

Forest official arrested

Our Correspondent, Moulvibazar
 The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) arrested a forest official from Rajnagar area in Habiganj district town on Tuesday night on charge of embezzling government money. The arrestee is Mukhlesur Rahman, a range officer of Shayestaganj area in Habiganj district. He hails from Rayerpara village in Islampur upazila of Jamalganj. ACC filed a case against Mukhlesur on April 18 last year on charge of embezzling public treasury money, said Fakhru Islam, ACC's assistant director in Habiganj and investigation officer of the case. Later, the accused forest officer was handed over to Habiganj Police Station by ACC.

Hakaluki abuzz with migratory birds

Their arrival rises by 70 percent compared to last year

Mintu DShwara, Moulvibazar
 Arrival of migratory birds sees a boost in Hakaluki Haor this year, much to the delight of bird watchers and visitors. "We counted 58,289 birds of 50 species in 40 water bodies of Hakaluki during a survey on February 4 and 5, while 34,264 and 21,631 birds were found in surveys in 2016 and 2015," said Enam Al Haque, also National Coordinator of Waterfowl Census in Bangladesh. The prominent bird specialist led a team to conduct the survey organised by Bangladesh Birds Club. USAID's Climate-Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihoods (Crel) project funded the programme. Hakaluki Haor comprising 18,115 hectares of land is spread over six upazilas in Moulvibazar and Sylhet districts. Birds in the large water body are increasing as environment-friendly aquatic trees like hijal, koroch, boran, and murta are being planted in Chatalbil and Dohobil areas to create birds' sanctuaries, said Mazharul Islam Jahangir, regional coordinator of Crel project. Guards have been appointed to protect the plants, he said. In 1999, the Directorate of Environment declared Hakaluki Haor an ecologically critical area as its natural environment with aquatic trees and plants like hijal and koroch were being destroyed, resulting in serious decline in arrival of migratory birds.



A flock of winter migratory birds in Hakaluki Haor in Kulaura upazila of Moulvibazar. PHOTO: STaR

Nipa palm juice and molasses Heritage of coastal Bangladesh

Shykh Seraj
 The southern part of Bangladesh is blessed by nature and its resources. A few days back, I went to Nilganj union of Kalapara upazila in Patuakhali. A village named Nabipur there is famous for *golpata* (nipa palm) juice and *gur* (molasses). We can take pride on it as it's one of the most important heritages of our southern Bangladesh. Nipa palm serves as the livelihood for many farmers of Nabipur, a village famous for low land farming, apart from paddies on the highlands and flat fields. Golpata in Bangla means round leaves (*gol* means round, *pata* means leaves). But *gol*, a common tree in the coastal areas, is a distinct type of tree with leaves similar to coconut trees. It grows abundantly by the canals of southern region of our country. And this crop thrives in saline water. Many countries in the world have nipa palms in their sea coasts. For decades, this tree has strengthened our agricultural economy, being inseparable with the lives of the people in the coastal area. Nipa palms grow naturally, but many people here have made it their livelihood support. I met a farmer named Nirmal Chandra Mridha at Nabipur. "We just don't get juice and molasses from nipa palm. We make roofs of our houses with its leaves. We also make fences with the leaves," said Nirmal. Certainly, it is very useful for different kinds of household needs. The nipa juice is collected during the Bangla months of Agrabayon, Poush, Magh, Falgun and Chaitra. "How much do you earn by collecting juice from the trees in these five months?" I asked Nirmal. "I get 12 kg of molasses daily. This year, the price is high. It is 70-80 taka per kg." "So, you earn about a thousand taka daily for five months." "Yes", was his reply. A local farmer was saying his nipa orchard is 50-60 years old. If you plant one, it gradually expands. Dear readers, there is barely any home where you won't find nipa farming in Nabipur village. They collect nipa juice, make molasses and sell at the nearby market.

I went into Jagadish Chandra Sarker's home where nipa juice was being boiled. I had a little talk with the veteran nipa farmer. "Nipa farming is going on for generations and I am proud that my son Uttam and I could carry this heritage on," said the proud nipa farmer Jagadish. Jagadish gave me a brief on the advent of nipa palm in the region. "Once the Burmese (people from now Myanmar) used to come here and they first started this. They used to store the juice in *chonga* and make *tari*, an intoxicating item," said Jagadish. Keeping her at work, I went to have a look around the village. I found sundari trees in some parts of the village. There were some paddy fields. Uttam showed me how they collect raw juice from inside the orchard. They massage one branch of the tree by bending it. For seven to eight days they do it. After that they cut the mouth open and juice starts dripping on the pot. They keep on cutting the mouth of the same branch for seven days. The process seems quite interesting. Uttam can't harvest juice on his own from his huge orchard. He sells nipa juice to others, to be extracted



Shykh Seraj talks to a farmer as the latter holds a cluster of nipa palm fruits at an orchard of Nabipur village under Kalapara upazila in Patuakhali a few days ago. PHOTO: STaR

"Later on, who started making molasses?" I asked Jagadish Chandra. "Our ancestors," boldly claimed Jagadish. Uttam's wife Dipali was busy in boiling the nipa juice. This process takes a long time. She's really expert in this job. "How much of raw juice are you boiling today, Dipali?" I asked her. "60 kg," she replied. "How much molasses would you get from this?" I asked. "15-16 kg," she replied. It will take her an hour or so to boil up the juice to make molasses. from trees on half of his orchard by the buyers themselves. "How much do you sell a tree for?" "60 taka each." "What about cultivation cost and agricultural inputs?" "There is hardly any expense for cultivation and maintenance," Uttam replied. Farmers are really afraid of the bees inside the orchards. That's the main obstacle they face, but they tackle it somehow. As per a local tradition, farmers don't take the juice home on the first day. They make *payesh* with the juice

and put it at the foot of the tree for *mama*, a term they fondly use to mention foxes. Respecting these foxes means protecting their orchards, as they believe. Local farmers want nipa farming and cultivation of other crops to go on simultaneously. We know nipa farming needs salty water while the mainstream crops don't. "I think, if agriculture department arranges digging canal in a planned way, nipa palms can be cultivated with the help of salty water and the flat lands above can be used for general farming. In that case, both can be benefited," says Nasiruddin Mahmud, chairman of the Nilganj union parishad. Meanwhile, Dipali's *gur* is ready. She didn't pour sugar in it to make it hard, unlike many others who do it to make *khejur gur* (date juice molasses) hard. It was really tasty and I must say, dear readers, you would like to try the *gol gur*, after reading this article. Dear readers, nature sets grounds for distinct livelihood patterns of each locality. A good part of the life of this region centres round the nipa molasses. It is a great part of our heritage. We should be able to preserve these traditions. At the same time, we need to dig canals and build embankment in a planned way to help the people of this area to keep nipa orchards alive and preserve the tradition of nipa juice. For this, we need to make agricultural development plans based on visionary ideas for survival and growth of the great heritage of this region.

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".

ROw Over List Of Beneficiaries Mobile court stops scuffle of defiant UP members

Our Correspondent, Nilphamari
 Two groups of members of Balagram Union Parishad (UP) were involved in a scuffle in Jaldhaka upazila premises yesterday over making a list of beneficiaries for a government project. Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Md Rashedul Huq Prodhan brought the situation under control by setting up a mobile court on the spot and fining three people from both groups. Sources said a quarrel erupted between the UP chairman concerned and a group of members as a few members supported the chairman during compilation of names of poor people in the list under government's Employment Generating Programme for the Poor (EGPP). EGPP is going to start in the upazila within this month, and the listed beneficiaries are likely to get a handsome amount as daily wage for doing rural infrastructure development works. Some members alleged that the chairman was choosing the names of beneficia-

Assault on Teacher Two sent to Pirojpur jail

Our Correspondent, Pirojpur
 Two of the four named accused were sent to jail here yesterday in a case for assaulting a teacher in Nesarabad upazila of the district on Friday. Md Shitul Talukder and Mainul Islam were arrested on Tuesday night while the two others went into hiding. The named accused are Nayan Gazi, 40, son of late Hafizur Rahman, and Nasir Gazi, 42, son of late Joyanal Gazi of Moyshani village, Shitul, 20, son of Mahub Alam Talukder, and Mainul, 18, son of Nurul Islam of Sagarkanda village. The accused allegedly assaulted Bidhan Chandra Sarker of Moyshani Girls' High School, for his alleged misbehaviour with a girl student. They let Bidhan go after taking his signature on a paper. Officer-in-Charge Md Munirul Islam said the arrestees were sent to jail

Brick kiln defies court order

Our Correspondent, Mymensingh
 After only a week of suspension, a brick kiln adjacent to a primary school and a madrasa started its production in Dewaniapara area in Trishal upazila of the district. Farazi Bricks Enterprise, adjacent to Dewaniapara Government Primary School and Dewaniapara Emdadul Ulum Hafezia Madrasa, is causing serious health hazard for hundreds of students of those institutions and local people as well. On January 3, a mobile court accompanied by police and fire service and civil defence officials conducted a raid at the brick kiln and ordered its employees to stop all its activities. But surprisingly, its owner Abdus Salam Khokon defying the mobile court's order resumed its activities after a break of only a week, said Nur Alam, deputy director of the Department of Environment (DoE) in Mymensingh. A couple of months ago, local residents, who have been facing the nuisance for last 15 years, lodged a complaint with the Directorate of Environment in Dhaka in this regards. In response, an additional director general from the directorate visited the site on October 26, 2016 and requested the Department of Environment to investigate and take necessary action. After investigation, Deputy Director Mohammad Mohsin Uddin of the department issued a letter on November 8 requesting its owner Khokon to cease all brickfield activities immediately. But despite the official request, Khokon allegedly started burning bricks on December 16. Khokon could not be contacted for his comment as he did not receive his mobile phone despite repeated calls.



A growing mustard field at Purbo Dorjul village in Saptabari union under Aditmari upazila of Lalmonirhat. PHOTO: STAR

Bumper mustard yield likely Many Lalmonirhat farmers switch to the crop cultivation

SDILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat
 Many farmers in the district have started growing mustard as its production cost is less and there is no need for irrigation. They are expecting bumper yield this season due to good seeds and favourable weather. "Our underground water level is falling sharply and it is having a bad impact on agriculture and the environment," said Nabiar Rahman, 50, a schoolteacher in Kakina village under Kaliganj upazila. "We have switched to farming mustard as this item can save our underground water," he added. Abdul Rahman, 62, of Doljor village in Aditmari upazila said he has cultivated mustard on two bigha lands for the first time as he was encouraged and supported by RDRS Bangladesh (a non-governmental organisation). "We were given training on how to cultivate mustard, and were also given seeds, fertiliser and input support free of cost by the NGO," he said, adding that he hoped to get 13 to 14 maunds of mustard. Jafar Ali, 48, said, "RDRS Bangladesh encouraged us to cultivate mustard, as it helps to keep the land fertile for farming the next crop." Meher Ali, 55, of Karnapur village in Lalmonirhat Sadar said they can produce five maunds to seven maunds of mustard from one bigha of land, with one maund selling for Tk 1,800 to Tk 2,500 in the local market. "We spend Tk 1,200 to Tk 2,000 for seeds, ploughing and fertiliser on one bigha," Meher added. "Sometimes we face problems in selling mustard, so some farmers lost interest in farming this crop, but in recent times the market for mustard is high both locally and nationally," said mustard trader Mizanur Rahman of Lalmonirhat town. Agriculture and Environment Coordinator of RDRS Bangladesh Mamunur Rashid said it is essential to make farmers aware of farming environment-friendly crops as those crops have no need for irrigation. "We have been providing training and input support to farmers to help them farm four crops round the year," he said, adding that the growers will cultivate mung dal after harvesting mustard. An official of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in the district said mustard was cultivated on 1,730 hectares of land with a target of producing 2,249 tonnes this year, while it was 1,615 hectares last year. Lalmonirhat DAE Deputy Director Bidubhuson Roy said agriculture officials encourage farmers to grow environment-friendly crops, and they are also given training in this regard. Now farmers in the district are becoming aware of their role in saving underground water and agriculture, he added.