



Illegal stone lifting from the Dharla River leads to serious erosion at Kafirhat village in Patgram upazila under Lamonirhat district.

Mindless stone lifting from rivers triggers erosion

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Vast tracts of farmland in different villages under Patgram upazila of the district are turning sandy and unfit for farming due to erosion caused by illegal stone lifting from the Dharla, Saniazan and Shingirmari rivers.

Though the district and upazila administrations are taking stern action against illegal stone lifting, the organised gangs are continuing to lift stones from the three rivers and adjoining areas.

Farmer Nazrul Islam of Islampur village under the

upazila, said he has lost four bighas of land in the last two years due to erosion caused by illegal stone lifting from the river Dharla. "I strongly protested against illegal stone lifting from the river beside my arable lands, but the stone lifters didn't listen to me as they are local musclemen," he added.

Mafiz Uddin, a farmer of Sarkererhat village of the upazila, said he lost six bighas of arable land due to illegal stone lifting from the river. "We cannot grow crops on our lands as they have turned sandy," he added.

Farmers' leader Nabir Hossain of Kafir Bazar vil-

lage said at least 4,000 bighas of land belonging to at least 2,000 farmers of 20 villages have been eroded due to illegal stone lifting from the three rivers and adjoining areas in the last 12 years

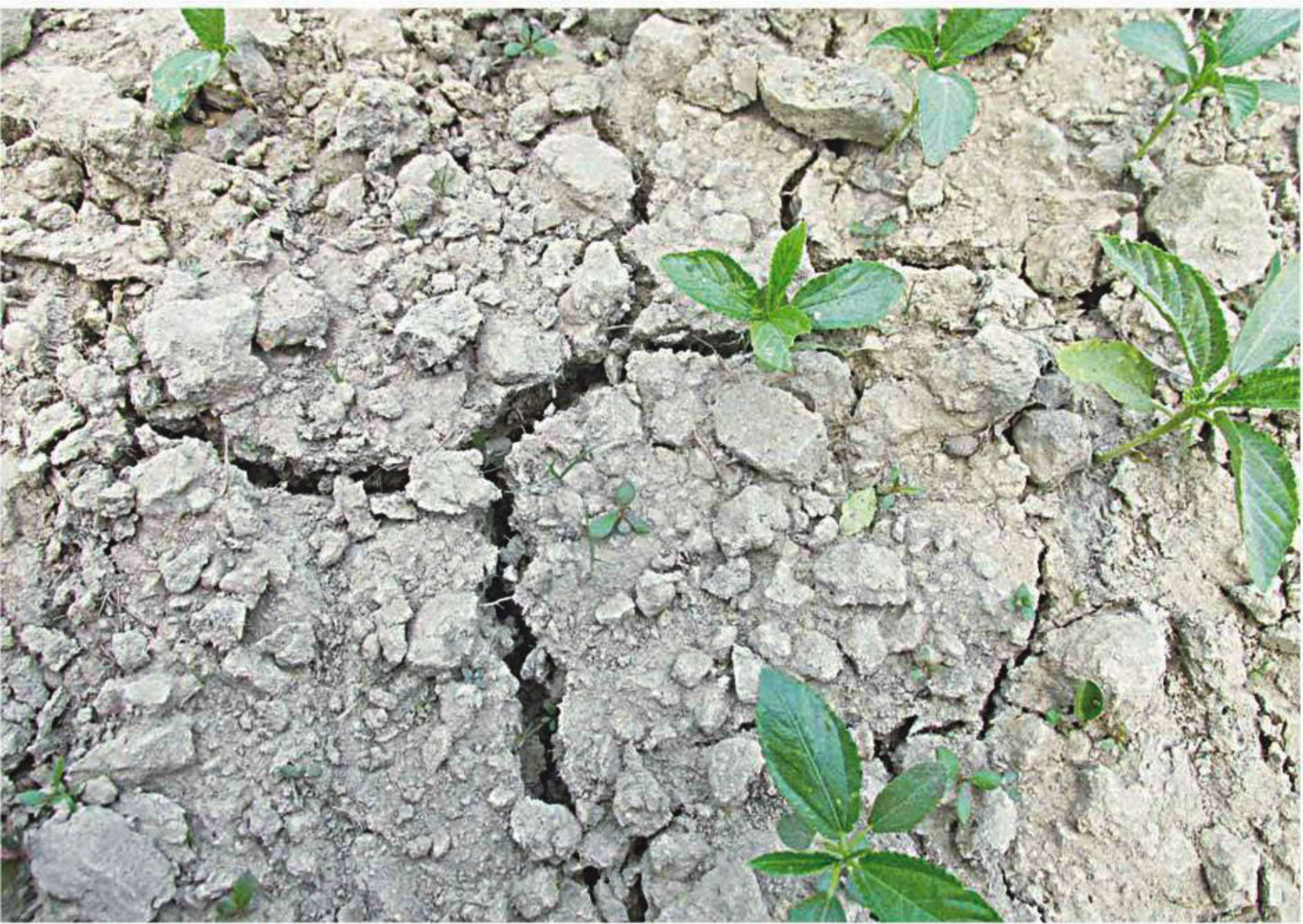
"Many farmers were harassed physically by the stone lifters when they protested against illegal stones lifting in the past. So we do not dare to protest fearing harassment," said farmer Nur Hossain of Burimari village.

Seeking anonymity, an official of Patgram agriculture office said they know about the matter, but cannot

do anything because the stone lifters are allegedly involved with the ruling party.

Nur Islam, upazila agriculture officer, said there is no exact figure of how much farmland has been eroded due to illegal stone lifting. The district and upazila administrations are conducting drives against illegal stone lifting, he added.

Noor Qutubul Alam, upazila nirbahi officer of Patgram, said the administration is filing cases against the lifters. We will show zero tolerance for illegal stone lifting from the rivers and adjoining areas, he added.



Jute saplings fail to grow properly at a dried up field of Kanchibari in Fulchhari upazila under Gaibandha district as the area hardly sees any rain during the ongoing summer.

GAIBANDHA'S FALCHHARI UPAZILA

Jute plants drying due to lack of rain

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gaibandha

Jute plants on vast tracts of land are drying up due to unceasing drought that has been prevailing in Fulchhari upazila of the district for the last one and a half months.

Although farmers irrigate the land with water raised from underground by pumps, the situation remains unchanged. The scorching sun is drying out the tender jute plants, and jute seeds cannot germinate due to the dryness of the land.

Farmers made good profit from jute cultivation in the last two years, so many of them took it up, but the drought this season might

seriously reduce production, said local farmers.

This year, rivers and other sources of water went dry much earlier, which badly affected crop production, said Saidur Rahman, a farmer of Golna village in the upazila.

Farmers of the upazila prefer cultivating early variety of jute to avoid damage by flood, as the area is flood prone and they cannot harvest jute plants after the fields get submerged by flood water, said Abul Kashem, another farmer.

Although the agriculture department assured better production of late sowing jute seeds after harvesting boro crop, flood water often

submerges vast tracts of land in Fulchhari much earlier, he added.

According to the upazila agriculture office, 4,000 hectares of land will be brought under jute cultivation this season. Meanwhile, farmers sowed seeds on about 3,000 hectares.

While visiting some drought hit areas of Kanchipara, Uriya and Gajaria villages, this correspondent saw that farmers were irrigating dried up jute fields with deep tubewells, but the jute plants still could not survive.

The tender jute plants are gradually dying in the scorching sun, said Akbar Ali, a jute grower of

Kanchipara.

"We are worried about the production of jute this season, because drought will hinder normal growth of jute stalk," he added.

"This season, we had to sow seeds twice or thrice, as the seeds failed to germinate due to acute drought, forcing us to incur additional expenditure," said Altaf Hossain, a jute farmer of Uriya.

"At present, we have nothing to do against natural calamities, especially the changing trend of climate. However farmers still have time to sow jute seeds soon after rain," said Tahajul Islam, upazila agriculture officer.

Pirojpur's pioneer orchardist

HABIBUR RAHMAN with ANDREW EAGLE

Rome wasn't built in a day: a common adage that Pirojpur orchardist Hangsopoti Mistry, in his 50s, of Tarabuniya village in Sakharikathi union of Nazirpur upazila, can probably appreciate better than most. In his quest to be economically solvent Hangsopoti has pursued a path of small, considered steps, with a willingness to try that has, in recent years, quite literally born fruit.

Having been unable to complete higher level education due to family circumstances, Hangsopoti had little choice but to follow his father Profullo Mistry into the paddy field. Like the rest of Tarabuniya's farmers he grew paddy, season after season, for meagre profits.

Then, at the age of 40, he saw something on television that piqued his curiosity. "I often watched programmes on agriculture," Hangsopoti recalls, "I especially enjoyed documentaries on fruit cultivation aired on BTV."

In the meantime, while visiting relatives in Satkhira, he noted their thriving jujube orchard which set his mind to wonder if he couldn't grow fruit.

Deciding to try, Hangsopoti took a Tk 2 lakh loan, with a further Tk 2.5 lakh collected from relatives, and he dedicated one acre of land beside the River Taltal to jujube, a development that made neighbours laugh. Nobody thought much about fruit orchards in Tarabuniya.

The following year Hangsopoti planted 100 litchi trees that he collected from Dinajpur; gradually he expanded his orchard to cover five acres of land. Now Hangsopoti has 350 litchi trees of mujaffapuri and China-3 varieties and around 800 amrapali and mollika mango trees as well as oranges and malta trees.

"The trees are like sons to me," he says, "I take great care of them." Passing his whole day in the orchard and enlisting the help of his wife Happy Rani Mistry, Hangsopoti's fruits are in great demand in Tarabuniya and neighbouring villages. He also sells to wholesalers who visit his orchard.

"I never use chemicals on my fruit," he says, "I only apply pesticide during the flowering stage. People know the fruit from my orchard is tasty."

His current litchi crop is due for harvest and Hangsopoti is concerned about the quality this year due to a lack of rain. "If I had better rain I could have benefited more," he says, adding that damage from birds and bats is a constant challenge. "I try to protect the fruit by covering them

with nets."

But last year he earned about Tk 4,000 per 1,000 litchis and his orchard produced 400 maunds of mangoes, a crop that should be mature once again within a month.

Hangsopoti's efforts have not gone unnoticed by his neighbours. "At first we thought he was foolish," says villager Narayan Mistry. "But now we have seen the results."

"We never realised it was possible to grow flavour-some litchis here," says passerby Rafikul Islam.

"In the past," agrees another local Porimal Biswas, "we depended on seasonal fruits from other districts, but now we get them from our locality."

Inspired, more than 150 people in the area have embarked upon fruit culti-

vation, planting orchards that already cover around 300 acres of land. "When anyone wishes to become an orchardist," says Hangsopoti, "they usually ask my advice. I also sell them seedlings."

Pankaj Kumar Boral, sub-assistant agricultural officer in Nazirpur upazila, says that Hangsopoti is a role model farmer. "We have helped him with technical support," says Pankaj, "and he has done well."

With his dedicated efforts as an orchardist it has become much easier for Hangsopoti to bear the expenses of his nine-member household. "I could never explain to you just how happy I was on the day I collected the very first fruit from my orchard," he says, beaming.



Hangsopoti Mistry holding litchis produced at his orchard.

4-KID MURDER CASE Bail prayers of 5 accused rejected

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

A Habiganj court yesterday rejected the bail prayers of five accused in the case for murder of four children in Bahubal upazila in February this year.

The accused are Rubel Mia, 18, Jewel Mia, 20, Shahed Ahmed, 32, Saleh Ahmed, 30, and Bashir Mia, 48, of Sundrateki village in the upazila.

Habiganj Senior Judicial Magistrate Kawsar Alam fixed May 25 for hearing on the bail petitions.

Inspector Muktadir Hossain of Habiganj Detective Branch (DB) Police pressed the charges against nine of the accused on April 6.

On February 17, the bodies of Monir Mia, 7, Zakaria Shuvo, 8, Tajel Mia, 10, and Ismail Mia, 10, who had gone missing from Sundrateki village on February 12, were found from a Balu Mahal at the village.

Police said Abdul Ali of the village had a longstanding dispute with Panchayat leader Khaleque Master over establishing supremacy in the locality.

Abdul Ali and autorickshaw driver Bachchu, who was expelled from the Panchayat following a dispute with Khaleque, made a plan to kill Aziz or his son Tajel Mia as Aziz was a close aid to Panchayat leader Khaleque.

According to the plan, Bachchu tactfully took the four children on his autorickshaw on the evening of February 12 from near a playground.

After a while, Rubel, Arju and other accused joined Bachchu and drugged the kids to make them unconscious.

They strangled the boys inside the three-wheeler, kept their bodies at Bachchu's garage and later buried them under sand.

Security beefed up at Nizami's birthplace Santhia

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

Tightened security measures have been taken in the district, especially Santhia upazila, birthplace of war criminal Motiur Rahman Nizami.

"We have employed additional forces including police and Rapid Action Battalion in Santhia upazila and sensitive areas of Pabna district headquarters," said Md Alamgir Kabir, superintendent of police in Pabna.

Meanwhile, law enforcers arrested 63 people including 12 Jamaat-Shibir men from different areas of the

district in connection with plot for violence in last 24 hours, said sources of the district police control room.

Born in Monmothpur village of Santhia upazila, Motiur Rahman Nizami, also the chief of Jamaat-e-Islami, instigated the Al-Badar, an auxiliary force of the Pakistan occupation army, to commit the crimes against humanity during 1971 Liberation War.

International Crimes Tribunal-1 on October 29 in 2014 handed Nizami death penalty on four charges of war crimes, including killing intellectuals.

On January 6 this year, the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence in three of the charges. The apex court rejected his review plea on May 5.

"Special security measure have been taken in Santhia upazila. We have set-up four check posts and arranged mobile teams of police in the upazila," said Md Nasir Uddin, officer in charge of Santhia Police Station.

The law enforcers have taken special measures to provide security to the witnesses in Nizami's trial and local freedom fighters, he added.



PHOTO: STAR

Policemen check vehicles and bags of passengers on the roads leading to Pabna town yesterday as part of beefed up security measures in the home district of death sentence recipient war criminal Motiur Rahman Nizami.

