

THE PEANUT POWER

Groundnuts drive an overlooked ecosystem. From char farmers to street vendors and factories, a small crop feeds many

Once a stand-alone street snack, groundnut has grown into a sought-after crop as food processors diversify its uses in everything from snacks to confectionery. This rising demand has prompted farmers to expand cultivation.

SUKANTA HALDER and S DILIP ROY

Basir Mirza has been selling peanuts for his entire adult life. At around 3:00 pm every day, he sets up his floating cart in front of the playground on Manik Mia Avenue near the parliament building, one of Dhaka's busiest, crowded areas -- a good spot to fetch customers. For nearly four decades, the trade has rewarded him well, and he never considered trying anything else.

"Selling peanuts allowed me to pay for my daughter's education, her wedding, and even buy a small portion of land in my village," the 55-year-old, hailing from Bhairab of Kishoreganj, said as he set up his shop.

Unlike vendors of other goods, Mirza's business has been stable through every political upheaval, economic downturn, and social shift. A handful of peanuts is always cherished by people everywhere, from the posh urban towns to the remote villages.

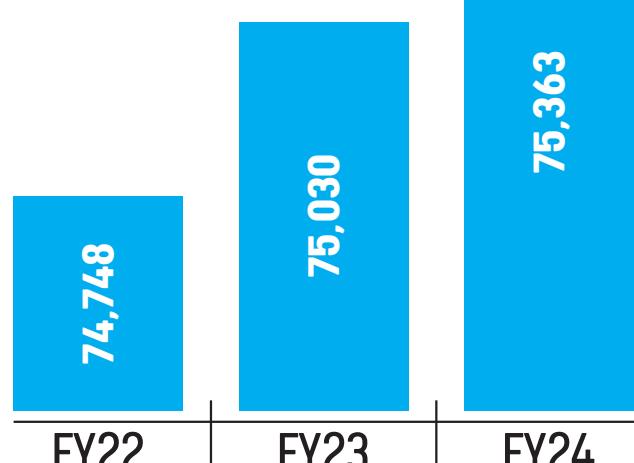
Once a stand-alone street snack, groundnut has grown into a sought-after crop as food processors diversify its uses in everything from snacks to confectionery. This rising demand has prompted farmers to expand cultivation, backed by agri-scientists



Production of GROUNDNUT

In tonnes

SOURCE: BBS



Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

Over 200 kilometres north of Dhaka, at Islampur upazila in Jamalpur, farmer Mohammad Kamruzzaman Akand represents the peak of peanut farming success.

"I started from scratch. Now I own a house in the municipal area worth about Tk 50 lakh, built entirely from groundnut earnings. I have also purchased four to five bighas of char land," he said over the phone.

Further north, in Chilmari upazila of Kurigram, 65-year-old Nazrul Islam harvested nuts from eight bighas at Joragach char this year.

"Nothing grows well in sandy char soil except peanuts. For us, this is the crop of hope," he said.

In Kalimati char of Lalmonirhat, another border district, 60-year-old Nurjamal spoke of the crop's value compared with others.

"We turned our fallow land into cultivable land through this oilseed. It has become our main source of income. If the market price holds, peanuts are

significantly.

Government officials say the main driver of the peanut's expansion is its unique ability to grow in fallow lands, especially the chars or sandy riverine islands.

"Peanut is drought-resistant and thrives in sandy and loamy soil. Since char lands do not hold water, yields are usually very good," said Abdulla Al Mamun, deputy director of the DAE in Kurigram.

Mohammad Quamrul Islam Matin, senior scientific officer at the Oilseeds Research Centre (ORC) under the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), added that farmers are steadily expanding cultivation in char areas where land availability and favourable conditions make it viable.

According to SM Sohrab Uddin, director of the DAE's Horticulture Wing, peanuts are now grown in nearly all districts except Meherpur, Dinajpur, and Joypurhat. The northern region alone accounts for nearly one-third of production, thanks to its vast chars.

Once a marginal crop, peanuts are now

production now comes from Noakhali, Panchagarh, Bhola, Patuakhali, Sirajganj, Faridpur, Manikganj, Kurigram, Bandarban, Lakshimpur, and Pabna.

THE KING OF NUTS

At the industry level, the legume's growing popularity is tied to its use in processed foods. While cashews, pistachios, and walnuts are cultivated domestically, peanuts dominate thanks to their affordability and versatility.

Industry estimates put annual demand at 1.40 lakh tonnes. Of this, roughly 1 lakh tonnes are consumed directly or used in snacks and bakeries, with the remaining 30,000-40,000 tonnes processed into industrial food products.

"Consumption has doubled in recent years," said Kamruzzaman Kamal, marketing director of PRAN-RFL Group, one of the country's largest conglomerates.

"This trend accelerated after the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, when people shifted from carbohydrate-heavy foods towards protein-rich alternatives. Among all nuts, peanuts have the highest demand in the local market."

PRAN alone uses about 2,500 tonnes annually for roasted nuts, chanachur, cookies, bars, chocolate, and milk-based drinks. While most supply is domestic, 20-30 percent is imported during shortages.

At the farm level, however, peanuts move quickly.

"Farmers sell right after harvest. Later, when demand rises, prices go up," said Fazal Haque, a trader at Jatrapur market in Kurigram.

Each year, 12 seasonal peanut markets operate along the Brahmaputra during January-February and May-June, each handling 450-500 tonnes. Traders often transport the goods to the mainland on horse-drawn carts.

In Dhaka's Karwan Bazar, wholesale trader Abdul Matin, who has run his stall for nearly 30 years, says peanuts are his top-selling item. His customers range from households to industrial buyers.

In Khatunganj, the country's main hub for essentials, wholesale trader Mezbuddin Munna sells about a tonne a week -- roughly 53 tonnes a year. Most of his buyers are shopkeepers, with large volumes headed to Cox's Bazar, where tourism fuels peak demand during winter and festive seasons like Ramadan and Qurbani. Half of his supply is imported from India, and the rest comes from various districts.

HIDDEN POTENTIAL

While peanuts' growth has been lauded, government officials and traders say

there is more to be expected.

Peanut seeds contain 48-52 percent oil, higher than mustard and soybean, and slightly more than sunflower.

"Despite this potential, peanuts in Bangladesh are primarily consumed as food rather than processed for oil," said BARI's Matin.

Farmers also speak of possible expansion, but say the shortage of quality seeds and storage availability remains a big challenge to that end.

Local peanut varieties yield 1,800-2,000 kg per hectare, while the higher-yielding Chinese variety produces 2,500-3,000 kg, said 60-year-old farmer Mahabbat Ali of Jatrapur Char in Kurigram. "Around 60 percent of char farmers now prefer the Chinese variety due to its profitability."

His neighbour, Noyon Islam (50), noted that poor storage facilities, market fluctuations, and lack of training or flood protection hamper growth.

"With better infrastructure, peanut farming could expand even further," he added.

"Peanuts have export potential if better storage and processing technologies are introduced. If developed properly, peanuts could become a major export product, boosting incomes for char farmers," he said.

Government officials, however, say they are making significant contributions.

SM Sohrab Uddin, director of the Horticulture wing at the DAE, said, "Groundnut output grew because of the introduction of improved varieties and rising awareness about nutrition."

BARI's Matin said the ORC has so far developed 12 groundnut varieties, and its efforts are underway to develop shorter duration varieties, reducing maturity from 150 to about 135 days so that peanuts can better fit into existing cropping patterns.

"Currently, BARI Badam 8, 9, and 12 are the main commercially cultivated varieties, with farmers generally preserving their own seeds," he said, adding that the most widely cultivated varieties include Dhaka 1, Maijchar, BARI Peanut-4 through BARI Peanut-9, and BINA Peanut-8 through BINA Peanut-10.

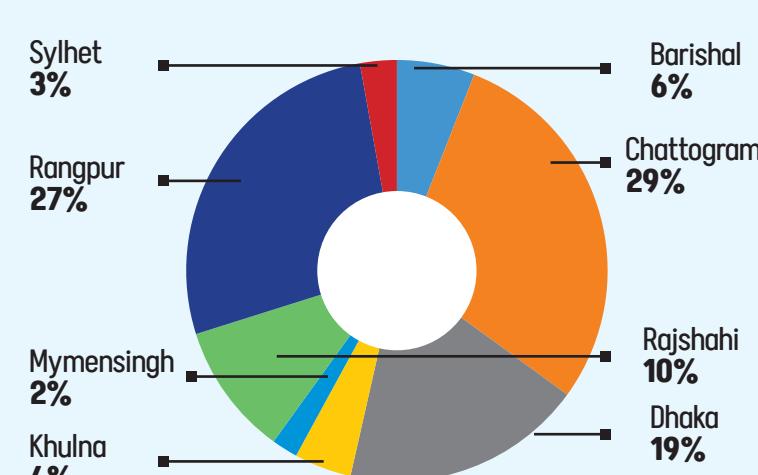
According to Rangpur DAE Additional Director Islam, peanuts are not only strengthening the economy of char areas but also creating employment opportunities.

"With proper marketing and storage, peanut farming can be even more profitable and sustainable."

Kurigram's Ali acknowledges the growth. "This crop is making us self-reliant. Without peanuts, many of us would struggle to survive."

Share of production of groundnut by divisions

Fiscal Year: 2023-24



SOURCE: BBS

far more profitable than other crops," he said.

Data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics shows wholesale peanut prices more than doubled to over Tk 160 per kg in 2024, up from Tk 62 in 2011.

IT GROWS WHERE NOTHING ELSE DOES

Peanut cultivation in Bangladesh began in the mid-20th century, and production has since expanded

central to the rural economy here.

Sirajul Islam, additional director of the Rangpur DAE, identifies Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Gaibandha, Rangpur, and Nilphamari as the key peanut-growing districts. "Vast areas along the Teesta, Brahmaputra, Dudhkumar, and Dharla rivers are now peanut fields."

Nearly 90 percent of the output comes from 650 chars.

About 70 percent of domestic