



Rather than letting them rot, discarded tyres are collected by yards like this one at Chattogram's Bahaddarhat. The tyres are cut and then sold across the country, mainly as raw materials for bitumin. Every tonne fetches around Tk 1.3 lakh. This photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

# Musti Chal: A handful of hope

Women from minority communities find self-sufficiency through food bank initiative



A group of women weigh their Musti Chal, a handful of which is saved every time they cook. After a week's savings, the rice will be sold, with the money going to fund income-generating activities. *Right*, the rice is kept in a pot at each household. The group's collection is gathered in a big drum.



PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUI

MOSTAFA SHABUI, Bogura

Around 5,000 women, mostly from the minority communities, are finding self-sufficiency with every passing day.

Under an initiative formally known as "Food Bank", the women set aside a fist-sized portion of rice every day.

With some logistic support and supervision from national and international NGOs, this Musti Chal (fistful of rice) practice is helping out women at 90 villages in two upazilas under Naogaon -- Sahapur and Niamatpur -- since 2015.

After enough rice is saved, the women then sell it and use the money for income-generating activities, like buying cattle, cultivating fish in Khas ponds, running community businesses and helping people from their communities.

Many of these landless women have also bought land, opened shops, started business, bought land for funeral rites and even built their own temples.

In a recent visit to Niamatpur and Sapahar upazila, this correspondent found that in the past, the women used to undertake the same activities by taking out loans from local Mahajans, entrepreneurs, village arbitrators, NGOs, local clubs and more at higher rates. But as Musti Chal has gained in prominence,

**The best part about Musti Chal is that if anyone in the village runs out of rice, they can always get it from us and return it later.**

Rekha Rani Ray

they have stopped going for such expensive loans.

This is how the process works: a group of 20-30 women band together and set aside a fistful of rice whenever they cook a meal for seven days. The rice is kept in pots, which is then gathered

inside a big drum. At the conclusion of the week, they sell the rice and use the money to fund their income-generating activities of choice.

In Niamatpur's Kamaspur village, 30 women have been collecting Musti Chal for the last seven years. So far, they have sold rice worth Tk 1 lakh and are now cultivating fish in three Khas ponds, rearing three cows and helping the people of the village with the money.

Maniza (30), of Kulmodanga village under Sapahar upazila, bought six decimals of land by taking money from their 30 member-group practicing Musti Chal. Like Maniza, there are 14 landless families who bought at least five bighas of land in the upazila by getting financial help from their Musti Chal-collecting groups. One of the groups bought a shop at the Sapahar new market worth of Tk five lakh, said Shamsul Haque, senior programme officer of the Borendro Development Organization (BDO), a local NGO which

monitor the groups.

This economic empowerment is also helping the women grow in confidence. In the past, many of them were shy to speak publicly. But after finding self-sufficiency through the project, they're growing in power. Five women from these are contesting the ongoing UP elections as independent candidates.

"When the Covid started in Bangladesh, many of our neighbours were out of work. Back then we lent them rice from the food bank," said Minoti Pahan of Sirajpur village.

Rekha Rani Ray (30), of same village, said, "The best part about Musti Chal is that if anyone in the village runs out of rice, they can always get it from us and return it later."

There are three NGOs; Action Aid Bangladesh, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) and Andheri HILFE which are running three projects; CLIMATE, REEAL and SOLID, to supervise the Musti Chal initiatives.

## Covid positivity rate doubles in 24hrs in Ctg

Shoots up to 28pc, highest in 5 months

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Ctg

Covid-19 positivity rate reached 28 percent from 12.29 percent in Chattogram yesterday, doubling in only 24 hours.

A total of 550 cases have been detected out of 1,983 samples tested till midnight yesterday. The number of cases has reached the highest mark in five months.

On August 13, 2021, 616 cases in total were detected in Chattogram.

At least 362 of the recently diagnosed are from the port city and 188 from different upazilas, said Dr Elias Chowdhury, Chattogram's civil surgeon.

However, there has been no death despite the increasing number of patients from rural areas.

This correspondent visited Chattogram General Hospital on Saturday, where several people with symptoms were waiting to get tested.

Trishna Bhattacharjee, a Rahamatganj resident, said she felt body ache and had a runny nose a week ago and was tested positive for Covid-19. "I felt well after three days of isolating. I have come to test again to know whether I have recovered," she said.

According to doctors, most of these patients show mild symptoms, while many others are asymptomatic.

Dr Abdur Rob, senior consultant of medicine and head of Covid-19 ward at Chattogram General Hospital, said the number of patients admitted to hospitals is little compared to detected cases.

Dr Sheikh Fazle Rabbi, the hospital's superintendent, said just 26 patients were admitted to the 100-bed Covid-19 ward yesterday.

Sixty-four patients were admitted to the Covid-19 ward at CMCH yesterday, said Dr Aftabul Islam, deputy director of CMCH.

Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases Laboratory's head Prof Dr Shakeel Ahmed said the omicron variant might be liable for the rapid increase in cases. "Omicron is 70 times more contagious than other variants."

Dr Shakeel blamed the lack of awareness regarding health guidelines for the increasing number of cases, both in city and rural areas.

"Only genome sequencing can confirm which variant is dominating the cases in Chattogram, but the procedure is costly and time-consuming."

## 6 killed, 3 hurt in road accidents

STAR REPORT

Six people were killed and three were injured in road accidents in three districts during the last two days.

In Dinajpur, an easy bike driver and his passenger were killed and a teenage boy was injured after a bus hit the vehicle in Chirirbandar upazila yesterday.

Md Delwar Hossain (35), the battery-run auto-rickshaw driver from Parbatipur, died on the spot, said police. His passenger Ishak Ali (60) from Amtoli area in Chirirbandar succumbed to injuries at a local hospital. The 14-year-old injured was undergoing treatment at the hospital.

The easy bike was going to Amtoli area carrying several passengers. When it reached Doulatpur village in Chirirbandar, a Dhaka-bound bus hit the vehicle.

In Panchagarh, a meter reader of Thakurgaon Palli Bidyut was killed and another injured when a Thakurgaon-bound tractor collided head-on with a motorbike carrying them on Thakurgaon-Panchagarh highway at Bhatapra village yesterday. Dhankrisna Roy (38), the Palli Bidyut staffer, died on the spot, said police.

In another incident, Ramjan Ali (65) was killed as a soil-laden tractor hit him at Malipukuri village in Boda upazila yesterday.

Meanwhile, Karimul Islam (45) from Pirganj and his son Arman Islam (14) were killed as a pickup hit their motorbike on Saturday.

## Business as usual

Irregularities, violations mark municipal polls

STAR REPORT

Irregularities, electoral code violation and vote boycotting by independent candidates marked the municipal polls at Natore and Chattogram's Banshkhalhi yesterday.

Yesterday saw elections to five municipalities in four districts as well as the by-polls to the parliamentary seat Tangail-7.

In Natore municipality, lawmaker of Natore-2 constituency Shafiqul Islam Shimul visited different polling stations, violating electoral code.

"I'm visiting the stations to observe the polls," he said when asked.

Quizzed over whether this is in violation to the electoral code, he said, "Can I not see the voting?"

In Baraharishpur Sher-e-Bangla High School polling centre, our correspondent saw that ruling AL men were roaming around the polling station around noon, even though many of them weren't voters of the area.

AL's Natore district unit joint secretary Syed Mortuza Ali Bablu was one of them. Asked about his presence, the AL leader admitted that he went to the electoral area despite being an outsider. "I've come here because central leaders have given me responsibilities of this

station," Bablu said.

Contacted, Natore's SP Liton Kumar Saha said, "We have requested the lawmaker to comply with the electoral code. If he (lawmaker) does not comply with it, we have nothing to do."

Returning Officer Md Aslam said, "We don't have the jurisdiction to take action against a lawmaker."

Asked about other irregularities, the RO said he would look into the allegations.

In Banshkhalhi, an independent mayoral candidate boycotted the election, brining allegations of irregularities by ruling party men. Talking to journalists, independent candidate Kamrul Islam Hossein alleged that his agents were ousted from centres by supporters of AL candidate Tofail Bin Hossain.

Tofail denied the allegations and told journalists that the independent candidate only brought the allegations after sensing defeat.

The RO could not be contacted for comments.

Meanwhile, the by-election to Tangail-7 constituency saw very low turnout as people did not show much interest in voting. The parliamentary seat was vacant after its AL lawmaker Ekabbar Hossain died on November 16.

A total of five candidates contested the election.



Gobinda has earned his living for the last 14 years catching crabs from around the Sundarbans. Depending on size, they sell for Tk 180-350. This photo was taken recently from Batiaghata's Fultala Math area in Khulna.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN