

Efforts to save binturong fail, finally

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

The badly injured binturong, captured at Brahmanagan village in Tahirpur upazila of Sunamganj on January 2, died on the way to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Safari Park in Gazipur on Tuesday night.

"As the binturong did not show any sign of improvement after one week of treatment at Bangladesh Wildlife Service Foundation in Sreemangal upazila of Moulvibazar, we referred it to Gazipur safari park for better treatment. But it died on the way to the park on Tuesday night," said Tabibur Rahman, assistant conservator of Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Department, Moulvibazar.

The binturong had brain haemorrhage and heart attack, said Dr Md Nizamuddin Chowdhury, assistant veterinary surgeon of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Safari Park.

Forest officials buried it in the park area, he said. "There were serious injuries on the head and neck of the binturong when it was rescued. It could not move properly and our weeklong treatment here failed to improve its condition," said Swapon Deb Sajal, director of Bangladesh Wildlife Service Foundation.



Growing tomatoes in a field at Baniary village under Nazirpur upazila in Pirojpur.

PHOTO: STAR

'Criminal' dies in Jessore gunfight

The dead was accused in eight cases, including robbery

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

An alleged criminal was killed in a gunfight between two rival groups at Jagahati village in Jessore Sadar upazila early yesterday.

The deceased was Rasel alias Rony, 27, son of Kamor Ali of Mathpara village in Chowgachha upazila.

Informed that a gunfight ensued between two criminal groups, a police team raided Jagahati village around 1:30am, said Sheikh Elias Hossain, officer-in-charge of Jessore Kotwali Police Station.

Sensing the presence of police, both the groups fled the scene, the OC added. Later, police recovered the body of Rasel from the spot and sent it to Jessore Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

OC Mashiur Rahman of Chowgachha Police Station said Rasel was wanted in eight cases, including for robbery.

Police recovered a one-shooter gun and a bullet from the spot.

Tomatoes make growers smile

Pirojpur farmers say setbacks could be overcome although flood had delayed planting, fog affected crops

HABIBUR RAHMAN with ANDREW EAGLE

With a healthy harvest and even healthier prices, the tomato growers of Baniary village in Pirojpur's Nazirpur upazila are upbeat this winter.

"We didn't face any serious problem with the tomato crop this year," says farmer Haider Sheikh who is happy with his harvest. Even though flooding delayed planting and a few weeks ago crops were impacted by fog, such challenges proved minor setbacks and were successfully managed with help from the department of agriculture extension, local farmers said.

"From the beginning of the season one maund of tomatoes sold for over

Tk 3,000," reports gleeful neighbouring farmer Sunil Mondal. "After picking tomato crops the first two times most growers already recouped their production costs."

Indeed only in the past week or so has the wholesale tomato price dipped to around Tk 500 per maund; the season has been so lucrative thus far however that the farmers are not frustrated by the price decline.

"Profits are up compared to previous years," says another grower, Premananda Akarson, "so the reduced price now cannot make us unhappy." Tomatoes in the area are expected to be harvested for a further month.

An ongoing difficulty that farmers face, however, is in transporting their

tomatoes to market. "The village roads are in an appalling state," says one grower, Anadi Bala. "It's quite difficult to reach the wholesale bazaar and sometimes due to transport delay we cannot achieve full price for the tomatoes."

According to Nazirpur's sub-assistant agriculture officer Bijan Krishna Howlader, tomatoes were cultivated on 75 hectares in the upazila this season. "As tomatoes are rather profitable, farmers are keen on growing them," he says. "Most often various hybrid varieties are preferred."

Tomatoes in Baniary are grown on the raised embankments of fish enclosures, gardens that produce a variety of vegetables year-round.

GP's BAIL IN THREE HOURS

Magistrate's court rejects, judge's court grants

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

The District Judge's Court in Dinajpur granted bail to a government pleader (GP) yesterday, three hours after the Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court rejected his bail plea after he surrendered before the court.

The GP, Mir Yousuf Ali of Khansama upazila in the district, is an accused in cases filed by police on Monday.

Yousuf appeared before the Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court of Lutfar Rahman seeking bail that the court rejected.

The District Judge's Court of Hossain Shaheed Ahmed granted him bail at around 3:00pm after a miss case, said Mintu Pal, an assistant prosecutor of the district.

Khansama Police Station Sub-Inspector Dulal Uddin filed a case on Monday accusing 91 people, with 41 named. Yousuf is the ninth accused in the case. Another case was also filed with the same police station the same day accusing 600 people, in which Yousuf is number three.

Police filed those cases after a clash between villagers and police during a hartal on Sunday demanding nationalisation of Khansama Degree College, leaving nearly 50 people injured.



Shykh Seraj takes video as a couple pours into an earthen pot thickened date palm juice at Tejrol village in Jessore's Khajura, and right, the media personality and agriculture development activist prepares to hold a pot containing raw juice from a gachhi at the village a few days ago. PHOTO: STAR



Date palm juice, patali gur on decline

SHYKH SERAJ

The traditional six seasons of Bangladesh are losing their distinctive features in course of time. Now it's January, the middle of winter. Along with foggy weather, a little cold is felt in the country's rural areas, but the people of the mega cities can hardly feel it, thanks to the climatic changes impacted by global warming.

Consequently, the traditional farming culture and heritage are also fading. Extracting date palm juice and making patali molasses out of it is one of those.

A few days back, I travelled to Jessore's Khajura, especially Tejrol village, once abundant with date palm trees. Now along with decrease in the number of trees, farmers, earlier dependent for livelihood on these, make other ways to earn, and the age-old tradition of making patali gur (molasses) from the date palm juice is on gradual decline. It was the Bangla month of Poush, the peak of winter season, but not much cold was felt, an obvious sign of climate change.

I arrived in Khajura around 5:30am in the morning. But I couldn't find any farmer at the fields or at the trees. It was around 7:00am when Mizanur Rahman of Tejrol village came to climb up the tree to collect date palm juice. Locally known as gachhi, these men collect date juice from trees. For the purpose, they bark the upper portion of trees and fix a clay pot there to collect juice drops throughout the night. I had a little chat with Mizanur.

"Hello, are you here to collect palm juice?"

"Yes."

"Do you think these traditions becoming extinct?"

"Yes, not all the people want to climb the trees."

"Why?"

"It is very hard and risky. We still follow our family tradition but my children won't ever do this," added Mizanur.

We comprehend that things won't be the same in the farming sector in near future, such as the traditional ploughing is getting replaced by mechanised agriculture.

I saw Mizanur climb up the tree and bring down the pot containing juice, a scene representing the rural Bengal. The more intense the cold, the more amount of juice is secreted from the trees. Gradually the sun came up and I saw many date palm trees in the landscape and many others climbing up and down -- a captivating view indeed.

Farmer Nazimuddin and his son Ibrahim were on their way to a date palm tree to collect juice. I talked with them to learn their view about date palm juice heritage in this region.

"Does your son help you in this?"

"No, it's very hard for him. He should rather study."

"What's wrong if they study and still hold on to the farming roots?"

"That's not a problem, but I don't want my son to work this hard like me."

I also met another gachhi, Dulu Mia.

"I see you with clay pots with date juice. You collected juice from how many trees?"

Shykh Seraj is a Media and Agriculture Development Activist. He is an Ashoka Fellow and recipient of Ekushey Padak, FAO A.H. Boerma Award and many other prestigious accolades. At Channel i, he is Director and Head of News. He is also Director and Host of the popular agro-documentary, "Hridoye Mati O Manush".



"12 trees."

"Yet, it didn't fill four pots."

"What's the price for one pot of juice?"

"100 taka to 150 taka."

Dear readers, one pot of juice is sold for 100 taka. However, juice from 12 trees couldn't even fill four pots. Barking date palm trees, climbing it with full risk on, bringing the pot down, collecting juice - every step of it demands hard work. However, he's getting only 100 taka for one pot containing 10 kg of juice. This is why people are moving away from this profession, I think. Moreover, many are afraid of the high risk it has, like falling down and getting paralyzed forever.

I also went to Dulu Mia's home to have a look on how they boil the juice and make patali gur.

He was boiling three pots of juice, 8 to 10 kg each pot."

Most of the customers demand white molasses but these contain soda and other stuff, says another farmer Hossain, adding, "I don't mix

soda to make patali. I mix only a little sugar to make the item hard."

At least in 50 homes at the village, the process of making patali molasses from date palm juice has already started, Hossain said.

Some farmers from this village also send patali gur to foreign countries including the USA, Qatar, England, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia.

At the nearby market beside the Chitra river, farmers are selling patali gur for 130 taka to 150 taka per kg. But, some mix sugar and some don't do it at all as they feel it's a crime.

Dear readers, what I felt deeply is farmers, not getting fair price for date palm juice and patali gur, can hardly make any profit. They don't want their children to become farmers. With time, changes everything. However, people from all the localities try to hold on to their local tradition with pride. Those traditions mean their livelihood, even if it's just a little earning. Despite a lot of inconveniences and hurdles, many of Khajura's people are still celebrating the traditional work of collecting palm juice and making patali gur (molasses). Only in Khajura, there are more than 1 lakh palm trees. According to a local account, once, all over Jessore, there were 40 lakh palm trees but now, it has come down to half.

Every Bangalee wants the tradition of molasses and patali to survive. To materialize, both government and private organisations should come up with effective ideas to keep it going where farmers can make some profit and the tradition remains firm.

Good aromatic rice yield in N-districts

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Aromatic rice saw record yield in Rangpur region, comprising five northern districts, in the aman season this year as farmers increased cultivation for getting lucrative profit.

Horticulture specialist of Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in Rangpur Khondokar Md Mesbahul Islam said 13,017 hectares of land were brought under cultivation of aromatic rice this year compared to 12,650 hectares last year.

Aromatic rice was cultivated on 5,272 hectares of land in Rangpur, 3,175 hectares in Gaibandha, 3,011 hectares in Nilphamari, 1,477 hectares in Kurigram and 82 hectares in Lalmonirhat.

The total production in the region was 30,626 tonnes, while it was 29,727 tonnes last year.

The most popular aromatic rice varieties are Kalijira, Chinigura, Katarihbog and new variety BRRI-dhan 34.

Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) recently developed BRRI-dhan 34, which has gained popularity among farmers within a short time for its outstanding quality and output, farmers said.

The other traditional varieties, which farmers cultivated, are Rasulbhog, Begunbichi, Badshahbog, Khirshahbog, Chinisagor, Zamaisagori and some others.

Mesbahul said medium low lying land with sufficient irrigation facility is suitable

for aromatic rice cultivation and the soil of Rangpur agriculture region is ideal for the purpose.

Alluring flavour, good taste and high food value have created a demand for aromatic rice at home and abroad, enabling farmers to get lucrative prices.

Golam Mostofa, a big farmer at Angarpara village in Sadar upazila, said he cultivated aromatic rice on 30 bighas of land and earned more profit compared to coarse rice as a maund of aromatic rice is being sold in the markets at Tk 1,350 to Tk 1,400 compared to Tk 650 to Tk 700 for coarse rice.

Farmer Saidur Rahman of Kursha village in Rangpur said he had no problems in selling aromatic rice as agents of big companies come to his house to buy the produce.

Deputy Director of DAE in Nilphamari GM Idris said the inclination of farmers to aromatic rice cultivation is an outcome of the DAE's effort to popularise crop diversification, leaving behind traditional farming pattern, to bring about a revolutionary change.

Additional Director of regional DAE M Shah Alam said, "Special emphasis will be given to cultivating aromatic rice as this region is one of the biggest producers of the variety in the country. Its quality is very good, and it also benefits farmers as it is an export item."



Aromatic rice kept for sale at a shop in Nilphamari.

PHOTO: STAR