

Natural cold storage for potato preservation

SHYKH SERAJ

The news isn't an old one. In the greater Bogra region of the country, farmers have incurred serious loss, preserving their potatoes at the cold storages. Every year, we see the same picture – the picture of farmers in Bangladesh preserving a great amount of potatoes, we find these unwanted incidents around us. Farmers stay in dilemma when they are about to preserve the potatoes at the cold storages across the country. When farmers can't match their profit with what they have spent for production, they fall into greater crisis. It again is the same old picture and repetition of the same event. Farmers invested a lot in potatoes and in the end, they face multifaceted loss. When they don't get anyone beside them, they throw the potatoes on road in protest. I have also seen different other forms of protests, when farmers don't get fair price for their produce over the years.

In Munshiganj, Bangladesh's largest and traditional potato producing region, I have witnessed the same story. One thing is very much evident that from production of cereal crops to varieties of vegetables and different crops, success has spread steadily. Traditionally, farmers in our country tend to produce in larger quantities the crops which give them profit last season. If the market demand is there, farmers get the profit, they feel inspired; however, if the situation is unfavourable, they suffer loss. Later on, they look for money and as a result become a slave of credit and try to find in another profit-earning crop. In these cases, farmers have always been in a helpless state. The market is never in their control. Even if the government can't assure them the desired market price for their produce, there is no particular pre-production research on what potato would be best for them to bring onto the field. There is no incentive for them from the government mechanism. We know, the agriculture ministry has a potato advisory board. If the board wants, they can easily set goals for the seasonal production,

analyze the situation beforehand, work on the preservation system and even could think of fixing the market price, which would have been easier for farmers. However, we never see these ideas put into effect.

Dear readers, the main worry regarding potato production is more severe when it comes to preservation at the cold storages. When they can't preserve their own crops, they are harassed in every step of their journey with the hope of profit. If they want to make some profit in the next season, they barely get any chance to preserve some for the purpose. In this regard, I would like you to recall the CDP (Crop Diversification Programme). They took an initiative of preserving

authority, most of them couldn't pay back. Hence, the authority has sent them legal notice. Farmers are hiding from the administration, law and order. Generally in Bogra, by this time, 80% of potatoes go out of the storage to the market, but not even 30% went out so far. And, the cold storage association of the country informs, more than ten million tonnes of potatoes have been produced, among which in 390 cold storages, 5.3 million tonnes have been preserved.

Dear readers, I would like to share a different story, which is related to the story I'm writing now. Two years back I went to The Netherlands to witness the most-advanced farming systems, invited by the Netherlands government.

journey. It was magnificent. How extremely wonderful it was! After crossing the bridge landscape of fields came in front of me. My travel partner was an old friend, whom many of you already know – Dutch national AO Spijkers, former FAO representative in Bangladesh. Since we started very early in the morning, the nature itself was changing its colour gradually and it truly was a dreamy experience. Finally, I reached my destination, PPO Lelstad, a farming research centre. You won't believe where they have taken the agricultural research. This research site is operated by Wageningen University.

This can be called the ultimate research hub of Wageningen University. The centre located in



Shyikh Seraj is a Media and Agriculture Development Activist. He is an Ashoka Fellow and recipient of Elushey Padak, PPO A.I.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 Mui O Manush".



potatoes in a natural method. In Munshiganj, they made a bamboo-shelf through which air and light could easily pass. However, following this method, farmers also preserve the potatoes for a maximum of two to two and a half months. Farmers believe this time isn't enough for them.

As I started this article, I mentioned about the Bogra issue. In the greater Bogra region, potato farmers are facing an odd time as potato price continues to decline. Farmers are counting loss in every variety of potatoes, in every sack of potatoes the loss is Tk 300 to Tk 400. On the other hand, the farmers who preserved potatoes at the cold storages and managed some petty loan from the storage

During the tour, I have seen very closely the ultra-modern farming facilities, hi-tech farming, greenhouse operation and many more agricultural opportunities and research advancements, which eventually are helping farmers a lot. During the filming for Hridoye Mui O Manush, I went to a small island called Texel, which is locally known as the kingdom of sheep. You have to go across the North Sea to reach there. After the end of my work there on saline tolerant crops and sheep farms, I moved towards Lelstad, another city in the Netherlands. As you all know, the country is located well under the sea level. When I was on my way to Lelstad, lakes were on both sides of the bridge, at one point of

Lelstad's Flevoland also supports progressive farmers. One of them is Harry Schreuder, a potato farmer to be exact. I have involved him in this write-up because he has built a natural cold storage (run with wind and light from nature through automatic computerized control panel) with the help from the university's research hub. Harry cultivates on his own 50 hectares of land. He cultivates potato, carrot, onion, wheat and many more. But, potato is his main cash crop. Here, Harry can preserve for six months in his natural cold storage. This is a great advantage for Harry. Harry gets 60 tonnes of potato per hectare whereas in our country the average production per hectare is 20-25

tonnes. The only thing Harry is concerned about is climate change. But, there is no scarcity of water, so irrigation runs smooth. Harry showed me the entire natural cold storage system.

I entered the natural storage along with Harry. The bon dage of technology and nature is evident inside the storage. The windows open automatically when the computerised panel directs for light or light for a particular crop. This storage has 700-tonne capacity. Five fans work for onion and three are enough for potato. Natural wind and light is basically the key to the success where automation is only a means to manage. Moisture and ventilation is maintained through the computer programme. Harry says, the foremost requirement for such natural storage is to have an open field.

Dear readers, it was truly a pleasure visiting Harry's farm and his natural cold storage. But at the same time, I thought why we are lagging behind from doing it in our own country. The main challenge behind producing potato is the preservation of it. In Bangladesh, to save farmers from wastage of their produce, public-private partnership and funding would make it easier to build such platforms. This is not a costly venture and through this we can save a lot of farmers and a lot of produce. We have to be sure about the security of our crops as well as of our farmers. The sooner we look into this, better the result will be.

BRUTAL MURDER OF SAGOR 'Bring killers to book'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Family members of slain Sagor Mia as well as the people of Charisrampur village in Natokighar, where the teenager was brutally murdered on Monday, have demanded punishment for the perpetrators.

Akhas Ali and his men beat dead Sagor Mia, 18, bringing allegation of attempt to steal a water pump from Gauchia Hatchery owned by Akhas at Charisrampur village beside Mymensingh-Kishoreganj road on Monday morning, said locals and police.

Sagor, second among seven children of Shiphon Mia of Mymensingh town's Natokighar Lane Railway Colony area, went out of their home around 4:00am on Monday with rickshaw-van to collect scrap, family members said.

"Hearing that a boy was being beaten on charge of theft, rushed to the spot around 6:00am and saw the indescribable brutality of Akhas and his men," said a youth of Charisrampur.

"Several people requested Akhas and his men to release the boy as his condition turned critical. But an arrogant Akhas replied that he would manage it with money," added the youth.

The boy screamed, cried for water and begged for his life but the men's torture went on. He even fainted several times.

Around 8:00am, when Sagor crumpled to the ground, the



This picture, showing Sagor in a jovial mood with his mother and younger sister, would now incite only agony among his near and dear ones.

beaters left the place with him in a CNG-run auto-rickshaw, said another witness.

Police recovered Sagor's body from the bushes beside the hatchery on Tuesday morning.

Akhas and his family members fled the area after the incident.

Demanding punishment of the killers, victim's mother Hashi Begum said, "My son was not a thief. He used to collect scraps as we are a poor family. But they brutally killed him."

Neighbours gathered at Hashi's house said Sagor had no previous records of criminal activities.

Police arrested Reaz Uddin, 50, of the village Tuesday night and during interrogation, he confessed his involvement in the killing, said Delwar Ahmed, OC of Gouripur PS.

Earlier, the victim's father Shiphon filed a murder case against 12 people, including Akhas, his brothers Hashu Mia, Abdus Sattar Chhuto, Jewel Mia and Sobel Mia, and Akhas's employee Kaium with Gouripur Police Station.

Youth hacked to death in Mymensingh

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

The town was hacked to death allegedly by his friends in Dhohladia area on the town yesterday afternoon.

The victim was identified as Mamunur Rashid Shawon, 27, son of Wazed Mia of Kathgola area. Md Kamrul Islam, sub-officer-in-charge of Kotwali police, said there had been previous enmity between Shawon and Mustaq. Mustaq Ahmed of the same locality over sand business. A tense situation had been prevailing between Shawon and Mustaq following a feud, added the OC.

He further said Shawon along with his two friends were roaming in Kathgola area on his motorcycle when an altercation occurred between Shawon and Mustaq following a feud, added the OC.

As Shawon tried to speed up, he fell from his motorcycle and Mustaq allegedly hacked him indiscriminately, killing him on the spot.

Police later recovered the body from a bush in Dhohladia area and detained Mustaq from a house in the area.

During primary interrogation, Mustaq confessed to killing Shawon, the OC said.

No case was filed as of filing this report last evening.

Blights threat to good Aman production

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

Aman crop in Thakurgaon and Panchagarh is being attacked by different diseases, posing a threat to the farmers' hope of a good yield of the paddy this season.

The diseases are Bacterial Leaf Blight (BLB) and Sheath Blight (SB).

Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) Deputy Director (DD) Maundul Islam said the situation is under control and they are advising farmers to drain out the water from the paddy fields immediately and apply potash to the affected fields.

But the farmers are worried as they did not get result even after taking different measures to save their paddy plants.

During a recent visit to different villages of the districts, this correspondent saw farmers struggling to save their paddy plants from the diseases by spraying medicines on their fields.

Sabuj Sarcar, 45, a farmer of Sardarpara village in Sadar upazila, told this correspondent that he cultivated Aman on 2.5 acres of land spending Tk 40,000. About one-third of the field was attacked by BLB. The disease could not be controlled even after spraying of medicines prescribed by the local fertiliser, seed and pesticide vendors.

Arun Chandra Barman, 55, of

Yakubpur village, said he cultivated Aman on one acre of land spending Tk 15,000. Suddenly, BLB attacked different parts of the field, and the leaves of the plants turned yellow and dried up, he added.

Sirajul Islam, 58, of Sahapara village in Sadar upazila of Panchagarh told this correspondent that his paddy plants are drying up from the roots as they were attacked by SB.

DD Maundul said the situation was under control. It is still unknown why BLB attacks paddy plants, and a remedy is yet to be found to protect plants from the disease, he said, adding that draining the water from the paddy fields and applying five kg of potash per bigha helps to control spreading of the disease. Urea should not be applied, he added.

For SB attack, farmers have been advised to spray Tk 250 (fungicide) three times at intervals of 12 days on their affected crop fields.

Despite scanty rainfall in the Aman planting season, farmers have cultivated Aman on 1,36,885 hectares of land against the target of 1,35,743 hectares, with production target of 3,86,335 tonnes of rice in the district.

In Panchagarh, 97,590 hectares of land have been cultivated against the target of 96,025 hectares, with production target of 2,71,162 tonnes of rice.



Year-round watermelon cultivation makes farmers happy in Jessore. Sadar. The photo was taken from Khajura area in the upazila recently.

Year-round watermelon

Tariqul's homesickness spurs the farming in Jessore

MOHSIN MILON with ANDREW EAGLE

After completing his Secondary School Certificate in 1999, Tariqul Islam, from Rahulpur village in Jessore Sadar upazila, took a job at a photo frame factory in Malaysia. Despite the promise of a good livelihood, a future as an expatriate worker wasn't for him. None could have foreseen that Tariqul would become the pioneer all-season watermelon farmer in his district. Many have since followed his initiative. Year-round watermelon cultivation in Jessore is proving a profitable endeavour.

While making frames in the Malaysian factory, Tariqul had only one problem: The only frame that could contain his heart was his memories of his motherland. Thoughts of a Rahulpur childhood drove him, proved to be his passion. Thus, after eight years he did the only thing he could do. He gave in to his heart and returned home.

Tariqul then went to visit his elder brother who at the time was working in Chudanga.

There, he noticed that farmers were growing watermelons of the usual Chinese and Japanese varieties. Watermelons weren't a common crop in Jessore at the time. Tariqul won-

dered if watermelons can thrive in Chudanga, why not in Jessore?

With additional motivation from the marketing officer of an established seed company, Tariqul decided to try. Moreover, he chose to begin with the Jemine-2 and Bantak varieties from Taiwan, which can provide fruit year-round. Since he planted his first watermelon seed Tariqul has never looked back.

He grows the fruit on shaded, slanted platforms, with the raising lasting for at least three crop cycles. "The lifespan of a watermelon is only sixty days," says Tariqul. "It costs around Tk 35,000 to grow watermelons on one bigha of land but this should produce up to 1500 melons weighing more than 4 tonnes. If the watermelons are sold at a small size, the net profit should still reach around Tk 80,000. It ends up being more profitable than other crops."

Tariqul's success has not gone unnoticed. At least forty farmers in surrounding villages have followed his lead. Watermelon cultivation in sadar upazila now accounts for up to twenty acres of farmland and Tariqul is commonly acknowledged as the local industry's founder.

"Common watermelon varieties are grown from February to April," says the

sub-assistant agriculture officer of sadar upazila's Isali union, Abu Sayed Mohammad Arif. "Those watermelons are brought from other districts to sell here. But all-season watermelons are grown here. They have high demand since they are available to consumers year-round."

Besides, the Taiwanese varieties are less susceptible to insect attack which means the chance of loss to farmers is reduced. Apart from excess water build-up at the base of the plant there is little to disrupt its growth."

An additional advantage of all-season watermelons is that they can be grown on paddy land that usually remain fallow for two months after the Boro rice crop harvest. "An all-season watermelon crop can be harvested before the next rice crop is due for planting," Arif says.

Barely three years ago, there were few farmers in Jessore who thought about watermelons. These days, the raised structures on which the hanging melons grow are an increasingly common part of the landscape. It's a story of innovative agricultural success that started quite unexpectedly, with an expatriate worker's home for his childhood home.



A farmer of Sardarpara village in Thakurgaon Sadar upazila spraying medicine on his field to protect the Aman crop from different diseases attacking paddy fields in Thakurgaon and Panchagarh.

PHOTO: QUAMRUL ISLAM RUBAYAT