

Black Rice, a magical variety

SHYKH SERAJ

Dear readers, today I'll share with you about a special variety of rice. In some part of the world, it's also known as 'forbidden rice'. Many years ago, it was available only in the forests and hill areas and gradually it was brought under cultivation. There is a folklore which says this rice was cultivated in secret for ensuring better health of the Chinese people. Probably this indicated the enrichment of nutrition the rice contains. As mentioned in the tale the Chinese emperors used to consume the rice and it called black rice. Coming to this modern age, many researches were done on this variety and now black rice is cultivated in many places across the world.

I know Manjur Hossain, a farmer from Cumilla, for many years now. This guy is a little ahead of time, I say it frequently. You may also remember Haripada Kapali from Jhenidah for his greatest rice variety, 'Haridhan'. It has spread in many regions of the country just because the yield is very good. Manjur is doing a great job on black rice. He has done successful production of this variety and now spreading it among farmers of his village. He is producing seven black rice varieties in his land. Manjur has seen farmers who couldn't even sell their produce at Tk 500 per maund (USD 5.89). However, he has noticed that black rice is selling at Tk 1,000 (USD 11.78) per kg in the city malls. He thought if farmers can earn more, it might bring back their golden days. I have been to Cumilla's Monagram to see what Manjur was doing. It was amazing to see his demonstration and research plot of black rice there. I had the privilege of talking with other growers who are cultivating this exceptional variety.

A few days back, the fields were filled with Aman. Farmer Manjur is an exceptional farmer who always looks at things a bit differently. He is cultivating a rare variety of rice for years now and it was great to know many features of black rice from him.

"How much do you get per hectare?"
"5.5 tons."
"Is black rice available in our country?"
"I have ancient black rice which has a production of 1.5-2.5 tons."

"I also have Vietnamese variety of black rice" he added.
Manjur also has black rice from Indonesia. He is doing the cultivation on two acres of land and wishes to extend his cultivation area in near future.

"How much production would you get from one hectare?"
"5.5 tons."
"Same as Vietnamese?"
"Yes, but sometimes this Indonesian variety of black rice may give you six to seven tons per hectare."

I was talking with Manjur about how he was inspired to do black rice. I wanted to know in detail how did all start.
"Where did you get the inspiration?"
"Once I saw it at a mall in Dhaka getting sold at Tk 1,000 per kg. It was imported variety of course."

"Then what did you do?"
"Then I went to meet Dr Mehedi Masud, a Horticulturalist at Agriculture Department, and he gave me 23 seeds of black rice. Then I gradually grew those experimentally."

"How many varieties of black rice do you have right now?"



Farmer Manjur Hossain talks with Shykh Seraj at his black rice, inset, field in Cumilla's Monagram village.

PHOTO: HRIDOYE MATI O MANUSH

"Seven varieties of black rice. Agriculture department has taken five of my varieties and stored those in their bank in my name."

"That's great to know."
I have seen how different Manjur is from other farmers. Alongside agricultural production, he is also adept in commercial matters. He predicts the market beforehand. Thus he is ensuring a market for the black rice while spreading it among other farmers. He already discovered diversified benefits of black rice reading on the internet.

"Black rice can cure cancer, diabetes, heart disease, obesity etc."

"How do you know this?"
"I have read on the internet and I also have documents to prove this."

"What about the local demand?"
"A local company contacted me and they said they want to buy the black rice from me and they're eager to export this."

"Great to hear."
"Some city malls are also contacting me to buy the rice from me."

"That's quite impressive."
What Manjur is saying is this variety will really help farmers who can't get Tk 500 from one maund of rice (40 kg). Rotary Club is taking 5,000 kilograms of black rice from Manjur. Many farmers in Tetuara village has also taken seeds from Manjur and started cultivating the variety. They all know from

Manjur that they will get a good price from the market.

Farmer Belal Hossain Bhuiyan has cultivated black rice on 24 decimals of land and he's getting Tk 2,000 per maund. This new rice variety has brought a new dream to them.

Alongside Anwar Hossain, another farmer who is cultivating the rice, there are many others who are cultivating this variety since they found great promise and prospect in this.

As you already know Manjur has cultivated seven varieties of black rice. Among them, some are very black. Some are red and some are mixed of black and red. When they're cooked they look black, of course the taste is good.

He has collected some varieties from India's Manipur and Assam. He believes those varieties are most sustainable and they smell great. Manjur also has black rice varieties from Philippines, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia. At the end of Aman season, farmers here start cultivating black rice. Manjur has prepared seed beds for three black rice varieties in his field during this Boro season.

Manjur has made contract with 15 farmers who are cultivating black rice on a total of 10 acres of land. Another farmer, who has taken black rice seeds from Manjur, said he has done it on 40 decimals and got 29 maunds. In case of other rice varieties he would have had 18

maunds, he added.

Black rice is a new hope for the farmers. They didn't used to take their rice to the market before. Some didn't even use to harvest it in the past. Because they couldn't pay for the labour needed for harvest. But black rice has generated new dream among the farmers. They are able to sell it for Tk 2,000 per maund at field level. It is a product of Manjur and he is planning to distribute the seeds all over Bangladesh. This is a great initiative. Manjur has already built a rice seed storage. In his storage he has rare black rice variety from China along with other black rice varieties. He also has exceptional plants in his farmhouse. He has a purple variety of mango which looks awesome.

Cardiologist Professor Dr Chandra Ghosh conducted a research on the diversified benefits of black rice and himself is a regular consumer of this rice. Many studies show that this rice has plenty of anti-oxidant ingredients. It helps to sustain youth and heart diseases, cancer, diabetes etc can be prevented by consuming this rice. Even though this rice is expensive, it is beneficial for health. Awareness should be spread through promotion, says the doctor.

It is a great achievement of our farmers, government, researchers and media that we achieved self-sufficiency in food production.

Now the entire world is thinking about nutrition safety. Educated and concerned

farmers are prioritizing nutrition in agricultural products. In this aspect, Manjur, a visionary farmer, showed something really exceptional through black rice. He dreams to spread nutritious black rice all over the country at an affordable price.

He expects the rice will ensure nutrition and become a healthy food for the consumers.

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.



PHOTO: STAR

In this recent photo, two farmers take care of their onion field at remote Kishamoter Char in Nilphamari's Dimla upazila.

High price fails to boost onion growers in Rangpur region

Farmers in northern districts count losses due to untimely rain that damaged vast onion fields

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Despite the unusual high price of onions that made headlines lately, farmers in northern districts are counting losses due to untimely rain that damaged vast onion fields this year.

Cultivation of the essential cooking ingredient starts in middle of November and continues till the end of December while harvest takes place in March and April.

"For fiscal year 2019-20, we have set a target to cultivate onion on 6,550 hectares of land and get 65,185 tonnes of produces. But we until now we could cultivate 5,500 hectares only," said Rafiqul Islam, sub-assistant agriculture officer at Rangpur Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

In 2018-19 fiscal year, Rangpur DAE aimed to produce 75,548 tonnes of onion from 6,868 hectares of land in the region. The data shows that the targets had been downwards.

Untimely downpour due to climate change and 'unwise import of onion throughout the year' are the primary reasons behind the slump, according to farmers of Rangpur, Gaibandha, Nilphamari, Kurigram, and Lalmonirhat.

"Due to climate change, rainfall had been a common occurrence here during March and April when onion is harvested. As a result, the farmers are gradually losing interest in onion cultivation," said Mohammad Moniruzzaman, deputy director at Rangpur DAE.

Dulal Hossain, a farmer of Khokshabari village in Rangpur Sadar upazila, said, "Last year, I cultivated onion on one acre of land but bulks of my produces were damaged by the untimely rain. So, this year I have cultivated 0.5 acres of land only."

"I got 40 maunds of onion by cultivating the high yielding variety BARI-1 on 30 decimals of land last year.

But I had to sell them at a nominal rate because the imported ones flooded the markets. So, this year I have cultivated only 15 decimals," said Jahurul Islam, a farmer of Monthona village in Nilphamari's Kishoreganj upazila.

Yahia Abid, secretary of Bangladesh Krishak League, Nilphamari unit, opines that farmers in this region can be benefited if facilities like cold storage are set up here.

"If that happens farmers can preserve their perishable crops and put them up for sale when convenient. Also, the government should stop importing onion round the year, especially during the harvest season," Abid told this paper.

Mohammad Ali, additional director (AD) at Rangpur DAE, said, "We are trying to motivate the farmers by providing them fertilisers and seeds. This year, we have trained 17,500 farmers so that they do not give up spice cultivation."

Time expires, Payra Bridge incomplete

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Forty percent work of construction of Payra Bridge over the Payra river in Lebukhali area on Kuakata-Dhaka via Patuakhali-Barishal highways is still incomplete although the scheduled completion date was April this year.

Ahmed Sharif Sajib, executive engineer of Payra Bridge (Lebukhali Bridge) Construction Project, hopes the construction work will be completed by June next year.

Construction work of the bridge has been going on in full swing, he said.

After completion of the construction work of the bridge, a direct road link between Payra seaport and Kuakata will be established.

Local people feel very happy as the bridge is now visible.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina laid foundation stone of the bridge during her visit to Patuakhali on March 19 in 2013.

The 1,470-metre-long and 19.76-metre-wide four-lane bridge is

being constructed by Longjian Road and Bridge Construction Company, a Chinese construction firm, under the ministry of road, transport and bridges.

The construction work of the bridge was started on July 24 in 2016 and it was scheduled to be completed within 33 months at a cost of Tk 1,500 crore.

A total of 31 pillars, 32 spans and the height of the bridge will be 18.30 metre from water level.

Around seven km approach road on both sides of the bridge will be constructed, said officials of the project funded by jointly Bangladesh government and Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED).

Md Reaz Uddin Mridha, former president of Patuakhali Bus and Minibus Owners Association, said transportation system would be more comfortable after completion of the construction work of the bridge.

Much time will also be saved to go to different places including Barishal city and Dhaka and people's suffering

will end as well, he said.

Abdul Motaleb Sharif, secretary of Kuakata Hotel-Motel Owners Association, said the number of tourists from home and abroad will increase in Kuakata over completion of the bridge work as a direct road link will be established on Dhaka-Kuakata highway.

Md Mohiuddin Ahmed, president of Patuakhali Chamber of Commerce and Industries, said after completion of the bridge work, their long-cherished dream will be fulfilled as many foreign investors show interest to set up different types of industries there.

Engineers and workers are working round the clock to ensure quality work, said Sajib, executive engineer of the construction project.

It is mentioned that, the bridge is important to make Dhaka-Mawa-Faridpur-Barisal-Patuakhali highways free from ferry service and boost trade and tourism with the southern region by establishing direct link with Kuakata and the Payra seaport.



Construction work of Payra Bridge in Lebukhali area of Patuakhali is still incomplete although the scheduled completion date was April this year.

PHOTO: STAR