

'Organic village' of female farmers

Maheshwarchanda village in Jhenidah's Kaliganj upazila reaps health and financial benefits of chemical-free farming

SHYKH SERAJ

This year's theme of International Women's Day -- "Think equal, build smart, innovate for change" aptly fits with the achievement of women farmers at Maheshwarchanda village in Jhenidah's Kaliganj upazila, where the change-makers' innovative steps help promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

Kaliganj is very rich in agricultural diversity. Walking beside the Chitra river, one would see fields covered with various crops. Winter vegetables, sugarcane, betel leaf, guava, baukul (Bau variety of plum) are on fields. Large patches of land are covered with marigolds. Boro paddy is planted in relatively low lands. Farmers are earning well by cultivating different varieties of fruits and crops here. Farmers know that soil is the source of their livelihood. And so, they are conscious enough to take care of the soil. They are encouraged to use organic fertilizer more and reduce the use of chemical fertilizers.

Dear readers, today, I will take you to a village of organic farming. The village is known as Maheshwarchanda.

The commercial production of vermicompost or worm fertilizer in this village and some nearby ones has already generated great response in the country.

Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote in a song of this, "The soil of my country is purer than pure gold." But that soil is losing its purity due to unplanned cultivation, excessive tilling and massive use of chemical fertilizers. Thus, fertility of the soil is gradually decreasing. Currently, there is about 79.46 lakh (7.9 million) hectares of arable land in the country. And the organic components of these cultivable lands play the most effective role in maintaining quality of the soil. Ideally, the amount of organic compound in the soil is supposed to be five percent.

Shykh Seraj is Bangladesh's pioneer development journalist. He received country's two highest civilian honours, *Suadhinata 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*.



Women working at a vermicompost plant at Maheshwarchanda village in Jhenidah.

PHOTO: HRIDOYE MATI O MANUSH

But in most areas of Bangladesh, the amount of organic compound has dropped below one percent, which is a matter of great concern. The main reason for this is the increased intensity of high yielding crops and excessive use of chemical fertilizers. Various types of programmes, both public and private, have been taken to find a solution to this problem. Campaigns to encourage production of organic fertilizer are being conducted in rural areas to signify the importance of organic fertilizers. Maheshwarchanda village of Jhenidah's Kaliganj upazila has become a role model. Here, in every household, farmers are making vermicompost, which is truly a rare example in the country.

The commercial production of vermicompost was unknown to the common people and rural masses even a decade ago. Readers, I remember that in the '80s, from the time of 'Mati O Manush' on Bangladesh Television, I used to continuously broadcast programmes, explaining to the farmers about the importance of organic fertilizers and later on with 'Hridoye Mati O Manush' on Channel i, I have been inspiring

farmers to do it from the very beginning. Vermicompost production has spread across the villages of Fulbaria, Shivalaya, Belabo and Raipura, mainly through the hands of rural women. And now it is being produced more or less all over the country.

In rural areas, women have joined this work. They are producing poison-free crops. It meets the nutritional needs of the family. And they are earning money by selling additional crops. For this reason, vermicompost is playing a very important role in socio-economic changes of rural livelihoods.

I went to Maheshwarchanda village earlier, quite some time ago. Then I saw how creative their idea of protecting the soil was. When I came here again after seven or eight years, everything looked different. It seems that the soil, nature, farming and people of this village understand each other's language. I have to add again, women farmers have played a pivotal role in this change.

When I reached Maheshwarchanda, the sun had tilted to the west. Homemaker Shahnaz Parvin of this village was then busy working with tools for producing vermicompost at her

courtyard. I talked to her. She mentioned how vermicompost changed her life. Once very poor, Shahnaz Parvin changed her life by producing vermicompost. She now lives in a concrete house with tiled floors. In front of the building, stands her vermicompost producing plant.

Shahnaz said she earns about Tk 10,000 (approximately USD 118) on average in a month by selling vermicompost. She produces 600 kg of vermicompost a month. And she sells about 10 kg of worms per month. Shahnaz said, she uses vermicompost with her own land. As a result, the land needs less irrigation on 24 kathas (approximately two acres) of land.

Shahnaz Parvin's mother-in-law Rebecca Begum was present there. She has been able to bring solvency to the family by producing vermicompost. She has received social recognition for this organic farming campaign. She has been honoured with certificates, crests and awards from public and private organisations.

Like Shahnaz and Rebecca, many other women have become self-

reliant. Ninety-three families among a total of 96 families in Maheshwarchanda village have engaged in the production of vermicompost. Vermicompost is being produced on large clay-made containers kept on courtyards, cattle farms or empty places. It has created employment opportunity for rural women, at the same time villagers have got back the fertility of soil and getting organic crops. This has decreased production cost too.

I saw a cattle farm near a rice mill. The cow dung is used for biogas production which meets the rice mill workers' need of cooking fuel. And the slurry of the cow dung is used to produce vermicompost. Altogether, the production cycle is great here.

Dear readers, tomorrow (March 8) is International Women's Day. It is a time to reflect on progress made, to call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played extraordinary roles in their communities and countries, says UN.

This year's theme, "Think equal, build smart, innovate for change" focuses on innovative ways in which we can promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, particularly in the areas of social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure.

The achievement of the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires transformative shifts, integrated approaches and new solutions, particularly when it comes to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. And, I firmly believe the women and girls of Maheshwarchanda have just done that and the world has to know it.

The need of organic farming and safe food production has been recognised by all farmers of this region. Women have predominantly come forward while men are following. Each woman will turn into a successful farm entrepreneur in the near future in this village by making vermicompost, I am pretty much sure. The soil of this region will be much more productive with their contributions. Financial solvency will reach every household. More importantly, producing safe food is the key to ensuring good health and these women have done this. I hope that day is not far when no farmer of the country will depend on excessive pesticides or chemical fertilizers. Rather, they will be encouraged to protect the health of the soil and produce pure, fresh, healthy and organic crops for the people of Bangladesh.

18 rebels of AL to fight for UZ chairman posts in Tangail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Only three out of 12 upazilas in Tangail will not have any rebel candidate against chairman candidates nominated by Awami League in the upcoming upazila parishad election.

In the remaining nine upazilas, 18 rebel candidates submitted nomination papers against AL-nominated ones for chairman posts.

BNP, on the other hand, is not officially taking part in the election. But six of its leaders submitted nomination papers as independent candidates for chairman posts in Sadar, Kalihati, Mirzapur, Basail and Nagarpur upazilas.

Meanwhile, none but AL-nominated Harun-or-Rashid, vice-president of Dhanbari upazila unit of AL, submitted nomination paper for chairman post in the upazila.

If Hurun-or-Rashid's nomination paper is found valid after scrutiny and withdrawal of others' nomination papers, he will be declared chairman-elect uncontested, said AHM Kamrul Hasan, district election officer in Tangail.

In Tangail Sadar upazila, besides AL-nominated candidate Shahjahan Ansary, party leader and incumbent Chairman Khورشهد Alam also submitted his nomination paper. Asgar Ali, secretary general of the upazila unit of BNP, also submitted nomination paper as an independent candidate.

In Madhupur, besides AL-nominated candidate Sarwar Alam Khan Abu, party leader Yakub Ali also submitted nomination paper as an independent candidate.

In Gopalpur, besides AL candidate and incumbent Chairman Yunus Islam Talukder Thandu, three more party leaders also submitted their nomination papers. They are Saiful Islam Talukder Suruj, Khandakar Gias Uddin and Nasir Uddin Roni.

In Bhuapur, besides AL's candidate and incumbent Chairman Abdul Halim, four more party leaders also submitted their nomination papers. They are Amirul Islam Talukder Bidyut, Abdul Latif, ATM Habibullah and Masudur Rahman Cornel.

In Ghatail, besides AL's Shahidul Islam Lebu, four more party leaders also submitted nomination papers. They are Arif Hossain, Shahidul Islam Hasting, Syed Ehsan Abdullah and Shafiqul Islam Khan Jony.

In Kalihati, besides AL candidate and incumbent Chairman Mozaherul Islam Thandu, party leader Ansar Ali also submitted nomination paper. Joint convener of upazila BNP Motiul Alam Talukder also submitted nomination paper as an independent candidate.

In Nagarpur, AL candidate Kudrat Ali submitted his nomination paper without facing any rebel candidate from AL. Two BNP leaders -- incumbent Chairman Abdus Samad Dulal and Arifur Rahman Sami -- submitted their nomination as independent candidates.

In Delduar, besides AL's Fazlul Haque, party leader Mahmudul Hasan Maruf also submitted nomination.

In Mirzapur, AL's candidate and incumbent Chairman Mir Enayet Hossain Montu submitted nomination paper and he is not facing any intra-party candidate. BNP leader Firoz Haider Khan submitted nomination as an independent candidate.

In Sakhipur, besides AL's Julfikar Haider Kamal, party leaders Sayeed Azad and Nazrul Islam Khan submitted nomination.

In Basail, besides AL's Motiur Rahman Gaus, party leader Kazi Alid Islam submitted nomination. Two BNP leaders -- incumbent Chairman Kazi Shahidul Islam and Nizamul Islam -- submitted nomination.



A vast area of farmland in Barguna's Pathorghata upazila still remains under water after unseasonal rain in February. Inset, a few samples of potato that rot due to the rain.

PHOTO: SOHRAB HOSSAIN

UNSEASONAL FEBRUARY RAIN IN BARGUNA, PATUAKHALI Farmers incur Tk 3.6cr damage

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

The sudden unseasonal rainfall in the last week of February has dealt a serious blow to farmers in Barguna and Patuakhali.

According to estimates by officials of Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), the heavy rain has caused at least Tk 3.6 crore worth of damage to crops in the two districts.

Hoping to reap a good harvest after winter, Abul Kalam had spent about Tk 35,000 to plant several seasonal crops including mung beans and potato on his 1.5 acres of land in Barguna's Rupdhon village under Pathorghata upazila.

Looking at his crop field, inundated by the rain, he now sees no hope of recovering the investment.

The mung beans would be ready for harvest

next week, but the rain has spoiled it, the hapless farmer said.

Patuakhali's watermelon farmer Kamrul Islam Hiru said all his watermelon plants, on 15 acres of land in Rangabali upazila Chotobaisdia village, were damaged by the rain, costing him a loss of nearly Tk 24 lakh.

"Now how will I pay off the loan that I took for agriculture?" He said with frustration.

Rangabali Union Parishad Chairman Saiduzzaman Mamun said the government should step in to help out the farmers as all of them have incurred heavy losses due to the rain.

In Barguna and Patuakhali, many others had similar stories to tell. Met offices in both the districts said they recorded 385 millilitres of rainfall in the two districts from February 25 to 28, with 205 millilitres recorded in Patuakhali

alone.

Abdul Mannan, acting DAE officer in Rangabali upazila of Patuakhali, said, almost 60 percent of various robi crops, including watermelon, have been badly damaged by the four days' rain.

DAE Deputy Director (DD) in Barguna Matiur Rahman said various crops such as potato, watermelon, mung bean, green chili and sunflower were damaged in the district due to the unexpected rainfall. The damage is estimated at around Tk 2.35 crore.

The higher authorities have been informed of the extent of the losses, he added.

The DD of DAE in Patuakhali, Hridayeshwar Datta, said crops cultivated in lowlands in the district have been damaged badly, with an estimated value of Tk 1.28 crore.



US Ambassador to Bangladesh Earl R Miller accompanied by USAID Mission Director Derrick Brown visits Bengchari village in Kaptai upazila of Rangamati as part of a tour to see the ongoing USAID development projects dealing with natural resources, deforestation and climate change in Chattogram Hill Tracts.

PHOTO: ANVIL CHAKMA

Pregnant girl seeks justice against 'rapist'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

A rape victim, now two-month pregnant, on Tuesday filed a written complaint to Sunamganj Sadar upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) seeking action against a local union parishad (UP) member who allegedly raped her two months ago.

In the written complaint, the 21-year-old girl said her mother has been maintaining their family amid hardship since her father's demise three years ago.

Two months ago, Faizul took her to Dhaka promising her of giving a job abroad.

"He later confined me to a hotel room and raped me," said the victim.

The incident came to light when the

girl disclosed the matter to her parents after they noticed her physical changes a few days ago.

The parents then took the girl to a local diagnostic centre for tests and came to know that she was pregnant.

Contacted, the UP member under question said the allegation brought against him is totally false.

UNO Yeasmin Akter Rima said after getting the complaint, she forwarded it to Officer-in-Charge (Investigation) of Sadar Police Station Mohammad Shahidullah for taking action.

Contacted, the police official said action will be taken against the accused after conducting a proper investigation into the incident.