



PHOTO: STAR

Jute plants are getting dried up under the scorching sun as the water beside the field is too inadequate for processing the natural fibre. The photo was taken from Hiarboldi village in Faridpur's Nagarkanda upazila.

Water scarcity hampers jute processing

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

High yield of jute fails to make farmers in Faridpur happy as they are facing huge trouble to rot and process raw jute in absence of adequate water in local water bodies (Beels), canals and ponds.

Farmers said if the ongoing water crisis continues, they will have to count huge loss this year as quality fibres cannot be extracted without properly rotting.

According to Faridpur Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE), jute was cultivated on 85,865 hectares of land in nine upazila of the district while it was cultivated to 85,201 hectares last year.

Many farmers said raw jute processing has been badly hampered as they cannot rot their jute plants due to lack of rain water even in the middle of monsoon.

Moreover, they have to spend

additional labour cost for carrying the jute plants to other place for rotting, farmers said, adding that this year day labourers are charging Tk 550 to Tk 600, which is Tk 150 to Tk 200 more compared to the previous year.

While visiting different villages in Nagarkanda and Saltha upazilas this correspondent saw piled up jute stalks are drying up on the field as there is no water to process those.

Meanwhile, some farmers were seen carrying their jute plants to other places for processing.

Farmer Sarwar Matubbar of Salitha village in Nagarkanda upazila said he cultivated jute on four bighas of land this year, spending Tk 60,000.

But due to lack of adequate water he couldn't rot half of his jute plants on two bighas, Sarwar added.

Another jute grower Haridas Biswas of Boutipara village in the upazila said every year they have to

cut the jute plants a bit early as rain water starts entering their field.

"But the situation is different this season," he said.

Farmer Abdul Gaffar of Ramkantapur in Saltha upazila said he cultivated jute on three bighas of land and had already sold 4.5 maunds of raw jute at Tk 3,000 per maund.

"I have cut the rest of the jute plant in last few days, but could not rot those due to lack of adequate water," Gaffar said.

Shahahan Sheikh of Chhoto Bahirdia village in the upazila said usually farmers sow jute seeds at the end of March and complete the harvesting by last week of June every year. Faridpur DAE Deputy Director Hazrat Ali said jute plants are getting dried up as jute growers in all the upazilas of the district are facing serious problem in processing jute plants due to lack of rain water this season.

Parties can't be forced to join nat'l polls

FROM PAGE 1

Awal said they will continue to appeal to all political parties for joining the next general polls that may be held in late December 2023 or early January 2024.

The CEC's comments came as Bangladesh Kalyan Party, a partner of the BNP-led 20-party combine, skipped the talks with the EC yesterday.

According to sources in the BNP, the party will not participate in the dialogue with the EC scheduled for today.

"The party has decided not to join the ongoing talks with the Election Commission ... We have no interest in sitting with it," Sayrul Kabir Khan, a member of the BNP chairperson's press wing, told this newspaper yesterday.

Late last month, the BNP and several other like-minded parties skipped the EC-organised view-exchange programmes on electronic voting machines. The commission took the initiative to earn political parties' trust over EVM use.

"We are trying to hold an inclusive election. We will not be able to bring anyone [to the election] forcibly, and we will not try that," Awal said during talks with Bangladesh Samyabadi Dal yesterday.

"If everyone joins the polls, we will be happy ... We have clearly said we must hold the election in line with the constitution, the existing rules and regulations."

During dialogue with Islami Oikya Jote earlier at noon, Awal urged all political parties to have interparty dialogue to reach a consensus on stopping polls violence and the use of

money and muscle power.

"We expect a consensus. It will be tough for the Election Commission to find a solution to the issues [polls violence, and the use of money and muscle power] unless there is a joint initiative of all political parties," Awal said.

CEC APOLOGISES, BLAMES MEDIA Amid backlash from different quarters, Awal yesterday offered "apology" for a controversial comment he made during talks with Nationalist Democratic Movement on Sunday.

That day, he had said, "If all political parties don't cooperate with us, we will fail. There needs to be a concerted effort. If someone comes with a sword, you will have to stand with a rifle or a sword. We will have command over the police and the government."

The CEC also said they cannot stop violence alone. "You [political parties] will have to take responsibility. Because you are the players... we are the referees."

Yesterday, he blamed the media for "distorting" his comments.

"You have to understand that a chief election commissioner can never say this. Maybe I'm less educated. Even a less educated person can't talk like that. I said it as a joke."

"Sometimes, we make mistakes ... Sorry for that. I went for a joke. I didn't mean it..."

He alleged that the media distorted his comments and damaged his dignity by spreading the statement knowingly or unknowingly.

"We have given the media free access... But as comments are being

distorted, we have to rethink how open we will be to them," he added.

During the talks, Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish proposed using ballot papers in the next general election, dissolving parliament before elections and deploying army personnel a week before the polls.

Islami Oikya Jote called for deploying the army in "sensitive areas", and said the election-time government should perform only routine work and EVM should be used only after people's trust is earned.

Ruling alliance partner Samyabadi Dal proposed using EVM in elections and keeping the local government, and the public administration and the home ministries under the EC during the election.

The party's General Secretary Dilip Barua said it's not the EC's duty to bring all political parties to elections.

'Shocking' report lists devastation to Australia wildlife

AFP, Sydney

Australia's unique wildlife is being devastated by bushfires, drought, habitat loss and global warming, a government report said yesterday, warning that more species are headed for extinction.

The five-yearly State of the Environment report prompted calls for dramatic action to reverse the "poor and deteriorating" state of flora and fauna depicted by scientists on land and at sea.

Not sure when they can return

FROM PAGE 12

said, "We fled the area later on and took shelter in a relative's house in Bagerhat town. We are not thinking of returning home anytime soon."

Primary schools have reopened after the Eid vacation, while academic activities at secondary institutions will resume today. As the Hindu families are unable to return to the area, their children are missing schools and colleges.

"My school will open tomorrow [today] but we cannot go home. We do not know when we can. So, it is uncertain when I will be able to go to school again," said a tenth-grader of a local high school, who along with

family members have taken shelter in a relative's house in Bagerhat.

However, law enforcers and representatives of local government bodies claimed they have taken all necessary measures to ensure security for Hindu people so that they can return home safely.

"I have held a series of meetings with locals and conducted campaigns in the area to regain trust of Hindu people so that they return home. We have taken all measures to maintain communal harmony in our area," said Syed Borhan, chairman of Dighalia Union Parishad.

Contacted, Lohagara Police Station Officer-in-Charge SK Abu Hena

Milon said additional law enforcers have been deployed in the area to check any further violence. "We hope that those who have left their houses will return shortly."

Police have already identified some people involved in the attack. Six of them have already been arrested. Police are trying to arrest others, he said.

Meanwhile, a team from the ruling Awami League is scheduled to visit the affected area today.

AFM Bahauddin Nasim, the party's joint general secretary, will lead the team that will talk to the affected Hindus and will assure them of the government support, reports BSS.

Issues faced by plainland ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh

Traidcraft Exchange in association with The Daily Star organised a roundtable titled 'Issues faced by plainland ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh' on June 21, 2022. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

Nabila Nusrat, Head of Programme, Traidcraft Exchange

Traidcraft Exchange has been implementing the 'Fighting Forced Labour with Adivasi and Dalit Communities in South Asia (MUKTEE)' Project in Bangladesh since 2019. The project is co-funded by the European Union. Agriculture Sustainable and Socio-Economic Development Organization (ASSEDO) is the implementing partner.

The MUKTEE Project has been implemented in two Upazilas --Tanore and Nachole -- in Rajshahi. We are working with the plainland ethnic minority communities of these areas to address the systematic and structural weaknesses they suffer from.

There are three main reasons behind their suffering. Firstly, they don't get the same treatment as mainstream Bengali citizens and are not skilled enough in income-generating activities. Also, they suffer from various health complications, particularly premature aging due to hard manual labour. Lastly, the natural resources in their living areas are depleting rapidly, and, therefore, they are losing their alternative sources of food and ways to earn a living.

Unfortunately, there is no social safety net programme to support these vulnerable communities. We started working on two areas: food and income opportunities. We are trying to include them in social safety net programmes so that they get food assistance. They are also being trained in various skills so they can participate in income-generating activities.

Foyzul Bari Himel, Consultant, TTC

Over the years, people in ethnic communities have been deprived of things that are rightfully theirs, such as the ponds in their localities or the fruits growing on trees that they themselves planted. They are faced with these restrictions because they are made to believe that there will be problems as these are the properties of zamindars. They have been suppressed generation after generation, held back from being able to reach a position where they could do or think for themselves.

Rabiul Alam, Executive Director, ASSEDO

Being mainly an agrarian working class, the introduction of automotive technology has greatly reduced the number of work opportunities for plainland ethnic minority communities. Our target for the MUKTEE Project has been to enhance the skill of this group and create alternative livelihood opportunities for them, teaching them things



such as sewing, masonry, mobile phone servicing, etc. We have also provided training on various hardware and software programmes for members from 2,000 families. Although our training period was only two weeks long, it has led to them finding jobs in fields not related to traditional agriculture.

Sagor Marandi, World Vision

The MUKTEE Project has been successful in helping the disadvantaged ethnic minority communities generate some savings from their income, but whether it has been done with sustainable solutions remains to be seen.

The situation of the tea workers in Sylhet is an example of modern slavery. They are underpaid, deprived, and discriminated. A tea worker can't work outside the tea garden, and we were not allowed into the garden to talk with them.

Camillus Kamol Gandhai, Project Coordinator Development, CARITAS

We work with the indigenous people, especially the Santals, who have their own traditional social organizations. We make sure that even after our project is completed, the indigenous people can help themselves through their organizations.

The government should be involved in the development of ethnic minorities. Representation of the ethnic minority communities must be ensured at the policy level.

Mohammed Rabiullah, Program and Research Officer, SEHD

The Ministry of Cultural Affairs has enlisted 50 ethnic communities, though some ethnic communities have still been left off the list. They should be recognized by the government

immediately, and they should also be included in the ongoing national census.

Sheikh Shahed Rahman, Chief of Party, Save the Children

The education policy of 2010 pledges that all the children from ethnic minority communities will be given early education in their mother tongue. Although some ethnic groups receive books in their mother tongue, there aren't enough teachers to instruct them.

The Department of Youth Development has the aim to develop the skills of all young people by 2025 and the youth from these communities must be included.

Amitabha Ghosh, Senior Program Manager, IRI

Generally, women in our society are vulnerable. However, the women from ethnic minority communities are more vulnerable as they have little access to local administrative bodies to lodge a complaint.

Alexius Chincham, National Project Coordinator, ILO

The Government of Bangladesh has adopted various policies and laws to protect indigenous peoples in the country and establish rights in line with international norms. However, the government has yet to ratify ILO Convention 169 on indigenous and tribal peoples.

There should be separate ministry for Plainland communities, such as the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs that looks after the issues of ethnic communities who are living in Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Md. Tajul Islam, Adviser, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)

We have found that there are three primary reasons ethnic minority communities lose

their land. One is the acquisition of land by the government and autonomous bodies. Another is the forceful eviction of these people from their homes and lands, and the last is the process of land transfer. The DC offices do not keep a record of lands that have been illegally transferred.

AKM Mamunur Rashid, Program Specialist, UNDP

Starting from primary school, we must begin teaching acceptance and accommodating others at a cultural level. Second, we must motivate the members of the ethnic minority communities to think outside of just owning land as a means of livelihood. Thirdly, most of the farmlands in the northern areas are being transformed into orchards since fruit

do not take money from the Mahajan anymore. We have formed a cooperative association and take loans from it with lower interest rates. It has helped us become independent, and it has also encouraged us to save for our future. Now, we are confident to seek services from government offices. However, we still don't get all the government allowances. None of our women, for example, have received maternity allowance from the government. If there were officers from our community, we would have known about these issues.

Biplob Coda, A representative from Coda community

We often hear that tribal people cannot dream. This isn't correct. They can dream bigger dreams, but it's just that they aren't given the right opportunities, and they don't have enough leaders to guide them. They also face harassment in many places which often crushes their dreams.

Government officials often omit our surname from national IDs and government records. For instance, one of my relatives is named Ajin Coda but in his national ID his name is mentioned as Ajin. The registrar omitted Coda from the records as our family title seemed uncivilized to him. Now, my uncle Ajin cannot get government allowances for underprivileged ethnic groups of the plains as the government officials want proof of his indigenous identity.

We hear about quota in government jobs for indigenous people, but on the ground, there is no such thing. There have been instances where we have been asked to pay BDT 800,000/- just to be considered for a government job.

Shahed Ferdous, Country Director, Traidcraft Exchange

From the very beginning, the MUKTEE Project has been working with multiple stakeholders because we know that it is not possible to address issues of the ethnic minorities all by ourselves.

We need to promote locally led initiatives and establish strong local institutions so that the plainland ethnic minority communities can address their problems on their own.

In the second stage of this project, we will try to institutionalize the savings initiatives of ethnic minority communities by forming cooperative associations.

We can form a caucus involving all the relevant stakeholders to address the issues faced by the plainland ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh in a coordinated way.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a separate ministry for plainland ethnic minority communities.
- All the ethnic minority communities should be recognized by the government.
- A separate land commission should be formed for plainland ethnic minority communities.
- Include all the plainland ethnic minority communities in social safety net programmes and the national social security strategy.
- The youth of the plainland ethnic minorities should be included in the government-led youth development programmes.
- A common platform and partnership agreement should be formed to ensure that similar development work for plainland ethnic minority communities is continued by different NGOs in collaboration.

cultivation requires less water and labour.

Aroti Munda, A representative from Munda community

We still face discrimination in getting access to government services. We are educated and yet struggle when we go to government offices. Just imagine how an uneducated community member feels at that place. They wouldn't even want to go there to begin with. So how will our rights be ensured if we aren't treated as equal citizens?

The MUKTEE Project has helped us, and we