

Bottle gourds take potato lands in Munshiganj

The popular winter vegetable brings better profit than the region's traditional main crop

SHYKH SERAJ

It is not possible to bring a change alone. But the change is to start from an individual level. And of course, the most difficult part is the start. I have tried to observe very closely the agricultural change in North Bangladesh after liberation. I have seen how the farmers of this country have gradually been associated with new agricultural changes. For the sake of necessity, they themselves have developed many technologies and agricultural techniques. By learning about a new technology or strategy of a different country or area through television, they have been successful in making and using it completely on their own. I have seen many such examples. Agriculture is a spiritual pursuit to a farmer. I believe in the immortal line of Razia Khatun Chowdhurani, "The great saint of all saints is the farmers of my country."

Recently, I have found another successful farmer. He is Hakim Dewan of Mamashar village under Bojrojugini union of Munshiganj, the person who applied technology and technique by watching agricultural show on television. By doing so, not only has he changed his own fortune, but also the scenario of the whole village.

During the end of November this year, I started for Munshiganj at dawn. The destination is the farm of Hakim Dewan in the village of Mamashar. A light fog appeared after I entered the village. The climate change was quite noticeable as at the end of November, the winter should have been far colder and foggy.

After I reached Hakim Dewan's farm, the sun started peeping out in the eastern sky. A glimpse of a bright day is noticed due to the golden shine spread by the sun. Hakim's age would be 40 years to 45 years. It is apparent that he is a very enthusiastic man. He came to me carrying a basket containing 10 to 12



Farmer Hakim Dewan poses with Shykh Seraj at his bottle gourd field in Bojrojugini of Munshiganj.

PHOTO: HRIDOYE MATI O MANUSH

Shykh Seraj is Bangladesh's pioneer development journalist. He received country's two highest civilian honours, *Swadhinata Puroshkar* and *Ekushey Padak*, respectively. He is an Ashoka and Bangla Academy Fellow. He also received highest award for agricultural journalism from the United Nations, FAO A.H. Boerma Award, Gusi Peace Prize (Philippines) and many other prestigious accolades at home and abroad. At Channel i, he's the Founder Director and Head of News. He's also Director and Host of Channel i's popular agro-documentary, *Hridoye Mati O Manush*.



bottle gourds on his head. Putting the basket down, he hugged me. He said, "I cannot believe I am actually meeting you. By the grace of Almighty, watching your show changed my fortune." Readers, there is no greater joy in my life than knowing my

programme has benefited a farmer.

Potato was the main crop of farmers in this area, including Hakim Dewan. This fertile area on the banks of Padma, Meghna, Dhaleshwari and Ichhamati rivers is relatively low. Many lands get submerged due to heavy rainfall. Usually, the water goes away in September-October. After the water moves away, potatoes are planted. One day, Hakim Dewan saw the ancient floating farming method of the southern region on Channel i's Hridoye Mati O Manush. I have presented this method many times on Hridoye Mati O Manush. In the early nineties, I did a report on floating farming method for the first time in Bangladesh Television's Mati O Manush programme. After that, the method of floating cultivation has been recognised as the country's traditional agricultural method by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. Farmer Hakim Dewan watched this farming technique on television and practiced it first on his low land. The other farmers in the neighborhood thought he had gone crazy. They said, "Barishal's farming system won't be applicable in Munshiganj." Hakim Dewan is not someone to panic. He alone made a heap of water hyacinth and planted bottle gourd seedlings on top of it. Success came in the first try. In a

soaked floating bed, he started growing profitable bottle gourd. Many other farmers started following him witnessing his success.

Potato cultivation is like an age old practice of Munshiganj farmers. It is their tradition. But they are gradually changing their habit. It has happened due to nothing but the fact that they have been facing loss in potato cultivation lately. So, the cultivable potato lands of Bojrojugini are being taken over by profitable bottle gourds.

The lands are green with luscious bottle gourds. Fields after fields are filled with bottle gourds. Thousands of bottle gourds are hanging on the *machas* (bamboo platforms). This amazing scene overwhelms me. This reminds me of the bottle gourd farm of Babul, a young man from Betbari village of Mymensingh's Bhaluka. A couple of years ago, the young entrepreneur Babul created a stir by cultivating bottle gourd on 20 acres of land. Hakim Dewan is now cultivating bottle gourd on 120 decimals of land. I also talked to other farmers of the area. One of them is Rasel Mohammad. He said that this time he has cultivated bottle gourd on 140 decimals of land. He is getting 100 gourds daily. He will be getting gourd like this for straight three months. They start the season by selling gourds for Tk 40 to Tk 45

each. At the end of the season, the price comes down to Tk 30 to Tk 35 each. The farmers are happy with the price they are getting straight from the fields. Rasel Mohammad's calculation is very simple in the case of gourd. To cultivate bottle gourd on 140 decimals of land, it costs him a total of Tk 1.50 lakh (approx 1789 USD). And he earns more than Tk 4 lakh (approx 4772 USD) from there. This profit of Tk 2.50 lakh (approx 2982 USD) in four months has changed his life, even the dreams of the future. Another farmer Yasin Arafat has planted gourds in 160 decimals of the land. He said, "There is more profit in bottle gourds than potatoes. Not only the fruit, but also the leaves bring earning."

Indeed, this Mamashar village of Munshiganj is giving a message of a new wealthy Bangladesh. Farmers are now very aware. Their calculations are well-organised. They are becoming confident. They are choosing their own tools and tactics to change their fortune.

Sub-Assistant Agriculture Officer (SAAO) of the Department of Agriculture Extension Selim Hossain was present in the field. I also talked to him about this new change in cultivation in Munshiganj area. He said that bottle gourd cultivation is happening on 35 hectares of land

in Bojrojugini. And from this, farmers are getting about three times more profit than potatoes. Selim Hossain estimates that the cultivation of potatoes from 35 hectares of land brings Tk 1.10 crore (approx 131,241 USD), whereas farmers are getting more than Tk 3 crore (approx 357,930) by cultivating bottle gourds.

Dear readers, diversified changes are happening in the farming sector. The pattern of agriculture is changing every day. The equation of agriculture has changed due to multipurpose research, extension and improved seeds reaching the hands of the farmers. Needless to say, media campaign is tremendously influencing the farmer too. Farmers are becoming rich tactically as well as becoming aware regarding their own rights. They are finding the crops that will bring them more profit. Farmers are confidently investing in farming, understanding the possibilities. Today, they have enough enthusiasm and confidence in applying new methods. Munshiganj's agricultural diversity is such a successful example. It is necessary to ensure timely extension of services and market facilities to take these brave initiatives of the farmers forward, so that the farmers can contribute to the agricultural economy reaching their desired goals.

Schoolboy murdered in Jashore

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Police recovered the body of a schoolboy with his throat slit from a paddy field at Sarkati village in Monirampur upazila of Jashore yesterday.

The deceased was Shimul Hossain, 15, son of Rafiqul Islam, and an SSC candidate from Kashimpur High School in the upazila. "Shimul was watching television when someone called him over mobile around 11:00pm on Tuesday. He went out from the house but did not return," said the deceased's mother Poly Begum.

Bhasani's 138th birth anniversary observed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

The 138th birth anniversary of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, a legendary politician and dreamer of independent Bangladesh, was observed in the district with due respect yesterday.

Bhasani's family members and teachers, students, officials and employees of Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University placed wreaths and offered fateha at his grave at Santosh in the morning.

Besides, doa and milad mahfil were held at the central mosque of the university after Johr prayers, praying for peace of the departed soul of the great leader.

Different political and social organisations, including Bhasani Foundation, also

held various programmes, including a discussion meeting, to mark the day.

Born at Dhangara village in Sirajganj in 1880, Bhasani was the founder president of the Awami Muslim League, which afterwards became Awami League. He later formed a left-leaning political organisation called National Awami Party.

He played a leading role in the 1969 mass upsurge. He also led the historic Farakka March in 1976 to ensure Bangladesh's right to a fair share of the Ganges river water.

The brave and devoted leader of the common people worked relentlessly and spent almost his entire life for the oppressed masses, which earned him the title Mazlum Jana Neta, meaning the leader of the oppressed. The great leader passed away on November 17, 1976.

157 new species found in SE Asia

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Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, in some of the region's most impenetrable terrain, such as remote mountainous and dense jungle areas, as well as isolated rivers and grassland.

However, experts warned that many more undiscovered species will be lost due to deforestation, climate change, poaching and the illegal wildlife trade.

"There are many more species out there waiting to be discovered and tragically, many more that will be lost before that happens," Stuart Chapman, WWF's Asia-Pacific Regional Director for Conservation Impact, said in a statement. "It doesn't have to be this way. Ensuring that large reserves are designated for wildlife, along with increased efforts to close illegal wildlife trade markets, will go a long way to conserving the extraordinary wildlife diversity in the Mekong region."

Much of the wildlife described in the new report -- "New Species on the Block" -- is already at risk of population loss or even extinction.

This fragility ranges from bamboo -- a variety with unique bulb-like features at its base, discovered in Cambodia's fragrant Cardamom Mountains, vulnerable to clearing -- to the new thismia herb from Laos, already endangered because its habitat has been leased out for limestone mining.

Of the new mammals discovered, the Skywalker Hoolock Gibbon was first sighted in mid-2017 and named after the "Star Wars" character, to actor Mark Hamill's delight. Already however, it is the 25th most endangered primate in the world and faces a "grave and imminent risk to its survival as (do) many other small ape species in southern China and Southeast Asia due to habitat loss and hunting,"

according to the team which discovered it.

While Laos and Myanmar have tried to clamp down on the illegal wildlife trade, by increasing penalties and shutting down shops and markets, poachers can easily capture and transport animals across borders, particularly in places such as Mongla and Tachilek in Myanmar, said Lee Poston, spokesman for the WWF in the Greater Mekong area.

Poston said snares fashioned from cheap bicycle cable are often used indiscriminately by poachers, both to catch bushmeat for local consumption and to capture endangered species such as leopards and tigers for the wildlife trade. While he praised the work of local rangers who track and survey the areas for traps, the sheer quantity make the task of removing them difficult.



Hired labourers busy harvesting early potato at Rajarampur village in Phulbari upazila of Dinajpur. The photo was taken on December 10.

PHOTO: STAR

Early potato farming a boon for growers

215 hectares in Phulbari UZ under its cultivation

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Cultivation of early variety potato has made the growers in Phulbari upazila happy as they are getting high yield and good price for their produce.

According to the Upazila Agriculture Officer ATM Hamim Ashraf, around 215 hectares of land have been brought under potato farming in Phulbari this year.

Harvesting of early potato is going on everywhere in the upazila, farmers said.

During a visit to different villages in the upazila in the last couple of days, this correspondent found that many farmers are passing a busy time harvesting the potatoes with hired labourers.

Faruk Hossain, a farmer of Rajarampur village, told this correspondent that he cultivated potato on one acre of land this year and got around 4.40 tonnes of the

produce.

"I sold the potatoes at Tk 600 per maund from the field," he said, adding that the yield last year was not good.

Md Nazrul Islam said he has been producing early potato on his one-acre land for the last five years. "The yield and the price are good this year," he said.

He will cultivate maize on the same land after harvesting the potatoes, Nazrul said.

Upazila Agriculture Officer ATM Hamim Ashraf said early potato farming is a boon for its growers this year as they are getting a good yield and better price of their produce. Besides, they can cultivate other crops on the same land after completion of potato harvesting, he added.

"Cultivation of potato is still going on in the upazila," he said.

Each kilogram of fresh potato is being sold for Tk 35 in the local markets.

Elderly man found dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jamalpur

An elderly man was found dead under Jhenai Railway bridge in Kompapur area of Sadar upazila yesterday.

The deceased was Ashrafud-Doula, 65, of Pashchim Bamna village in Islampur upazila. He ran a welding shop in Jamalpur town.

Ashrafud traveled on a Jamalpur-bound train from Islampur on Tuesday night, railway police said quoting the victim's family members.

Ashrafud, who possibly traveled on the train roof, might have died after being hit by the girder of the rail bridge, said Taposh Chandra Pandit, OC of Jamalpur Railway Police Station.

Police recovered the body and sent it to Jamalpur General Hospital for autopsy yesterday, said the OC.