



## Water crisis plagues agriculture in Barind Tract

3 May 2009

### Khawaza Main Uddin . back from Rajshahi

Vast tracts of land on two sides of roads across sprawling villages in Rajshahi have dried up during these mid-summer days, be they full of standing rice plants and a few other crops or barren areas.

With the ponds, canals and even tributaries drying up, it is hard to believe this part of the country is located in the river basin of the once mighty Padma.



— New Age photo

According to locals and experts, farming in the region's huge cultivable areas, commonly called Barindh Tract, has been plagued again by water crisis as a result of fall in the level of underground waters and scarcity of surface water. Such a situation has prompted a change in the cultivation of crops which is currently dominated by excessive focus on rice.

Cultivation of rice in many fields, as found during a visit in the last week, was also affected by disruption in irrigation caused by frequent power outages while farmers generally complained about lower yields of paddy there unlike bumper crops in other parts of the country this Boro season.

'The prospects of rice production appeared to be good at the beginning of the season, but scarcity of water has severely affected the production this year,' said Azizar Rahman, a farmer of Purba Doulatpur village in Bagmara upazila, who grew rice on four bighas of land this year.

Showing signs of damage to crops because of drought and problem of irrigation, the chairman of local Nobodas union parishad, Mosharrif Hossain, said agriculture had become a 'curse' for the people. He also pointed out that water crisis during the lean season and sudden inundation or water-logging during the rainy season had made this area a mono-crop region despite having potentials for three crops.

'Extraction of underground water with deep tube-wells in the Barindh Tract is becoming tougher day by day. Options for surface water are also very limited because of the Farakka Barrage in India,' said AK Azad, executive engineer of the

Local Government Engineering Department, Rajshahi. He underlined the importance of rearrangement in the irrigation system of this region.

Ayub Ali, a sharecropper of Aumritapur village in Tanore upazila, echoed the feelings of other farmers, saying they had got yields that would be 3-4 maunds less than normal production per bigha. 'We are set to incur losses from farming if we calculate our investments,' he added.

Muntaj Ali, a farmer of Harin Bishka village in Gadagari upazila, could not cultivate almost 50 percent of the five acres of land owned by his family in a low-lying area in Foratpur for lack of irrigation facilities. 'The entire area undergoes water during the rainy season, but now there is no water there except for the core area under the ambit of a deep tube-well,' he told New Age on the spot.

Godagari upazila alone had more than 700 deep tube-wells after the government had undertaken the Barindh project in 1987 for providing farmers with irrigation facilities for rice cultivation during the dry season. The project shifted the focus of agriculture in Rajshahi and its adjoining districts to rice farming from the whole range of winter crops such as wheat, potato, onions and garlic and also oil seeds and jute.

Mohammad Yasin Ali, the upazila officer of the Department of Agriculture Extension, informed this correspondent that almost 65 per cent of the cultivable area in Gadagari had been used for rice cultivation. He also admitted that underground water level had fallen in recent times affecting the cultivation there.