



Sacks of potato are seen waiting to be sold at a farm in Purba Shahbazpur village of Rangpur sadar upazila. Farmers have been left in the lurch for the second year in a row due to decreased demand amid increased supply of the tuber crop. The picture was taken recently.

PHOTO: KONGKON KARMAKER

Digital repository to understand our workers better

FARUQUE HASSAN

Being a densely populated country, one of the major sources of Bangladesh's competitiveness is the young and vibrant workforce. We have around six million economically active population, and various estimates suggest that around two million people are joining our labour force every year.

In fact, workers are the lifeline of Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry. There are around four million workers employed in this sector directly, of whom 60 per cent are female.

While the economic prosperity of our nation greatly depends on the optimum use of our human resources by making them skilled and competent enough, it is equally important to ensure better social protection and well-being of the people to create an enabling environment to raise productivity.

The apparel industry is a time-tested industry, which has made commendable progress in the area of sustainability, especially workers well-being and industrial relations. Starting from the elimination of child labour in the mid-nineties, and the emerging compliance issues, including timely payment of wages, ensuring the minimum wage, overtime, hygiene at the workplace, and so on, the industry has responded well on all the issues of compliance and workers' rights.

A paradigm shift has taken place in the area of structural, fire and electrical safety at the workplace which was supported by international brands and donors like the International Labour Organisation (ILO), in addition to the lead role played by our government. As a result of all these committed and continued efforts, Bangladesh is now one of the safest apparel manufacturing countries in the world and offers the best sustainable solution to our valued clients.

In order to ensure workers well-being and safety at the workplace, the Labour Act was amended twice since 2013, and the Labour Rules was promulgated in 2015. The formation of a safety committee in every factory has been made mandatory. Workers participation committee has also been made mandatory through elections.

A central fund has been created under the supervision of the government where garment factories are contributing 0.03 per cent of their export earnings for the workers' welfare purposes. Undoubtedly, these are all positive moves by the industry to ensure the well-being of its workers, yet much more needs to be done to ensure their healthy upkeep.

While we prepare ourselves to transit to a developing country and envision becoming a developed economy by 2041, an inclusive approach is required to ensure the well-being of our people. In fact, we need to understand the dynamics of the livelihood difficulties of the marginal income groups, so that belittling policies and interventions can be planned and designed for them.

For instance, Covid-19 has exposed the inherent weakness of the health and hygiene issue of our workers. The public health reality of the workers and their vulnerability to viral

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Farmers selling potatoes for dirt cheap

Aim to simply recover investment after two consecutive bad seasons

KONGKON KARMAKER

Potato growers in Bangladesh are grappling to recover their investment as prices of the tuber crop have fallen below their production cost this season, according to various farmers.

"So instead of turning a profit, we are struggling to save our investment," said Taroni Chandra Roy, a farmer of Nawabganj upazila in Dinajpur.

And considering that farmers faced a similar setback last year, it has now become a matter of survival.

During a recent visit to Dinajpur and Rangpur, it was found that farmers are selling potatoes for about Tk 6 to Tk 8.5 per kilogramme (kg), which is Tk 4 to Tk 3 less than the production cost.

Experts say this situation arose as potato farmers across the country began harvesting the crop almost simultaneously, flooding the market with the tuber crop and bringing down prices as a result.

Potato is grown all over Bangladesh but the main supply comes from northern districts, such as Rangpur. Potato cultivation usually starts in the northern districts at the end of September while the harvesting season continues till late April each year, according to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

While speaking with The Daily Star, farmers of Dinajpur, Joypurhat, Thakurgaon and Rangpur said the prices were reasonable up till December last year but have dropped significantly since early January.



"The situation is quite despairing and there is no sign that prices will get better anytime soon," said Manik Chandra Roy, a farmer of Kaharol upazila in Dinajpur.

So far, Roy has suffered losses of Tk 6 lakh from the sale of potatoes previously stored.

A few farmers got better prices by cultivating fast-growing varieties of potato that sold for about Tk 1,500 to Tk 2,000 per 76 kilogramme-bag in early December last year.

However, even the price of those crops has fallen significantly this season, said farmers. Different varieties of potato, including Granola, Cardinal and Holland, are available in the domestic market.

Suruj Mia, a farmer of Pargachha

upazila in Rangpur, cultivated potatoes on one acre of land at an expense of Tk 40,000, which was borrowed.

He started harvesting the crop last week but has since been left dismayed by the prevailing prices.

"I was offered Tk 5 per kg for the Granola variety, which falls far short of its production cost," Suruj said.

Besides, there are other associated costs to consider, such as labour and transportation, he added.

Suruj was eventually forced to sell his crops at giveaway prices in order to save his investment.

Al Amin Mia, another farmer of Pargachha, said people like him were now drowning in debt after suffering such losses in two consecutive seasons.

"The situation is so bad that I had to sell my entire harvest to a wholesaler on credit," he added.

Jahangir Alam, a wholesale potato trader in Rangpur, said while the market supply has increased amid the peak harvesting season, prices also fell because of decreased demand.

"But the situation will improve in the future," he said.

At least 97,290 hectares of land have been brought under potato cultivation in five districts under Rangpur division, namely Rangpur, Nilphamari, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat and Gaibandha, said the DAE officials.

Of the total land being used, potato is being grown on 51,840 hectares in Rangpur alone, which is 2,000 hectares higher than last season.

Obaidur Rahman, an agronomist of the DAE in Rangpur, said potato production will likely exceed this year's target thanks to favourable weather conditions.

He went on to say that potatoes being harvested now cannot be stored for long but farmers are still clearing the crop from their fields in order to prepare the land for the upcoming paddy season.

"So, this situation could have been averted if harvesting was delayed," Rahman said.

Ashrafur Islam, a farmer of Mazadanga village under Dinajpur sadar upazila, said he suffered losses of Tk 17,000 because of the fall in prices. He cultivated potatoes on one-and-a-half bighas of land this year.

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India goes on a spending spree to boost growth

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's government will step up spending to 39.45 trillion rupees (\$529.7 billion) in the coming fiscal year to build public infrastructure and drive economic growth, it said on Tuesday, but it involves a wider fiscal deficit than targeted and record borrowing.

Asia's third largest economy has been on the mend after the government lifted mobility measures in June to curb the spread of coronavirus, after contracting 6.6 per cent in the previous fiscal year.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, presenting the annual budget to parliament, said total government spending in the 2022/23 fiscal year beginning in April will be 4.6 per cent more than the current year.

Trillions of rupees will be allocated to expressways, affordable housing and solar manufacturing to put growth on a firmer footing, she said.

Growth is estimated to be 9.2 per cent for 2021/2022, coming off the low base and slowing to 8 to 8.5 per cent in the coming fiscal year, still the fastest among the world's major economies.

The recovery from the pandemic has been swift but incomplete, officials say. Private consumption has been hampered by a lack of jobs, depleted household balance sheets and wider income inequalities.

Sitharaman said public investment must continue to take the lead and pump prime private investment and demand.

"The economy has shown strong resilience to come out of the effects of the pandemic with high growth. However, we need to sustain that level to make up for the setback of 2020/21," she said.



Labourers work at a coastal road construction site in Mumbai, India on January 12. Asia's third largest economy has been on the mend after the government lifted mobility measures.

PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka food inflation hits record 25pc

AFP, Colombo

Food inflation in crisis-hit Sri Lanka hit a record 25 per cent in January, the statistics office said Tuesday, with crop failures and difficulties in financing imports leading to widespread shortages.

The island nation's economy has tanked since the onset of the pandemic, with the collapse in tourism revenue leaving traders unable to finance purchases of essential goods from abroad.

The government last year banned the import of agricultural chemicals in a desperate attempt to shore up foreign currency reserves, drastically lowering crop yields and prompting many farmers to leave their fields bare.

Supermarkets have rationed rice, lentils and other essentials, while power companies unable to pay for imported fuel have been forced to impose rolling blackouts.