

Tea processing factories flock to Panchagarh as production rises

18 units are already in operation in Panchagarh, Thakurgaon

MD QUAMRUL ISLAM RUBAIYAT, Thakurgaon

Tea processing factories are being set up in Panchagarh in increasing numbers in keeping with the fast-expanding cultivation of the popular beverage in northern districts.

Seventeen tea processing factories are already in operation in Panchagarh and one in Thakurgaon, according to the Bangladesh Tea Board (BTB).

Five more factories are under construction in Panchagarh and will commence commercial operations soon. The state-run agency has given approval to a total of 32 firms to set up processing units.

"If the factories run efficiently, both owners and growers will benefit from the growing cultivation, and the promising tea industry in the northern part will play an important role in the economy," said Mohammad Shamim Al Mamun, senior scientific officer of the regional office of the BTB in Panchagarh.

Tea cultivation in the flatlands of Panchagarh began in the late 1990s thanks to its favourable weather and soil. It soon expanded to other districts in the region.

In the last two decades, Panchagarh and Thakurgaon have emerged as the third-largest tea producing regions in the country after Chattogram and Sylhet.

About 50,000 acres of land is suitable for tea cultivation in five northern districts -- Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Lalmonirhat, Dinajpur and Nilphamari -- of which, 10,170 acres have been brought under cultivation by this season.

Tea plantation has expanded to 8,642 acres of land in Panchagarh,



1,293 acres in Thakurgaon, 112.96 acres in Lalmonirhat, 71.09 acres in Nilphamari, and 61.50 acres in Dinajpur.

Cultivation grew by 15 per cent per annum on average in the last five years in the northern part of Bangladesh. The sector has created jobs for around 25,000 people.

"As the land in the northern districts is more fertile than in Chattogram and Sylhet, growers can pluck leaves after a year of planting saplings," said Mamun.

The plucking of green tea leaves and their processing began at the beginning of March and will continue until December.

Apart from 26 large gardens, there are 7,310 small farmers who produce tea on their own.

Large gardens and small growers in the five districts have a target to produce 12 million kilogrammes (kg) of tea, worth Tk 180 crore, in the current season by processing 60 million kg of raw tea leaves.

In 2020, tea was cultivated on 8,060 acres of land in the districts, and the target was to produce 9.5 million kg of tea.

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, the target was exceeded as 18 factories produced 10.3 million kg of tea by processing

50.12 million kg of raw leaves last year. The northern region accounted for about 12 per cent of national tea production in 2020.

In the initial stage of the plucking season, the collection of tea leaves has been lower. Authorities hope that the plucking will gain momentum by the middle of March, when all of the factories will resume operations at full speed.

Most of the factories have already started collecting raw tea leaves, said Monzur Alam, manager of Tentulia Green Care Tea Factory.

The factory, which started

operations on March 2, needs 10,000 kg to 50,000 kg of raw leaves each day during the production period.

"I hope the tea leaves plucking will accelerate from the middle of March."

Amirul Haque Khokon, president of the Panchagarh District Small Tea Garden Owners Association, said tea cultivation and production were increasing every year in the northern districts, especially in Panchagarh and Thakurgaon.

"The quality of tea in the areas is improving day by day," he said.

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Rain reawakens Sylhet's tea

MINTU DESHWARA

The tea industry in Sylhet has been revitalised by recent rains that came after a dry winter season.

Around 30 millimetres of rain was recorded in Sylhet on March 8-10, according to the Bangladesh Meteorological Department.

"This rain was quite beneficial for the region's tea gardens as there had been very little precipitation for the past four months," said Sayed Ahmed Chowdhury, a meteorologist of the department.

Around 30 per cent of the country's annual rainfall comes in winter between November-February, but this time there was barely any rain over these four months.

Besides, rain has become a rare event for Sylhet in recent times, Chowdhury told The Daily Star.

"Since tea production depends only on rainfall, this brief stint of rain is truly a blessing for us," said Sudham Chhatal, a tea worker of Mirtinga Tea Garden in Kamalganj upazila of Moulvibazar. Tea workers in the area still hold onto old ideals when it comes to cultivation.

For example, they perform a puja to celebrate the rain.

"The goddess of fortune goes door-to-door to bless the people of the village with rice and pulses," Chhatal said, adding that if the rain continues to follow a natural pattern, this year's harvest could surpass last year's total production.

"We are very optimistic about the rains," said Saiduzzaman, senior manager of Mirzapur Tea Estate under the Ispahani Tea Company in Srimangal.

The tea trees have regained their youth with green buds starting to come out, he added.

"Rains might be a disruption to the public life, but it is a blessing for the tea gardens," said Shah Alam, chairman of Bangladesh Tea Association, a body of tea garden owners.

Many tea gardens are now being irrigated and this rain will help facilitate the process, Alam said.

On the other hand, pruning of tea trees is going on in other gardens.

These pruned branches will grow in advance thanks to the rain, which allows earlier harvests as well.

Besides, pest problems will be less amid the rain, which plays a very positive role in the growth of seedlings, he added. Mohammad Ali, director of the Bangladesh Tea Research Institute, said this rain will boost tea production to a great extent.

This is because after a long period of drought, the gardens wake up to new shoots after receiving such rains.

"The buds will soon grow into trees and we will have the facility to do early plucking," Ali said.

As soon as spring arrives, the tea trees begin to sprout as early buds begin to shed.

"Our factory has started operations on a limited scale," Ali said, adding that his factory currently runs just 1-2 days a week to process tea leaves based on its supply.

Natural rainfall brings better yield than artificial irrigation, he said.

The current tea production target has been set at 77.78 million kilogrammes but if the weather is favourable, it could exceed 97 million kilogrammes, he added.

NEWS In Brief

BMW says every other car it sells to be fully electric by 2030

REUTERS

BMW expects at least half of its sales to be zero emission vehicles by 2030, setting a more conservative target than some rivals in the race to embrace cleaner driving.

In the short term, the German carmaker forecast on Wednesday a big year-on-year rise in pretax profit for this year, with a strong performance in all areas - from MINIS through its upmarket BMW brand to top-of-the-range Rolls-Royces.

Its shares were up around 3.8 per cent in morning trading, Bernstein analyst Arndt Ellinghorst said BMW had entered 2021 "very confidently."

"In terms of electromobility, BMW is making good progress and is taking significantly fewer risks than VW," he said. Volkswagen has said it expects 70 per cent of European sales at its core VW brand to be electric by 2030 and this week unveiled ambitious plans to expand in electric driving - including building half a dozen battery cell plants in Europe - sending its shares sharply higher.

BMW said around 90 per cent of its market categories would have fully-electric models available by 2023 and the electric BMW i4 would be launched three months ahead of schedule this year.



REUTERS/FILE

The logo of German car manufacturer BMW is seen on the company headquarters in Munich, Germany.

Oil demand to reach record by 2026: IEA

AFP

Global oil demand will return to pre-pandemic levels in two years and reach record heights by 2026 unless governments take swift action to meet climate goals, the International Energy Agency said Wednesday.

Oil markets and the world economy are recovering from the massive collapse in demand caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the IEA said in an annual report. "The Covid-19 crisis caused a historic decline in global oil demand -- but not necessarily a lasting one," IEA executive director Fatih Birol said in a statement.

As people get vaccinated and restrictions are lifted, demand will return to its 2019 level by 2023, according to the report.

The IEA's five-year projections estimates global demand will rise each year to reach 104 million barrels a day (mb/d) by 2026, a gain of four percent from the level in 2019. The outlook for demand, however, has shifted lower as the pandemic has forced changes in behaviour, with people working from home and travelling less, the report said.

GLOBAL BUSINESS

Uber grants UK drivers worker status in world first

AFP, London

Uber on Tuesday said it is granting its UK drivers worker status, with benefits including a minimum wage -- a world first for the US ride-hailing giant.

Weeks after a top court ruling that could shake up Britain's wider "gig economy" of 5.5 million people, Uber said its drivers would also get holiday pay and a pension.

It is a massive change in the business model of a company that had argued before Britain's Supreme Court that its drivers were self-employed. From Wednesday, "more than 70,000 drivers in the UK will be treated as workers, earning at least the national living wage when driving with Uber," the taxi app said in a statement. "This is a floor and not a ceiling, with drivers able to earn more." The court ruled last month that Uber's drivers are entitled to worker's rights.

The decision capped a protracted legal battle between UK drivers and the Silicon Valley taxi and delivery company. Uber said its action over

workers' rights "means drivers will earn with greater security, helping them to plan for their futures while maintaining the flexibility that is integral to the private-hire industry." The higher costs for Uber come as it faces sliding driver bookings owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, despite strong demand for the Uber Eats food delivery service during national lockdowns.

Uber did not expect the change in driver compensation to affect its net income this year, the company said in a US regulatory filing. "We've come to recognise that platforms like ours will work differently in different countries," Uber chief executive Dara Khosrowshahi said in an editorial published in the Evening Standard. "The future of work is too big of an issue for a one-size-fits-all solution, and that's OK." Khosrowshahi has argued for a new third option, to avoid drivers being classified as either employees or independent contractors.

The British ruling follows California's top court last month refusing to consider a legal bid to



REUTERS/FILE

The logo of ride-sharing company Uber is seen on the roof of a private hire taxi in Liverpool, Britain.

nullify a referendum passed by voters that lets "gig workers" like Uber be treated as contractors. Drivers for ride-share and meal delivery apps filed the lawsuit directly to the California State Supreme Court in January to derail voter-endorsed labour legislation known as Proposition 22. Proposition 22 -- passed in

November and heavily backed by Uber, Lyft and other app-based, on-demand delivery services -- effectively overturned a state law requiring them to reclassify their drivers and provide employee benefits. The November vote came after a contentious campaign with labour groups claiming the initiative would erode worker

rights and benefits, and with backers arguing for a new, flexible economic model.

The victory for the "gig economy" in California has ignited fears that big business is rewriting labour laws. Under the proposition, drivers remain independent contractors but Uber and Lyft are to pay them a number of benefits including a minimum wage, a contribution to healthcare and other forms of insurance. Critics of the measure said it failed to take into account the full costs borne by drivers.

In a first for the European Union, Spain's government earlier this month announced a deal that will recognise riders working for food delivery firms such as Deliveroo and Uber Eats as salaried staff following complaints about their working conditions.

In Italy, prosecutors have told Uber Eats and other food delivery platforms their couriers were employees and not independent workers, fining them 733 million euros for breach of labour safety rules.

Indian sugar mills rush to sign export contracts as prices rally

REUTERS, Mumbai

Indian mills have contracted to export 4.3 million tonnes of sugar so far in the 2020/21 season ending on Sept. 30, a trade body said on Wednesday, as a rally in global prices to a four-year high and an export subsidy makes overseas sales lucrative.

Higher exports from the world's second biggest sugar producer could cap gains in global prices, which have been buoyed by lower production in Thailand, the world's second biggest exporter.

The exports will help India reduce stockpiles and support local prices of the sweetener, crucial in ensuring millions of cane farmers get government-mandated prices.



REUTERS/FILE

Labourers carry sacks filled with sugar to load them onto a supply truck at a wholesale market in Kolkata.

"Around 4.3 million tonnes of export contracts have already been signed," the Indian Sugar Mills Association (ISMA) said in a statement.

"This is a great achievement especially because these contracts have been signed in just 2-1/2 months, since the date the export quotas were allocated by the government on 31st December, 2020," it said.

Out of the total contracts, nearly 2.2 million tonnes of sugar has already been shipped, the ISMA said.

The South Asian country has approved a subsidy of 5,833 rupees (\$80.38) a tonne for exports of 6 million tonnes in the current year.

India has been selling sugar

mainly to Indonesia, Dubai, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and African countries, said a Mumbai-based dealer with a global trading firm.

"A container shortage and higher freight charges are limiting Indian exports," the dealer said.

Indian mills have produced 25.87 million tonnes of sugar in the current marketing year, nearly 20 per cent more than a year ago as output jumped in Maharashtra and Karnataka, the ISMA said.

However, this year many mills are closing operations early due to limited supplies of sugar cane, the trade body said.

In the current marketing year, 502 sugar mills have started operations, but 171 mills stopped crushing by mid-March end, it said.