

Keeping the tradition of Pata molasses alive



Shykh Seraj inspecting sugarcane juice boiling in the tray

SHYKH SERAJ

A few days back, I went to Gayeshpur village, situated at Muktagachha upzila's Dullah union in Mymensingh district. In four unions of Muktagachha, among eleven farmers grow sugarcane in massive numbers. The main crop here is sugarcane, which takes a year to produce. They also cultivate boro rice in the low lying lands. As there is no sugar mill here, farmers produce gur (molasses) from sugarcane.

In Kushtia, Jessore, Narail and other districts, farmers used to make pata gur. But, this tradition has been over time. In Dullah union's villages, including Gayeshpur, farmers carry the age-old tradition of pata gur. In recent times, they cannot make profit from gur and sugarcane is a long-term crop. As the profits have decreased, farmers are stepping away from sugarcane farming. The sugarcane lands are now replaced by cassava, baukul (bau-plum). Due to absence of irrigation facility, farmers are moving away from sugarcane farming. They're also growing strawberries here nowadays. Today, I will tell you the story about farmers who make pata gur.

In Ramakana village of Dullah union,

I saw farmers extracting juice from sugarcane and then boiling it. This busy schedule during the early dawn is a common practice here. Outside Dullah union, there is no one producing molasses like this anywhere nearby. In this season, under this union, there are 22 open-yards (Khola) for making molasses. All the makers of molasses come from Jessore, Kushtia and Sirajganj districts. They are responsible for necessary tools and production of molasses. They charge Tk. 12 per KG under a contract with the farmers and the rest of the profit goes to the sugarcane farmers. Although this is a tradition of the region, the sad news is the production process is not entirely pure and healthy. Observing a farmer boiling juice, I noticed some dangerous elements being mixed with the molasses.

"Why is the colour like this?"

"It's white... as you can see."

"What do you mix in it to make it white?"

"Hydros...soda."

"Why do you mix hydros?"

"To make the boiling more effective."

Farmers say they can't make profit like they used to make in the past.

"We can't make good profits from gur business like we used to."

"Where is the main costs you think?"

"Hydros and soda prices are really high along with high labourer costs."

"Per KG price of gur in the market is Tk. 32.50. If it's above Tk. 40, we can make some profit."

Are they mixing these unsafe elements just for profit? There is no answer to this. There is no one who has tried to inform the farmers regarding this so far. This process carries on as the farmers barely know about the fatal impact of this on public health. While we were in conversation, the juice boiling was complete. Now they'll proceed to pouring the molasses into a wood frame.

From 216 KGs of juice, farmers make 45 KGs of pata gur. From 13.5 half tins of juice, they get one korai (tray). Each tin weigh 16 KGs. In each korai they get 45 KGs of gur. Shah Ali came from Sirajganj with all his extraction equipments under contract. I had a quick chat with him.

"Four people get Tk. 32,000 as monthly salary. We need one litre petrol for boiling the juice in one korai. Each tray costs Tk. 3,000 and we have three trays which cost Tk. 9,000. We have to pay a truck rent of Tk. 2,000. I can earn a profit of about Tk. 500."

"From one tray?"

"No, from one day."

I can remember a farmer from Manikganj's Singair who never used chemicals in making molasses. He used the extracted sticky juice from a plant, instead of hydros. That juice makes the gur hygienic. These technologies must be spread across the country in order to protect the consumers. I reached another khola at Gayeshpur village in Dullah union. Perhaps many of you know this khola or the entire arrangement of making gur is locally known as, 'Gaachh'. Farmers were busy in making gur here. I spoke with the farmers and producers of gur in Gayeshpur.

"Last season, per KG price was between Tk. 35 to Tk. 42. Now it has fallen," said a farmer. "The production cost is all the same but we can't make

profits," said another.

Many farmers of this region have stepped out of sugarcane farming. Many have started alternative crops in single crop lands. Alauddin has built baukul, mango and litchi orchards in most of his lands. He's now making more profit from other crops by decreasing dependence on sugarcane.

"I used to produce sugarcane, mustard seed and other crops."

"Why did you leave sugarcane farming?"

"The price we get is really low. That doesn't go with my high production cost."

Dear readers, I found two realities. Farmers are not following healthy rules for making traditional pata gur from sugarcane juice. And, many farmers have left sugarcane farming as they can't make profit these days. These farmers have started doing alternative crops and high-value crops on their single crop land.

First of all, farmers and traders say the customers and market want white gur that's why they're forced to mix hydros, soda, dalda and fertilizer. If you don't mix anything in the gur, the colour will turn red. White gur is almost always mixed with chemicals and those are unhealthy. This is really harmful to health. The urban customers should know about this before the farmers. Public campaigns, backed by public and private initiatives, should be run to raise awareness on these issues.

Secondly, in the face of low price in the market, farmers are stepping away from the long-term crop, sugarcane. The locals believe, by the next five years or so, there will be no sugarcane farming in this region. Vegetables and high-value crops will take the place of sugarcane. Considering the need for farmers to make a profit to maintain their livelihood, this thinking might be inevitable and must be applied in this region so that farmers can have a better and sustainable life in future.



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107 Year Old Taramoni Das struggles to survive

Earns Tk 45 a day from bamboo handicrafts

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat



Taramoni Dash, a 107 year old widow of village Baishsho Para in Mohishkhocha union of Aditmari upazila in Lalmonirhat, is struggling for her daily bread at the age of 107. She has been preparing different kinds of handicraft items with bamboo since she was a teenager. She works hard toil in her hut from morning to nightfall everyday producing baskets, dali, kula (winnowing tray), sieve and others, which brings her Tk 40 to 45 income a day. Some years back, she earned Tk 80 to Tk 100 per day but her present income is not sufficient to cope with the increasing costs of the family. Her income has fallen mainly because of increase in bamboo price. She often has to pass days half fed, if at all. Taramoni Das got married to Tarok Chandra Das, of Baishsho Para village at Mohishkhocha union of Aditmari in 1923 when she was 16. She had used learnt to make things out of bamboo at her parents' house at Kathal Bari village of Kurigram. After marriage, she continued the job to help her husband. She became mother of five daughters and one son. Taramoni lost her husband Tarok Chandra 18 years ago and since then she has been bearing the burden of the family. The family, consisting of her son Moni Das, 90, his wife Biso Bala Das, 82, and her grandson Bisso Nath Das, 57, with his wife Bul Buli Das, 47, live at the hut at Baishsho Para.

Taramoni Das said, "I look after the family as my grandson stays abroad for work. My income from bamboo made things is too little to meet the needs of the family." "Mostly we can't afford good fish, meat or milk," she added. Biso Bala Das said, "I've grown old. I can't work hard, but my mother-in-law can. I suffer from different diseases but she doesn't. She can still walk like a young girl. I have never seen idleness in her." Bulbuli Das, wife of Taramoni Das's grandson, said, "People come to the house to know

about her. Sometimes, school and college going students who come here say that Taramoni Das is example to the women who are struggling to live. Taramoni Das receives only Tk 200 as old age allowance per month from the government. "I get only Tk 200 old age allowance every month. I don't get any other relief or allocation from the Union Parishad office. Nor do I approach the chairman or any member for relief. I just prefer working than extending hand for help. I wish to work till the last day of my life." Taramoni Das said. She built a tin-shade hut with Tk 10,000 she saved from the old age allowance in the last four years, but she could not afford fencing around it. She and all other family members are okay in the dry season, but face problems during rainy days.

"I know many aged persons like go begging and they earn over a hundred takas every day, but I dislike begging. Begging is the curse of life. I work in my hut, I earn little but I am at peace with myself," she said. "Local Dhani Chandra Das said that Taramoni, the oldest woman in the locality, could peacefully survive in her last days if the government or the well-off people came to her aid.

Mili Begum, The Executive Director of Jago Nari Unnayan Sangstha, a Women Based NGO at Aditmari upazila, said that she personally visited Taramoni Das several times. Woman members of her organization always visit Taramoni Das and talk with her about how she is surviving. The Mohishkhocha UP Chairman Mosaddek Hossain Chowdhury said that he is newly elected UP chairman in the union and will use the right opportunity to try and help Taramoni Das.

Completed rubber dam unutilised for months

The dam is still inoperative as dredging, erosion prevention work stalled due to lack of fund

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

A 30-metre-long rubber dam constructed over the Ratnai River at Shalmara village of Bhelabari union in Aditmari upazila under the district has remained inoperative, depriving local farmers of irrigation facilities during the ongoing Irriboro season.

The 30-metre rubber dam over the Ratnai River was constructed at a cost of Tk 4 crore last year but its operation is delayed as the work for river dredging, erosion

prevention and approach road are yet to start due to fund constraints, said officials of Local Government Engineering Department (LGED).

Besides providing irrigation facilities to around 5,000 bighas of land at six villages, the rubber dam would help prevent erosion by the river in the area.

"Our hope for getting irrigation water to cultivate IRRI-boro paddy on our lands from early this year has remained unmet," said Ashraf Ali, a farmer of

Shalmara village. The instruments of the rubber dam are getting damaged due to delay in its operation, he added.

Zahir Ali of Durakuti village alleged that low quality materials were used for the rubber dam.

Abdul Hakim, contractor of the project, said, "I completed the construction of the rubber dam as per schedule and handed it over to LGED in August last year. I have not started work for approach road, dredging, and erosion prevention work as the authorities concerned did not sanction fund for the purpose."

Contacted, Executive Engineer of LGED in Lalmonirhat Mohammad Al-Amin said, "Additional fund for the dredging, approach road, and protection work will be sanctioned very soon and the rubber dam will hopefully see full operation by June this year."

He refuted the allegation of using low quality materials for the project work.



PHOTO: STAR

Completed last year, this rubber dam in Ratnai River at Shalmara village in Aditmari upazila under Lalmonirhat district remains a mockery for the beneficiaries as it is yet to be functional due to lack of dredging in the river.

Ruling party man shot dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole, Jessore

Criminals shot a local Bastuhara League leader dead on Khaldhar Road in Jessore district town yesterday afternoon.

The dead is Manjur Hossain, 40, vice president of Fatepur union unit of Bastuhara League, landless people's wing of the ruling Awami League (AL) party, and son of Yusuf Ali Biswas of Hamidpur on the outskirts of the town, said Jasim Uddin, president of Fatepur union unit of AL.

Shikder Akkas Ali, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station, said a gang of three riding a motorbike opened fire on Manjur in the area at 3:45pm, leaving him critically injured when he was going home by an easy bike.

He was rushed to Jessore Medical College Hospital where the on-duty doctor declared him dead, said the OC.

None was arrested in this connection.

Man shot dead in Natore

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Natore

Unidentified criminals shot a man to death at Bahimali village in Baraigram upazila of the district on Monday night.

The deceased was identified as Motaleb Sheikh, 52, of the village.

Habibur Rahman, in-charge at Bonpara police investigation centre, said a gang of 3/4 unidentified youths called Motaleb out of his home around 1:00am.

As Motaleb came out of his house they shot him and fled the scene, leaving him dead.

Victim's wife Monju Ara lodged a murder case with Baraigram PS yesterday.

Way in Sadar upazila, police recovered the body of Saiful Islam, 18, son of Sajedul Islam, from Paikerdol area yesterday.



PHOTO: STAR

This monitor lizard (locally called guisap) seized by locals at Gurabhui village in Kulaura upazila under Moulvibazar district on Sunday, was later released to the wild by forest officials.

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(মোঃ রইছউল আলম মুন্সার)
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