

THE POISON TREE of Rangpur

Agriculture, environment and human health at risk



PHOTOS: SDILIP ROY

four crore kilograms each year. On average, 9 to 10 kilograms of tobacco leaves are produced per decimal of land.

Omar Faruk, Agriculture Officer of Aditmari upazila in Lalmonirhat, said nearly half the upazila's land is under tobacco. "This year tobacco has been cultivated on 8,375 hectares here, compared to 7,520 hectares last year. As the offices of all local and foreign tobacco companies are located here, the tendency is higher," he said. He warned that tobacco farmers are using subsidised government fertilisers, creating shortages. "Without a strong government plan, tobacco cultivation cannot be controlled. Tobacco is destroying soil fertility. From children to the elderly, members of farmers' families work in tobacco fields, putting their health at risk."

Anwar Hossain, 65, from Mominpur village in Rangpur Sadar, said tobacco must be grown on the most fertile land and requires large quantities

suffers nausea, fever and body pain. "Tobacco cultivation is very harmful. I tell my husband to quit, but he does not listen. Due to the encouragement of company people, I am failing to make him aware," she said.

Noren Chandra Barman (75), from Sarpukur village in Aditmari, said he entered tobacco cultivation about 35 years ago when companies moved into the area. "I fell into the trap 35 years ago. Financially I am benefiting, but soil, environment and health are being damaged. My family members often fall ill," he said, adding that other crops yield poorly on tobacco land and require heavy fertiliser use.

Didarul Islam (55), another farmer from the same area, said 8 to 10 maunds of tobacco are produced per bigha. Production costs range from Tk 20,000 to 25,000, and tobacco sells at around Tk 8,000 per maund. "Although expected profits can be made, the risks are also high. Tobacco requires constant care. The whole

labourers, it is not profitable," he said.

Sanjida Yasmin, Fisheries Extension Officer in Lalmonirhat, warned that the excessive use of chemical fertilisers in tobacco fields is having a severe impact on indigenous fish species. Chemicals wash into canals and wetlands through rain and irrigation water, affecting fry and brood fish. Native species are gradually disappearing.

Dr Shaykhul Arifin, Deputy Director of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Lalmonirhat, said efforts to reduce tobacco cultivation are facing resistance. "We are working to reduce tobacco cultivation, but farmers are not listening. Farmers are more attached to tobacco companies. The current level of cultivation is severely affecting food production. If these lands were used for food crops instead, a large quantity of food could be produced," he said, adding that without a government ban they cannot act against companies.

Dr Safinur Rahman, Senior Scientific Officer at the Rangpur Divisional Soil Resource Development Institute said the increasing trend of tobacco cultivation is putting agricultural land at serious risk. "Tobacco plants have extensive roots that absorb large amounts of nutrients, reducing soil fertility. Eventually, the land loses its ability to produce crops. Immediate action is needed to save fertile land from the aggression of tobacco; otherwise, the poison tree tobacco will one day push agriculture to the brink of destruction," he warned.

Rangpur Civil Surgeon Dr Shaheen Islam said those working in tobacco fields, especially children, women and the elderly, suffer from stomach ailments, fever, vomiting and ulcers. "Children and women must be kept away from the aggression of tobacco," she said.

Sirajul Islam, Additional Director of the Rangpur Regional Agricultural Extension Directorate, said the ministry has sought suggestions to curb tobacco cultivation. "Since there is no specific government law, we cannot take strong measures. If tobacco cultivation is not brought under legal control swiftly, Rangpur's agriculture will face a severe crisis," he said.

SDilip Roy is a journalist at The Daily Star.

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While farmers in other parts of the country are improving their livelihoods by producing high-quality crops using modern methods, many in the agriculture-dependent northern Rangpur region remain tied to the "poison tree" of tobacco. Here, tobacco cultivation is widely seen as a path to financial stability. Local and foreign tobacco companies reinforce that belief by offering free seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, interest-free loans and gift items. Many farmers have fallen into what can be described as a leaf trap. Rather than getting out they are becoming even more entangled.

The consequences are far-reaching. Tobacco farming is damaging soil fertility, reducing food crop production and affecting the environment and the health of farming families. Heavy use of subsidised fertilisers in tobacco fields has created shortages, leaving growers of other crops struggling to secure fertiliser supplies. Despite these problems, many farmers continue to prioritise tobacco in the hope of immediate profit. Although the agriculture department holds courtyard meetings to raise awareness, officials admit their efforts are failing to

counter the influence of tobacco companies.

According to the Department of Agricultural Extension, tobacco has been cultivated this year on 21,290 hectares across five districts of the Rangpur region, up from 18,734 hectares last year. Of this, 1,810 hectares are in Rangpur, 10 in Kurigram, 35 in Gaibandha, 18,225 in Lalmonirhat and 1,210 in Nilphamari.

Khorshed Alam Sagar, a member of the Anti-Tobacco Media Alliance, claims the actual area is nearly double the official figure. "Wherever you look now, you see nothing but the poison tree tobacco. There is little visible campaign from the agriculture department to discourage farmers. On the other hand, tobacco companies are constantly campaigning. Company representatives are going door to door," he said. "Unless tobacco companies' activities at the field level are stopped, tobacco cultivation cannot be controlled. Three foreign and four local tobacco companies are openly encouraging farmers, yet no action is being taken."

He added that the tobacco leaf market in Rangpur exceeds 10 crore kilograms annually. One foreign company alone purchases more than



of chemical fertilisers. From sowing seeds in November to bringing tobacco home in March, hard labour is needed. "Last year I cultivated tobacco on eight bighas; this year on 11 bighas. When we sell to the company, we receive the money at once," he said.

His wife, Fatema Begum (58), said in an irritated tone that their suffering increases during the tobacco season. She cannot tolerate the smell but is forced to work cutting, drying and tying leaves. During the season she

family must spend time on it. Initially we make profits, so we cultivate tobacco. We do not make much profit from other crops," he said. For 20 years he has cultivated tobacco with a company card and expanded from 10 bighas last year to 13 this year.

Dhiren Chandra Barman (60), from Bhadai village, acknowledged the damage but said they cannot leave it. "Women and children in our families work in tobacco fields. We profit because we work together. If we hire

VOTING WITHOUT ACCESS

How the national election failed voters with disabilities

YSTIAQUE AHMED

For the first time in years, voters across Bangladesh felt they had taken part in a national election without fear. That sense of relief was extended to many voters with disabilities. Yet beneath the optimism, a different picture emerged. A significant number of voters with disabilities reported misbehaviour, harassment, or practical barriers that prevented them from casting their ballots.

In August 2025, the Bangladesh Election Commission, with UNDP, organised a consultation titled "National Consultation on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in the Electoral Process". Officials noted that more than three million registered voters in Bangladesh are persons with disabilities, but only about 10 per cent have historically been able to vote. The promise was clear. The outcome, according to many voters and observers, was uneven.

Student elections at several public universities revealed that many visually impaired students were unable to cast their votes because polling centres lacked basic accessibility. Similar concerns resurfaced during the national election. Despite assurances that arrangements would be in place, most centres relied solely on human assistance. There were no Braille ballots, tactile templates, or assistive devices.

Ayesha Ahmed Liza, a polling official in Dhaka-4, said, "We received training from the Election Commission before the election, including specific guidance on how to assist persons with disabilities in casting their votes. In my booth, two such voters came to cast their ballots, and there were designated people to support them. However, there were no accessibility machines at the voting station."

For some voters, simply reaching the booth was the first hurdle. Rifat Pasha, a policy officer at the Institute of Wellbeing Bangladesh who is blind, voted in a national election for the first time since becoming eligible in 2009. This year, he finally received his voting slip. "My wife was with me as my voting assistant. I was lucky my voting station was closer to my home



Rashan Ara arrives at the polling station in a wheelchair, accompanied by her grandson.

and the room was on the ground floor, so I didn't have to climb two or three floors." But his arrival was unsettling. "What was shocking at first was that security saw me and said, 'Why are you here?' When I said I was a voter, he eased off but again probed why there was another person with me." After he explained, they allowed him in, yet "the first experience left a bad impression on me."

Ajmeri Nishat, a voter with low vision, also cast her ballot for the first time this year. Her polling centre, a three-storey school in Mirpur, had her booth on the second floor. "Since I went with my mother, she was with me from start to finish. She took me to the second floor." Inside, officials allowed her mother to accompany her after she explained her eye condition. "They held the pen for me at the right spot, and I signed the two pads."

However, the ballot itself presented challenges. "I told them it wasn't possible for me to stamp the ballot on my own because of the layout; I needed an assistant." She

ultimately voted with her mother's help. Yet she stressed that her experience depended heavily on family support and familiar officials. "If I hadn't taken my mother and had gone alone, I would have needed support from start to finish."

She added, "For a visually impaired person, a three-storey building with only stairs is not accessible. There were no ramps or lift systems." Nor were there any Braille or tactile ballots.

"No, it was just a plain piece of paper." Looking ahead, she said, "polling centres must be accessible, and the ballot paper needs to change."

Jahangir Alam, Senior Coordinator at the CDD (Centre for Disability in Development), said he was able to vote without much difficulty, though others were less fortunate. "I went with a guide and cast my vote without much trouble." However, two totally blind voters who accompanied him faced rude behaviour before officials eventually apologised. "I believe the

root cause is a lack of awareness," he said.

He cited reports of guides being stopped at polling stations and polling agents attempting to stamp ballots on voters' behalf. "This raises serious concerns about the privacy and dignity of voters." In one constituency, wheelchair users found that booths were located on upper floors without ramps. "We do not want these so-called 'favours' or charity from the state; we want our rights and our dignity. Voting is meant to be secret."

Salma Mahbub, Executive Director of B-SCAN, a women-led organisation of persons with disabilities (OPD), said this was the first time organisations working with persons with disabilities had formally observed a national election. Despite meetings with the Election Commission and discussions about making 100 centres accessible, "when we went for observation, we did not see anything of that sort." Although officials were instructed to prioritise voters with disabilities, she said, "they were not told how to support them."

Wheelchair users assigned to upper floors were often carried upstairs. "In those cases, the

mindset that truly wants all citizens to vote."

According to earlier surveys, Bangladesh has an estimated 3.3 million voters with disabilities, though no participation data is available. That, she said, is a question she would put directly to the Election Commission.

Ruhul Amin Mollik, Director of Public Relations at the Election Commission, said trainers were instructed to ensure voters with disabilities could cast their ballots with ease. If booths were located upstairs, "arrangements should be made to assist the person upstairs, if possible." Where that was not feasible, officials were told to come downstairs. He noted that many newer school buildings have ramps, although older ones may not. On voter participation figures, he acknowledged, "we don't have a number. We do not collect or conduct surveys specifically for voters with disabilities."

Both Jahangir Alam of CDD and Salma Mahbub of B-SCAN called for structural reform. "We wanted persons with disabilities and the elderly to be allowed to vote by postal ballot. The Election Commission introduced the system, but only for expatriates, not for citizens with disabilities. If postal ballots had been available, participation would likely have been higher."

Ultimately, the experience of voters with disabilities in the recent national election reveals a gap between intention and reality. While the absence of widespread violence and the presence of some supportive officials offered reassurance, these alone cannot substitute for structural preparedness. Inclusion cannot depend on personal goodwill, family assistance, or improvisation at polling centres. For participation to be meaningful, accessibility must be built into the electoral process as a matter of right, not exception. Clear legal safeguards, consistent training, accessible polling infrastructure, and enforceable standards are essential if future elections are to ensure that voters with disabilities can exercise their franchise with dignity, privacy, and independence.

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Indrani Chakrobarati, a voter with a disability, casts her ballot.

secretary of the vote was not maintained." While some officials were cooperative, others were not. "People with mobility impairments did not receive the support they were supposed to get." There were no Braille ballots and no clear signage for voters with hearing impairments.

She believes a simple circular mandating voting booths on the ground floor could have addressed many of these issues. "It requires a