



An excavator scoops out topsoil from a piece of agricultural land in Moulvibazar. Influential brick kiln owners in the district have been forcing land owners to sell the fertile layer of land to them.

PHOTO: STAR

Land fertility, ecology under threat as topsoil removed to make bricks

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

Agricultural production and ecological balance are under threat in Moulvibazar as influential brickfield owners are forcing landowners to sell topsoil, the raw material for bricks.

Unless swift action is taken against the brickfield owners, a great swathe of land in the district may gradually turn infertile due to the rampant sale of the most fertile layer of land known as topsoil, said environmental scientists, activists and officials at Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

Approximately six inches of the upper portion of land is topsoil that help plants grow with a supply of nutrients, said Dr AHM Mahfuzul Haque, chairman of plant pathology and seed science department at Sylhet Agricultural University.

The fertile portion of soil provides habitat for plants and ensures consistent yield of high-quality agricultural plants, he said, adding that production of crops in the district is on the decline as plants are not getting nutrients due to the loss of topsoil.

Shahjahan Chowdhury, deputy director of DAE in Moulvibazar, said after a piece of land loses its topsoil, it may take around 15 years to regain fertility through application of organic fertilisers.

A local farmer requesting anonymity told this correspondent that brick kiln owners in the area are so influential that landowners there do not dare to refuse selling topsoil to them fearing repercussions.

Salam Mia, a resident of Dakkhinbagh area in Barklekha upazila, said two acres of his farmland has become uneven and less

productive after he sold topsoil from there three years ago.

Farmer Jibon Mia, from Tilagaon village in Kulaura upazila, alleged that an earth trader had forced him to sell topsoil from two acres of his land and many other farmers in the area are also being forced to sell topsoil from their land.

Echoing the allegations made by locals, Nurul Mohaimin, general secretary of Forum of Environmental Journalists of Bangladesh, said many landowners are under pressure from brick kiln owners to sell topsoil from their land. The poor farmers are too afraid to go against the pressure as the brick kiln owners are very powerful.

After the sale, the land remains uncultivable and fallow for years, affecting overall agricultural production. The situation is getting worse due to a lack

of monitoring by the district administration, he added.

However, speaking with this correspondent, Mithu Chakrabarty, manager of Monu Brickfield in Tilagaon village, claimed, "We don't force anyone to sell topsoil. [Moreover,] I pay good price when buying soil from farmers."

Urging the authorities to take immediate steps in stopping the harmful practice, Abdul Karim Kim, general secretary of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon's Sylhet chapter, said unabated use of topsoil in kilns will reduce fertility of land and eventually the land will turn absolutely uncultivable.

Tofail Islam, deputy commissioner of Moulvibazar, said, "We are aware of the violation of law by many brick kiln owners. We will take action against the ones violating the law."

Padma chars see bumper tomato yield after floods

Farmers reap massive harvest of the popular fruit as fertile alluvial soil helps unexpectedly high yield

AMANUR AMAN, From Kushtia

After last year's catastrophic flood, farmers in vast chars (sandy land mass in a river) of Padma in Rajbari are now hoping to make up for the loss by growing tomato this year.

Their hopes are high this winter as they are seeing a bumper production of the red fruit in the region.

According to data from Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), tomato is being cultivated on a larger area, around 835 hectares, of land this year in five upazilas of Rajbari that is mostly surrounded by the river Padma. The fruit was cultivated on 825 hectares last year.

Of the 835 hectares, 375 hectares are in Rajbari sadar upazila, 300 in Goaland, 85 in Pangsha, 38 in Kalukhali and 37 hectares in Baliakandi upazila.

Farmers said this year they harvested 600 maunds of tomato from each hectare of land.

While visiting some of the remotest chars in Barot and Chandani unions, this correspondent witnessed farmers reaping a massive harvest of tomato in the area.

Farmer Habibur Rahman Dablu, from Char Dukhi village in Barot union of Rajbari Sadar upazila, harvested 1,200 maunds of tomato from two hectares of land. "I already made a good profit," he said with excitement.

Other farmers in the same area said they too made a good profit growing tomato this year.

The DAE officials said soil in the area is suitable for growing different winter vegetables as it contains a type of active alluvial silt.

"Although the flood last year ravaged our dreams, the alluvial silt it brought eventually turned out to be a blessing for us," said Abdur Rashid, a farmer in Goaland upazila.

Aside from the natural blessing, use of modern technology -- including pheromone trap for insects -- and refraining from using harmful pesticides coupled with various on-field training campaigns provided by DAE helped in reaping the higher yield of tomato this year, the DAE officials said.

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A laudable initiative for maternal care

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

The Sindurna char in Lalmonirhat that once saw at least three maternal deaths in a year is now free of the menace, thanks to the free of cost prenatal services being arranged in the remote char.

A local NGO, Eco-Social Development Organization (ESDO), launched the project a year ago and trained four female workers for six months on maternal health. Since then the workers, known as "community skilled birth attendants" or CSBA, had been by the side of pregnant women.

"The project aims at promoting normal delivery over caesarean [the use of surgery to deliver babies]," said Abdul Mannan, manager of the project. "The char on Teesta [river] was chosen for its location as government services hardly reach this remote char."

The attendants come to the char every day and provide necessary counselling to pregnant women by going door to door, Abdul said. "When the time of delivery comes, the girls are brought to the mainland and admitted to government hospitals. We bear the cost," he added.

The char in Hatibandha upazila is home to 485 families. There is one government-run primary school, but no high school, clinic or even pharmacy. Boat is the only transport to reach there from the mainland.

Jaheda Begum, 40, is going to be a mother for the third time. "Previously I faced difficulties as no prenatal care was

available in this char. This time I am hopeful that my delivery will be normal and safe."

Ismat Ara Begum, 18, is going have her first baby. "At the beginning, I got scared hearing stories from other women. But now I am confident and hope I will give birth to my child in a safe environment," she said adding, "The NGO health workers often visit my house."

Hasina Bewa, a 52-year-old widow, recalled how women in the char used to go through serious difficulties during pregnancy before the NGO workers stepped in.

"We did not have any knowledge over nutrition, menstruation cycles. Now the women on this char are quite aware of how to take care of themselves as they are getting necessary counselling," she said.

A total 50 mothers have so far been facilitated under the project, "Integrated Community Development Project- II," funded by Plan International Bangladesh.

Rozina Begum, a CSBA, said, "We visit the char everyday and provide prenatal services free of cost. We take the girls to hospital in case any complication occurs."

Another attendant Maziron Begum said, "No maternal death has taken place since we started working here. We are trying to build awareness over healthcare among women in this char."

Dr Ramjan Ali, health and family planning officer in the upazila, praised the initiative by ESDO. "I would request the NGO authorities to run such projects in all the remote chars."



Two trained birth attendants talk to women at remote Char Sindurna in Lalmonirhat's Hatibandha upazila, explaining to them different aspects of health care and safe delivery a few days ago.

PHOTO: STAR



Workers in Patgram upazila of Lalmonirhat operate a stone crusher amid dust pollution and deafening noise. The unchecked use of the machines poses threat to human health in the area.

PHOTO: STAR

Stone crushing pollutes air, poses health risk at Burimari

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Rampant use of stone crushers is causing severe noise and air pollution in Lalmonirhat's Burimari land port area under Patgram upazila.

The gruelling noise and cloud of dust in the area are posing health hazards to locals, especially to several thousand workers who carry stones or operate the machines. First-time visitors and port users also find it difficult to cope with the unwarranted extreme conditions in the area.

As a means to keep the dust pollution to a minimum level, the authorities had directed the operators to spray sufficient amount of water onto the stones being crushed and in the areas around the machine. The directive, however, is ignored by most operators.

Redwan Islam, owner of a stone crusher, claimed that they follow the directive, but the workers sometimes fail to comply with their orders.

During a visit to the area, some people were seen using over-the-counter face masks. But many of the labourers, who cannot afford those, were seen covering their faces with gamchha (a traditional towel), knowing that neither the face mask nor the gamchha may not provide them full protection from the excessive dust.

Stone worker Fazlu Miah said since he cannot afford to spend money on face masks, he tries to cover his face with a gamchha while at work. "Of course, I know that this is not going to protect me from this terrible dust," he added.

Another labourer, Nazrul Islam, said, "It feels suffocating to keep our faces covered all the time. So, oftentimes, we take off the face coverings during work too."

Nazrul also said that if the machine owners supplied face masks to workers, he would not disagree to use those.

Within around a six-kilometre radius of Burimari land port, at least two thousand stone crushers remain in operation from dawn till

dusk. Some of those are even operational round the clock, making it quite impossible to sleep even during night time.

Finding the throbbing of the stone crushers unbearable, Delwar Hossain, a visitor at the land port, said the noise as well as the dust were beyond the level that he could tolerate and hence, he hurriedly finished his work at the port in an hour.

Sahidul Islam, 55, a resident of the area, frustratingly said, "This is not an environment where humans can survive. Still, we have no choice but to live with this terrible noise and air pollution."

After this correspondent reached Mezbah Ul-Alam, deputy director of Department of Environment in Rangpur, for his comments over the pollution caused by stone crushers around the Burimari land port, he said, "We [routinely] conduct drives against the stone crushers. But [sometimes] we can't continue the drive due to manpower shortage."