

MUSHROOM SPORE PRODUCTION

An income-generating enterprise

SAIKAT DEWAN with ANDREW EAGLE

In the quiet of a home laboratory, in Khagrachhari's Khabangparia village, a new enterprise is taking shape.

As a remedy for their own unemployment, twins Sudarshan and Sumon Chakma embarked upon an income-generating venture of an unusual kind.

They produce mushroom spores, to service the nascent but expanding mushroom farming industry.

Their business currently employs up to 400 locals. "We produce 40,000 mushroom spores annually," says Sudarshan, "At a minimum in this district there is demand for 60,000." Sumon Chakma first came upon the idea of producing mushroom spores while he was working as a labourer in Savar Export Processing Zone in 2011.

At the time he became acquainted with the nearby National Mushroom Development and Extension Centre, and took training there.

Upon returning home, Sumon noted robust demand for mushrooms in Khagrachhari. Thus with his brother he decided to form a company and put into practice the spore producing procedures he'd learnt.

Indeed, it being a family business, their younger sister Sraboni Chakma who is a college student also helps in the laboratory when she can.

The modest enterprise currently produces spores of a variety of oyster mushroom species, along with abalone and reishi mushrooms, the last of which is renowned for its medicinal properties.

They also produce spores of milky mushrooms, which are indigenous to South Asia.

In the marketplace and hence with local farmers two of the oyster mushroom varieties are the most popular.

As the mushroom farming season is winter, it is at this time of the year when the spore business is at its busiest, with farmers daily arriving at the door to buy.

Each spore sample is sold for Tk 23, which is a boon to farmers who previously had to pay significantly more for spores collected from Dhaka.

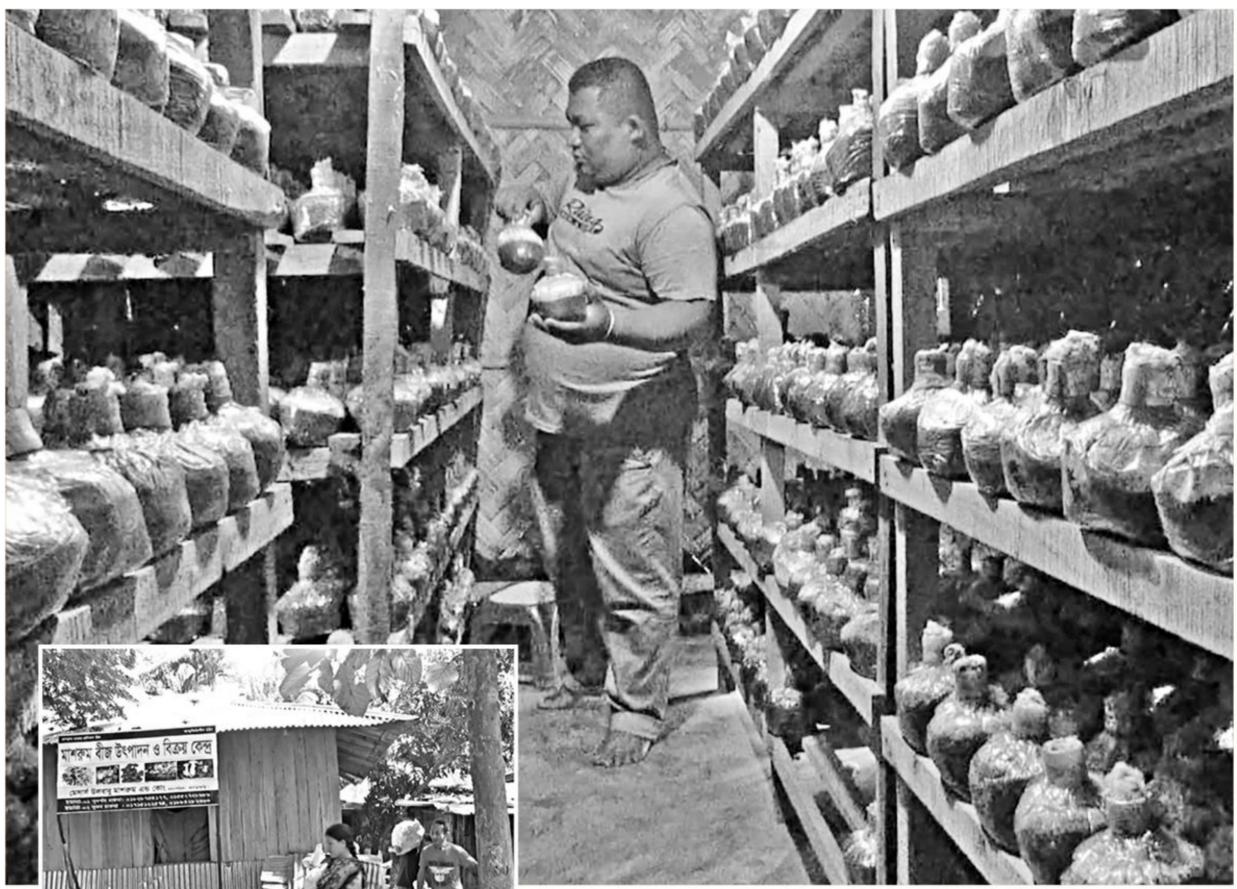
"I've been growing mushrooms for seven years," says one farmer, Abahla Chakma. "It used to cost a lot to collect spores but now they are available locally and reasonably priced.

"The brothers have faced some difficulties in bringing their business to life, foremost being financial.

Banks have been unwilling to provide loans to fund expansion.

Another problem is the uncertainty of the electricity supply, which limits spore production capacity.

"With an expanded business we could offer more employment opportunities to others," says Sudarshan.



Sudarshan Chakma at his mushroom laboratory at Khabangpuria village in Khagrachhari.

PHOTO: STAR

Missing youth found dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

The body of a missing youth was found in a potato field at Kalitola village in Baliadangi upazila yesterday.

The deceased was Ramjan Ali, 35, son of Rafiqul Islam of the village.

Ramjan went out of his house to buy medicine on Wednesday afternoon and did not return, said police and family sources.

Informed by locals, police recovered the body from the area around 1:00pm.

Mostafizur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Baliadangi Police Station, said no injury mark was found on his body.

Kid murdered for ransom

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Comilla

A six-year-old girl was found murdered yesterday, a day after she was abducted allegedly for ransom from Chandina upazila of Comilla on Wednesday.

The deceased, Suborna Akter Mim, a nursery student at Chandina Iqra Madrasa, was daughter of Korban Ali of Balasor area in the upazila.

Quoting the deceased's family members, police said Mim went out of her house around 12:00noon on Wednesday and did not return home.

Later, around 7:00pm, an unknown caller phoned Korban and demanded Tk 10 lakh ransom for his daughter's release.

Soon after receiving the call, Korban, a retired police constable, lodged a verbal complaint to Chandina Police Station in this regard.

Local people spotted Mim's body at Thangaon in the upazila yesterday morning and informed the police.

Officer-in-Charge Mohammad Ali Mahmud of Chandina Police Station said primarily they suspect that the girl might have been strangled.

3 sisters stop attending classes as stalker turns desperate

MD AMINUL ISLAM, Mymensingh

Amid harassment and threat by a stalker, three sisters have stopped attending their classes.

The alleged stalker, Delwar Hossain, 25, son of Tara Mia of Hatior village in Gouripur upazila under the district, and his accomplices have been disturbing an SSC candidate girl of the area for long.

Her elder sister is an HSC candidate while the youngest sister is a seventh grader at a local school, family sources said.

The SSC examinee completed her test examinations and her parents had to escort her to school for completing her form filling process, family sources said.

As the girl rejected Delwar's marriage proposal on several occasions, the stalker created more nuisance in recent

months, and it forced the victim to stop attending her school three months ago, said the girl's father, a farmer.

"In last month, my SSC examinee daughter started classes at a coaching centre, some one kilometre away from our house. But Delwar again started harassing her.

"On November 25 afternoon, when she was returning home from the coaching centre with another girl, Delwar along with his accomplice Abdul Aziz of neighbouring Poltipara village waylaid her with sharp weapons and forcibly took her onto an auto-rickshaw.

"They took my daughter to Sahaganj area of the upazila, some seven kilometres away.

As they started torturing her, locals came to her rescue and arranged her safe

return in the evening. Then she narrated the incident to us," said the father.

He informed Gouripur Upazila Nirbahi Officer Marjina Akhter about the matter and lodged a complaint with Gouripur Police Station accusing Delwar and Aziz on Friday.

"My daughters' education faces uncertainty as they dare not go out house. Earlier Delwar used to tease my elder daughter, but his family did not take any step to prevent him, despite our complaints. As the accused are still at large and giving threats, we feel utterly insecure," he said.

Delwar Ahmed, officer-in-charge of Gouripur Police Station, said primary inquiry shows the allegations to be true and police are trying to arrest the accused.

Delwar's father Tara Mia said if his son is found guilty, he should be punished.

Stalker jailed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gaibandha

A mobile court here yesterday sentenced a stalker to three months imprisonment on charge of physically assaulting a schoolgirl in Sadar upazila.

The convict is Ujjal Mia, 18, son of Dudu Mia of Uttar Kholahati village.

Police said the victim, a Class IX student, was going to her school to take the annual examination when Ujjal stopped her and proposed her. The stalker followed the girl into the class room and assaulted her.

Locals caught Ujjal and took him to the headmaster's room. Headmaster Asma Hakkani informed the police, who produced him before a mobile court.



Farmer Ashraf Islam spraying pesticide on his cauliflower field in Purbo Shalmara village under Aditmari upazila of Lalmonirhat. The picture was taken a few days ago.

PHOTO: STAR

Indiscriminate use of pesticides on winter vegetables

They aren't aware of proper chemical dosage

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Farmers in the district are using more pesticides than necessary on winter vegetables as most of them do not know how much to use on their crops.

Ashraful Islam, 42, a winter vegetable grower in Purbo Shalmara village under Aditmari upazila, said he has cultivated cauliflower on six bighas of land and sprays pesticide on the vegetable field twice a week. "If I don't use chemicals on my cauliflower field twice a week, pests will attack my crop," he added.

His younger brother Abdul Hamid, 30, said they take suggestion from the pesticide seller. "We don't need to go agriculture officials for getting advice, and they never visit us to give advice on the method of using pesticide," he added.

Delwar Hossain, 62, of the same

village said it is not possible to get expected production of winter vegetables, especially cauliflower, without using chemicals. "We also use vitamins to speed up the growth of cauliflowers," he said, adding that they spend a huge amount for buying chemicals every winter.

Nibendunath Barman, 55, of Karnopur village in Sadar upazila said they use additional chemicals on winter vegetables as they do not know how much pesticide they need to use on their vegetable fields. "We know that we will get bumper production if we use chemicals properly to save our crops from pests and diseases," he said.

"We go door to door of farmers for providing technical support and advice for using good seeds and limiting dosage of chemicals," said Sub-Assistant Agriculture Officer in

Aditmari upazila Khabir Uddin. "Most farmers always follow our directions, and they contact us if needed," he added.

Moslem Uddin, a pesticide seller at Bhelnari Bazar in the upazila said they sell pesticides to the farmers after hearing about their problems. "We advise farmers on how to use pesticides and tell them never to use chemicals unnecessarily," he added.

District Department of Agriculture Extension Deputy Director Bidhubhushan Roy said it is advisable to use pesticides on vegetable fields two or three times a month, but farmers tend to use additional chemicals. "Agriculture officials are always ready to prescribe pesticides and the dosage," he said, adding he has ordered the officials to visit farmers at their homes.

Four districts freed today

STAR COUNTRY DESK

People of Barisal, Brahmanbaria, Comilla and Patuakhali got the taste of freedom on this day in 1971, report our correspondents.

On December 8, valiant freedom fighters took control of Barisal town by defeating the Pakistani army.

In Brahmanbaria, late FF Johur Ahmed Chowdhury hoisted the national flag of independent Bangladesh in the town on December 8, a day after the army fled the district.

On this day during the Liberation War, Comilla was freed from the clutches of the occupation forces.

The FFs freed Patuakhali from the occupation forces after a nine-month fierce fighting.

Rickety bamboo bridge the only means

The bridge that broke down 10 years ago is yet to be rebuilt in Morrelganj

A CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

People especially the students of five educational institutions in Morrelganj upazila have been suffering immensely for lack of a bridge that broke down 10 years ago.

Villagers are using a risky bamboo bridge to cross the canal in Chalitabunia and Chipabarui khali villages as no steps have been taken to re-build the bridge during the last 10 years, locals said.

After the bridge broke down, a bamboo bridge was built by the local people, said Kabir Sheikh.

Thousands of people have to cross the bamboo bridge every day at risk. Accidents occur regularly. People, especially children, are afraid to walk across the bridge, said student Rakib.

Chipabarui khali High School, R Rahman Institute, Chalitabunia

Hefajkhana, Olimaganj Fazil Madrasa and Chalitabunia Government Primary School are situated in the locality. Hundreds of students of these institutions have to cross the risky bamboo bridge every day, said teacher Nasir Uddin.

Teacher Altaf said a bridge over the canal is badly needed for the people of Chalitabunia and Chipabarui khali villages.

Khailia Union Parishad Chairman Abul Khair said the authorities concerned had been informed about the need to build a bridge long ago, but no measures have been taken for that yet.

Morrelganj Upazila Engineer Ashikee Amin said he would take necessary steps in this regard as soon as possible.

Morrelganj Upazila Nirbahi Officer Md Kamruzzaman said he does not know about the matter as he has joined the upazila recently.



People cross this risky bridge in Morrelganj upazila of Bagerhat as the authorities concerned have not built a new bridge in place of the old one that broke down about 10 years ago.

PHOTO: STAR