So, those who have a small piece of land started their very own small tea plot. Now, the whole region is filled with green. At the moment, there are around 500 tea-farmers in Panchagarh. Farmers in Thakurgaon and Lalmonirhat nearby have also started tea cultivation. Overall, the total number of tea farmers in the region is around 600, who are cultivating tea on around 5000 acres of land in the region. Large part of this land belongs to the farmers.

I spoke to Abdul Jabbar, a farmer from Panchagarh's Podiaganj who converted his vegetable lands to tea farming plots.

"Why did you feel the interest to cultivate tea?"  
"Everyone said tea cultivation will be more profitable. It's also very easy to cultivate. But the profits are as expected."

"Why?"  
"I'm not getting the fair price for the tea-leaves. There is too much import. The price used to be Tk. 26.50 per kg, which has come down to Tk. 20.

Also, the factory owners want 40% for free."

Statistics tell us in 2013, Panchagarh has produced 1.64 million KGs of quality fine tea. During 2014, the district had a target of 1.7 million KGs and in 2015 the target is to reach more than 1.9 million KGs. I attended a discussion among tea farmers and factories to understand the core problems.

"Tea is being imported from India, Vietnam and Kenya at a very low price. That's why farmers can't sell the tea for a good price at the auction", says a local farmer.

"When farmers take the tea leaves to the factories, before unloading they tell the farmers if they give them 40%

for free, only then factories will buy from farmers. There is no second place where we can take these", says another farmer.

"What is the reason?"  
"They say there is water in the leaves, and it's poor in quality. The factory owners feel that they don't need as much anymore, then they talk about the 40% cut to discourage the sellers."

"The main reason behind this is the three factories are already closed. So, it's kind of an overload for the remaining factories and farmers can't preserve the leaves so they get ruined. Some are sending their leaves to Tetulia," says a factory owner.

The gist of the discussion was although Bangladesh achieved

remarkable tea production over the past twenty-five years, commercial success is not as high as people may think. During the 90s, Bangladesh was the fifth largest exporter of tea. However, the country has lost that dignity. Now, we import tea from abroad. Against a demand of 61 million KGs, Bangladesh already produces 63 million KGs of tea. But local producers are not being protected from imports. During 2010, the country used to import 2.9 million KGs of tea, which has soared up to 10 million KGs in 2013.

"Import duty was 92% on the cost price. Over this, there was a supplementary duty of about 20%. All of a sudden, government had taken off the 20% duty. Later on the import duty came down to 72%. In India, the duty is 110% and in Sri Lanka, its 130%. High imports are ruining local tea cultivations", says another tea farmer.

The discussion clearly indicated that Bangladesh is importing tea quite unnecessarily. At the auction market, the tea price is poor. Thirdly, there is now agricultural credit facility for tea farmers.

To investigate why farmers get unfair price, I went to visit Tetulia Tea Company Limited to talk with the company manager, Mizanur Rahman.

"Why you are giving farmers a low price?"  
"The quality of the leaves is not good."

"Can't you train them to produce better quality?"  
"We're trying our best."

Bangladesh used to export tea a few years back. That same Bangladesh is now importing tea. There is logic of import when there is lack of produce. But when the country has sufficient local produce, there is a need to discourage imports. The government should forecast the impact of changing tariff on certain products and realize the economic benefits of increasing tariff on tea imports. They must work to ensure that the local production and industries survive.

What'll be the future of the progressive tea sector of the extreme northern

district of Bangladesh? Will there be no light for the hardworking tea farmers, labourers and factory owners here? This is where the survival of our significant cash crop comes in front of doubts and dilemmas. I had the opportunity to bring this issue to Tofail Ahmed, the Honourable Commerce Minister.

"As per the rule of WTO, we can't completely shut down imports. We discourage import by only putting supplementary duty over it", he said. "As the Commerce Minister my duty is to make sure that people can buy what they need regularly. If we increase the supplementary duty and close the import, then people will have to pay a high price for tea. We have to take realistic measures considering both the parties- producers and consumers", adds Tofail Ahmed.

I firmly believe the Ministry of Commerce will take the right initiative to ensure that tea production sector becomes sustainable. If imports cannot be reduced, perhaps there need to be measures to ensure that local producers can produce at a lower cost, enabling them to better compete with cheaper imports. A government processing centre and a proper mechanism of getting fair price is important. In the age of globalization and open market economy, producers and relevant stakeholders are exposed to changes in the global scenario. There is no denying that over time, each country needs to become more and more open to the world economy in order to keep growing - but this cannot come at the cost of farmers losing their income. In the end, the commercial future of Bangladesh is slowly being driven more and more by foreign forces, such as imports. Local competitiveness needs to be ensured to shift the power back to local producers. The government must look intensely into these vital issues immediately. Or else, similar to the fate of the sugar industry, the bicentennial heritage of tea cultivation of Bangladesh will fade away gradually in days to come.

# Flower growers in trouble as prices fall due to blockade

AZIBOR RAHMAN, Jhenidah

Hundreds of flower growers in the district are now worried about the recovery of their production cost, let alone profit, as prices of the perishable item see drastic fall due to transport problem amid the countrywide blockade enforced by the BNP-led 20-party alliance.

Visiting Baliadanga flower market in Kaliganj upazila of the district on Sunday, this correspondent saw a good number of flower growers and sellers passing idle time as

there are only a few wholesale flower buyers and they too are purchasing less than before in fear of loss due to the political agitation.

Around 2700 farmers of Jhenidah district cultivated flower on 265 hectares of land this year, said sources of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE).

"Flower cultivation on 10 decimals of land brought me profit of Tk 60 thousand last year. With the hope of getting more profit I cultivated flower on

one bigha this year but now I am facing loss due to the blockade," said Rabin Kumar, 70, of Baliadanga village.

"Early this season I sold flower for Tk 180/200 per jhopa (comprising 800 flowers). But now the price has fallen to Tk 30/40. It costs around Tk 40 to prepare a jhopa," he said.

Abdul Aziz, a flower grower of Chakla village, said he got profit of Tk 40 thousand last year. With this season he would incur loss if the blockade

continues.

Many other flower growers expressed similar opinion.

Flower trader Hashem Ali and Shamim Hossain said they purchased a jhopa for Tk 180/200 before the blockade but now they are buying the same for Tk 30/40 as the business suffers a setback due to the transport problem.

Akramul Haque, deputy director of DAE in Jhenidah, said the countrywide blockade is badly affecting flower business in the district.

# Criminals vandalise 70 idols in Faridpur

UNB, Faridpur

Unidentified criminals vandalised at least 70 idols of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, at Palpara village in Sadar upazila of the district early yesterday.

Police said Sukumar Chandra Paul and his brother Pradip Chandra Paul of the village recently made the idol to supply to different puja mandaps in the district.

When they went to their workshop at the village in the morning, they found the idols lying damaged and informed the police.

On information, Upazila Nirbahi Officer Jahirul Haque, Additional Superintendent of Police Bijoy Basak and Officer in-Charge of Sadar Police Station Syed Mohsinul Haque visited the spot.

Police quoted Sukumar as saying that at least 150 newly-made idols were kept at the workshop. No one was arrested in connection with the incident as of 5:00pm yesterday.

Law enforcers have already launched a drive to arrest the criminals involved in vandalising the idols, the ASP said.

# Abductor gets life

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

A court yesterday sentenced a man to life imprisonment for abducting a madrasa girl at Uttar Sindurna village of Hatibandha upazila in 2008.

The convict is Rezaul Karim alias Ezazul, 45, son of Monir Uddin of Uttar Sindurna village.

Judge Md Zakir Hossain of Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal also fined Rezaul Tk 50,000, in default he is to suffer another three months in jail.

PP Akmol Hossain said Rezaul abducted the girl on September 8 in 2008. Police rescued her from Dhaka after eight months.



PHOTO: STAR

Doctors at Dharampasha upazila health complex in Sunamganj district have to undergo serious work pressure as the number of children with cold-related diseases has increased during last several days.

# COLD-RELATED DISEASES

# Affected children crowd hospital in Sunamganj

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Over 500 children affected with pneumonia, cold diarrhoea and other cold related diseases have been admitted to Dharampasha Upazila Health Complex in Sunamganj district in the last two weeks.

Everyday 45 to 50 children affected with pneumonia and diarrhoea took treatment from the hospital during the period, said Dr Sanuar Hosain Khan, resident medical officer of the health complex.

Besides, more than 200 patients are receiving treatment at the outdoor everyday. Most of them are suffering from respiratory prob-

lem, said Dr Md Monwarul Islam, health and family planning officer of the hospital.

The number of child patients with pneumonia, diarrhoea and other cold related diseases sees a sharp rise as the children are most vulnerable due to fluctuation of temperature during the last couple of weeks.

"I admitted my pneumonia-affected two and a half month-old son to the hospital on Sunday morning. We are staying on the floor due to shortage of space in the children's ward," said Shamsun Nahar of Masimpur village.

Joba Khanom, senior nurse of the hospital,

said many kids are staying on a space beside the staircase. "Despite the pressure, we are trying our best to tackle the situation," she said.

Dr Sanuar Hosain Khan said, there is no child specialist at the upazila level. Fluctuation of temperature between days and nights causes bronchitis, pneumonia, diarrhoea and other illnesses."

"Children are more vulnerable to these infections because their immune system is weak. If the patients come to hospital in time it is easy to give treatment. The situation is likely to improve within two or three weeks as the weather is becoming normal," he said.



PHOTO: STAR

Flower trader Jahir Hossain looks worried as the wholesale flower market at Baliadanga in Kaliganj upazila under Jhenidah district sees very few customers due to transport problem amid the ongoing countrywide blockade enforced by BNP-led 20-party alliance. The photo was taken on Monday.