

Reclaiming the golden fibre: the revival of jute

SHYKH SERAJ

Jute, the golden fibre, was historically the great pride of Bangladesh. Then, due to several factors including increased use of artificial fibres and low jute prices farmers found less incentive to grow jute. Many jute mills were forced to close, with jute production on the verge of extinction. However, in more recent years appreciation for the crop at home and abroad has risen, to the point where a welcome jute revival is well underway. And by the time jute was returning to economic favour, Bangladesh had already discovered its genome sequence.

Another factor that has helped jute growers participate in growing demand for jute in contemporary times has been the development of a new technology, 'ribbon rating.' Whereas traditionally the necessary jute rotting processes relied on soaking in canals and ponds, nowadays many waterways have been filled, leaving jute farmers in quite a conundrum. In not requiring canal or pond, ribbon rating provides a useful alternative.

At the same time, there are serious efforts to promote demand for jute at the consumer level, including making it more export-attractive. Farmers too have responded to such efforts, eager to join the jute revival. But they are yet looking forward to fair prices for their crop.

Oddly however, markets in key jute producing districts like Magura, Faridpur and Chapainawabganj are full of Indian jute seeds.

"It is true many jute seeds come from India," says deputy director of the Bangladesh Jute Research Institute Dr. Md. Kamal Uddin, "but the strength of Indian jute fibre is deficient. The fibre can become brittle while spinning and the wastage is higher. Local farmers do not understand these differences."

One reason farmers don't understand is because Indian jute seeds provide a larger harvest. "We can harvest more than 10 maunds of jute per pakhi of land with Indian seeds," says one farmer from Faridpur. "With local jute seeds we can expect about 7 maunds."

Farmers have also noticed that using the same seeds over a long period results in reduced harvests.

Another factor influencing the preference for Indian seeds is as simple as availability. "What can we do if nothing else is available?" questions one farmer. In Magura up to 80% of jute seeds in the market are

Indian seeds, with supplies of local seeds from the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC), including of the white, tossa, belon and mesta varieties, unable to meet demand.

According to BADC estimates, yearly demand for jute seeds is approximately 5,500 tonnes; while national production stands at a little over 1,100 tonnes. Thus the dependency of Bangladesh on imported seeds is quite large.

"We say our jute is excellent," says State Minister Mirza Azam, "which implies it is superior to Indian jute. But we still bring seeds from India to produce jute here."

Initiatives to reduce this import dependency are underway, the minister adds.

In the meantime an inter-ministry convention may improve the situation for participant jute growers. From the next season, farmers will be offered training, financial help and agriculture inputs. "We will help them expand their jute production," says the minister.

Farmers meanwhile believe that if the two issues of seed availability and fair prices for produce are properly addressed by the government, production of the golden fibre will continue to rise, to reach even greater potential.



PHOTO: STAR

With rising consumers and export demand for jute, farmers in key jute growing districts like Faridpur, Magura and Chapainawabganj are keen to grow jute, but face a shortage of food local jute seeds and disadvantageous selling rates.



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KUSHTIA'S LIPU MURDER

A still-grieving family's hope for justice

AMANUR AMAN with ANDREW EAGLE

To see a father look at photographs of his son will most often be to detect a range of happy emotions: love, joy and pride. But in the home of the assistant general manager of Agrani Bank for Kushtia zone, Wahedul Islam, in the house in Kushtia's Thanapara, to see father look at photos of his son will bring tears to the eye. For the last two years photographs are all Islam has seen of Lipu, since his son was murdered.

"It was hard for me to lose my only son in that sort of a way," Islam says.

Touhidul Islam Lipu was a second-year computer engineering student at North South University when he was abducted. He had returned home to Kushtia on vacation just the day before the family's nightmare began.

On the evening of 31 August 2014 Lipu was called out of his home by his father's cousin Zuhaim Khondokar Shuvo and Raqibul Islam Bappi, Shuvo's friend, who have since confessed to the abduction and murder.

The duo took Lipu to Pabna's Ishwardi, 40 kilometres from Kushtia town, and confined him in a house. They contacted Lipu's father with a demand of Tk 10 lakhs in ransom, threatening to kill Lipu if the money was not paid.

"I wanted to pay them. I just wanted to bring my son back to my lap," Islam says,

"but ultimately they killed him."

It is two years later and the trial, against not only these two but 16 others who remain at large, is now underway.

"We want justice," says Lipu's mother Samsunnahar Lili, a teacher of Kushtia Government Girls High School.

Lipu's only sister, Farzana Mim, now a genetic engineering student at Dhaka University, agrees. The family wants Lipu's killers either to hang or to spend the rest of their lives behind bars.

According to the charge sheet the initial plan was to release Lipu upon ransom payment but Shuvo was worried Lipu had recognised him. The kidnapers decided to kill Lipu to mitigate the risk that all would face trial should Shuvo's identity be compromised.

On 1 September 2014 they took Lipu to the bank of the Padma River, where he was strangled to death before the killers slashed his abdomen and dumped his body in the river.

On 13 September 2014 a Rapid Action Battalion team arrested Shuvo and Bappi, and the two confessed. But, released into the Padma's arms, Lipu's body was never recovered.

With the case subsequently handed to Kushtia's Detective Branch the charge sheet naming Shuvo and Bappi as masterminds was submitted

before a magistrate on 1 August 2015. The court ordered confiscation of the properties of the two prime accused.

"We are looking for all the others involved in the killing," says Kushtia's additional superintendent of police Zoynal Abedin. It's small consolation for Lipu's family.

Lipu's Thanapara bedroom largely remains as it

was left. The room could almost be that of any son except for the sombre mood that seems to have seeped into its walls, except for the more-than-usual number of photographs on display. But these are things that can happen to a room, when a loved one is taken too soon and in such a horrible way, when photographs are all that is left to be seen of a son.

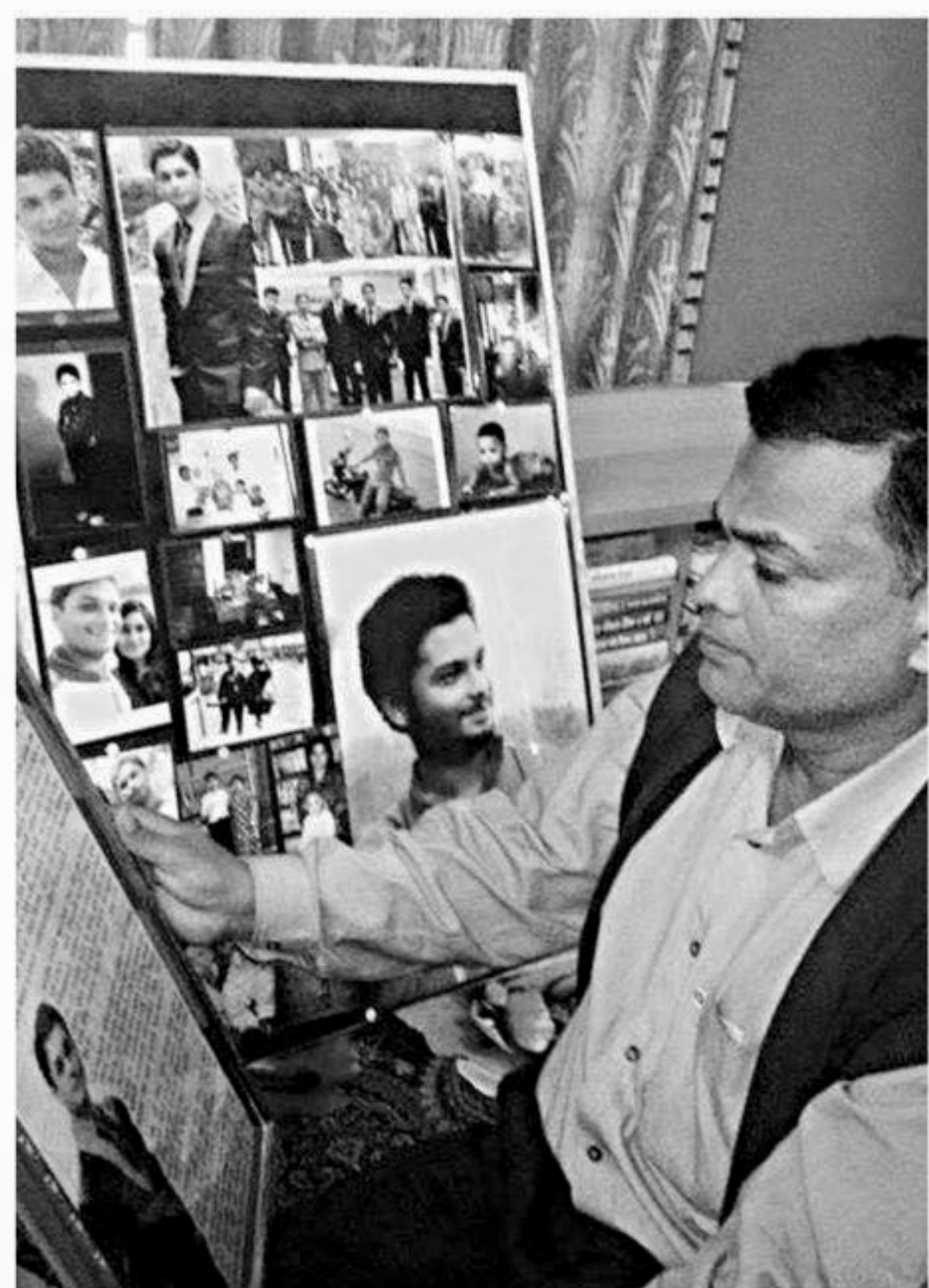


PHOTO: STAR

Agran Bank official Wahedul Islam looks at the photograph of his son Touhidul Islam Lipu, only to be reminded of the grievous memory of the latter's murder after abduction in Kushtia two years ago.

MMCH interns resume duty, 2 attackers held

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Interns at Mymensingh Medical College Hospital (MMCH) called off their indefinite strike and resumed duty at around 1:00pm yesterday.

Around 200 interns went on an indefinite strike on Tuesday afternoon, protesting assault on one of their fellows.

Dr Abu Bakar Siddique, president of Intern Doctors' Association at MMCH, said they called off their strike as police arrested two of the attackers from the town's Charpara area.

Police arrested two alleged attackers -- Rubel Chandra Sarker, 25, and Jasim Uddin, 28 -- said Md Kamrul Islam, officer-in-charge (OC) of Kotwali Police Station early yesterday.

The arrestees were produced before a Mymensingh court at noon with a prayer for 7-days' remand for each. The court sent them to jail without fixing date of hearing on the prayer, police said.

Police drives are on to arrest the other accused, the OC said.

The interns had submitted a memorandum to the MMCH authorities on Wednesday, giving a 48-hour ultimatum to arrest the attackers.

Intern Doctors' Association sources said a group of around 15 outsiders entered Ward No-13 of the hospital on Tuesday and engaged in an altercation with Dr Mazhar over taking of tissue paper from the ward without permission. At one stage, they assaulted Dr Mazhar, said sources.

SABOTAGE CASES

Joypurhat Jamaat chief arrested

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

The amir of the Joypurhat unit of Jamaat and also vice-chairman of Joypurhat Sadar upazila, was arrested on Wednesday in connection with sabotage cases.

He is Hasibul Alam Liton, son of late Abdul Kashem Mondal and a resident of Sahebpara in Joypurhat town.

A team of Joypurhat DB arrested him from Muslimnagar area in the town at around 10:30am.

Mahfuzar Rahman, officer-in-charge (OC) of Joypurhat DB, said Hasibul is an accused in sabotage cases filed with Joypurhat Sadar, Panchbibi, Kalai and Akkelpur Police Stations before and after the 10th national election.

Police yesterday produced the Jamaat leader before a court on Wednesday that sent him to jail.

Early marriage bid foiled

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jhalakathi

An SSC examinee was saved from child marriage in Kathalia upazila of the district on Wednesday.

Police said informed that marriage of the girl was arranged the upazila nirbahi officer rushed to the spot and stopped the marriage.

Later, Motaieb Khalifa, father of the bride, Jahangir Alam, father of the bridegroom, and bridegroom Rafiqul Islam, were produced before a mobile court which sentenced them to different jail terms.

The UNO led the court, said Jahid Hossain, officer-in-charge of Kathalia Police Station.



PHOTO: STAR

A growing wheat field at Jamtali in Dinajpur Sadar upazila.

Dinajpur wheat growers eye good yield

KONGKON KARMAKER, Dinajpur

Wheat growers and agriculturists are expecting good yield of the winter crop this season, despite higher than usual temperature during the growing period.

Around 4.89 lakh hectares of land has been brought under wheat farming across the country this year with the production target of over 15 lakh tonnes, said officials of Wheat Research Centre (WRC) at Nashipur village in Dinajpur Sadar upazila.

Last year, around 14 lakh tonnes of wheat were produced on 4.37 lakh hectares of land.

Earlier this season, a strong wind sweeping the northern region damaged wheat on nearly one percent of the total cultivation area.

Besides, five percent of the wheat land in five south-

ern districts, including Meherpur and Jessore, has been affected with wheat blast, which has been detected in Bangladesh for the first time, said the researchers of WRC.

Farmers said rising temperature may have an adverse impact on wheat production.

However, this year farmers across the country planted different varieties of wheat, 40 per cent of it is Sotabdi seeds, which have the ability to sustain in high temperature, dry spell and salinity, and resist diseases.

Dr Zahidul Islam Sarker, chief scientific officer of WRC in Dinajpur, said wheat plants produced by the centre can tolerate up to 35 degrees Celsius temperature during daytime and 20 degrees Celsius at night.

The farmers who sowed wheat in late January or early February can get over four

tonnes of yield per hectare while those who sowed it late will get less, he said, adding that the agriculture department has formed a special surveillance team for rapid action if spread of disease is reported anywhere in the country.

The wheat produced in the country can meet nearly half of its annual demand, said Dr Paritosh Kumar Malaker, another scientist of the research centre.

Despite slightly adverse weather, most farmers of Dinajpur, Panchagarh, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Rangpur and Barisal are hopeful of good production.

Fazle Rabbi, a farmer of Roypur in Dinajpur Sadar upazila, said this year he increased wheat cultivation area as he got good profit from the crop last year.

The harvest will begin at the end of this month, said the WRC officials in Dinajpur.



PHOTO: STAR

Indigenous people of Dinajpur's Hakimpur upazila form a human chain on the upazila parishad premises yesterday, demanding removal of the UNO for 'embezzling' government fund meant for their development.

Human chain demands removal of UNO, probe into 'corruption'

Indigenous people allege misappropriation of fund meant for them

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Indigenous people formed a human chain on the premises of Hakimpur upazila parishad under the district yesterday noon demanding removal of the upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) for his alleged embezzlement of government funds meant for the development of the local ethnic minority people.

Men, women and children from across the upazila joined the programme organised by Hakimpur Upazila Adivasi Samiti with banners, festoons and placards inscribed with their demands.

The government in last three years allocated at least Tk 41.05 lakh under different projects for the development of the indigenous people in the upazila, but Hakimpur UNO Azaharul Islam allegedly embezzled the fund, Gregory Soren, general secretary of Adivasi Samiti in Hakimpur upazila, said at the programme.

"An official letter was issued early February, mentioning that Azaharul Islam, UNO of Hakimpur in Dinajpur, has been transferred to Bhurungamari of Kurigram. But he is yet to join his new workplace,"

Gregory said, showing a copy of the letter at the human chain.

The letter signed by the divisional commissioner of Rangpur, was also sent to the deputy commissioners of Dinajpur and Kurigram, he said.

Earlier on January 10, civil society members of Hakimpur upazila at a press conference brought the allegation of corruption and fund embezzlement against UNO Md Azaharul Islam.

"The UNO office received Tk 11.05 lakh in 2012-13, Tk 12 lakh in 2013-14 and Tk 18 lakh in 2015-16 fiscal year for the development of the backward ethnic people in the upazila," said Harun Ur Rashid, president of importers and exporters' group in Hakimpur upazila, reading out the keynote at the press conference.

The UNO spent only 25 percent of the total fund and embezzled the rest, alleged Badal Tigga, president of Hakimpur Upazila Adivasi Samaj Unnayan Samiti.

The UNO, however, refuted the allegation against him, saying that the development project is under progress.

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