



Farmers take to the streets demanding fair price of paddy.

PHOTOS: ANISUR RAHMAN

Farmers in Peril

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Due to soaring operating costs and plunging prices of produce, farmers are being pushed below the poverty line

Several hundred people, mostly children, gathered at a paddy field in Bankina village of Kalihati upazila of Tangail district. They were witnessing something they had never seen before. A part of a paddy field, overflowing with fully-ripened harvest-ready paddy, was set ablaze by its owner. While the children were cheering at the "bonfire," as they could not perceive the gravity of the incident, some people were trying to console a weeping Abdul Malek Shikder, the owner of the paddy field, while others were trying to extinguish the fire. Abdul set fire to the fruit of his hard labour out of sheer desperation. He had already spent more than Tk 25,000 to cultivate and irrigate his 52 decimals of land. Then, he just learnt that he had to pay at least Tk 900-1000 to a labourer, along with providing food and accommodation, to harvest the crop. A land of this size required at least 10 to 15 labourers. However, he would not get more than Tk 500 from selling one maund (one maund is 40 kilo-

grammes) of paddy. Abdul was shocked to his core when he learnt about this rate. This meant that he would not be able to hire a single labourer to harvest his crop.

He says, "When I saw my fully ripened paddy was being reduced to food for rats and birds, I could not control myself. Sometimes I thought of committing suicide. I had taken a loan to purchase seeds, pesticides and fertiliser and I didn't know how I would pay back the loan when the price of paddy is this low. Then, out of desperation, I set my field on fire."

Abdul was not alone. Another farmer named Nazrul Islam also set fire to his paddy field because he could not afford to harvest his crop due to the low price of paddy. In several districts, farmers like Abdul have taken to the streets demanding fair prices for paddy. And while the farmers are being given a nominal price for their hard-earned harvest, the costs of rice and all other essential commodities are on the rise. This year, in differ-

ent parts of the country, the price per kilogram of rice has increased up by Tk 3-5. Now, a farmer has to purchase a kilogram of coarse rice at Tk 50 and half a litre of bottled water at Tk 15 whereas he is being forced to sell every kilogramme of paddy only at Tk 12.

Kazi Sazzad Zahir Chandan, general secretary of Bangladesh Krishak Shamiti (Bangladesh Farmers' Association) says, "Farmers have agreed to sell paddy at the government fixed rate of Tk 1,040 per maund of paddy. Despite the fact that a rate has been declared by the government, they are being forced to sell their paddy at less than half this rate. The middlemen and millers are making a huge profit by depriving the farmers."

Every year the government takes the initiative to procure rice and paddy directly from the farmers at a fixed price. However, the government procures such an insignificant amount of paddy that it cannot influence the market at all. For instance, last year, 19.5 million tonnes of Boro rice was harvested in Bangladesh and the government procured only one million tonne of that. As a result, most of the farmers have to sell their paddy to the middlemen and millers.

According to Abdul and his neighbours, "During every harvest season, the local political leaders and their henchmen suddenly become rice-paddy traders. Many of us cannot afford the transport cost of shipping our crops to the rice mills. We are forced to sell our paddy harvest to these seasonal traders. They are rich people and have sufficient storage facility. Sometimes, they sell the paddy to the rice mills at a profit, and sometimes they trade with the government."

These middlemen sell their stock to the government buyers and the millers at the government fixed rate of Tk 1040 per maund of paddy but they purchase paddy from the farmers at only Tk 500-600 per maund. In this way, these middlemen make more than a hundred percent profit while the farmers incur huge losses.

Considering increasing production costs, the government is supposed to increase the buying rate of paddy to ensure a fair price for the farmers. For instance, in 2017, the government's fixed price for each kilogramme was Tk 24 and in 2018 it was increased to Tk 26. However, this year, the government did not increase the price at a time when price of rice and all other commodities are increasing.

Dr Mohammad Yunus, senior research fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) says, "We should keep in mind that the government procures paddy from the farmers not to ensure a fair price for them. They make

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