

'Our Policies Should be Tangible to the Men in the Paddy Field'

by Rahat Fahmida

A.Z.M. Obaidullah Khan, Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative of FAO, talks to The Daily Star on the importance of agricultural development in Bangladesh and its sharing of the know-how with the other South Asian countries.

Having seen A.Z.M. Obaidullah Khan in a completely different mood earlier, reciting his poem at a formal gathering in an auditorium in Dhaka, the moments spent in waiting to interview him were rather tense. It was fortunate for me that he managed to squeeze in an hour for The Daily Star in the midst of his extremely busy schedule, when he was last in Bangladesh.

Mr Obaidullah Khan is a poet, scholar and former civil servant of Bangladesh. He has been both a participant in and observer of poverty alleviation and development. During his long and distinguished career in the civil service he has been Secretary in Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development and Cooperatives of the Bangladesh government.

A minister for Agriculture and also Communications, from 1982-84, he later became Bangladesh Ambassador to the United States in 1984.

Now he is the Assistant Director-General and FAO (Food And Agriculture Organisation) Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific, with his office in Bangkok.

At the dawn of the planning era years ago, economic development was taken to be synonymous with industrialisation; but experience has shown how both industry and agriculture have to grow together to realise their full potential.

Centralised urban and professional power, knowledge and values have flowed out over and often failed to recognise the knowledge of rural people themselves. An exception has been social anthropologists who have been at pains to ex-

perience cultures other than their own from inside, and to learn and understand the values and knowledge of these cultures.

Local knowledge is tempting for its simplicity. Local knowledge of rural peripheries can be contrasted with centralised knowledge of urban cores. But a weakness is the commonsense interpretation that it refers to knowledge of a local environment, rather than to the knowledge of people existing as a system of concepts, beliefs, and ways of learning. The 'village' or 'rural' includes those farmers, both small and large, who are thoroughly in the market, purchasing inputs and selling cash crops.

Bearing all these concepts in mind the FAO regional representative for Asia and the Pacific was asked, "What do you think are the basic requirements for agricultural development in our country? And how can we improve?" He smiled as he said that it was quite a vast subject to be talked about for just an hour or so. But he explained briefly as much as possible as he went on to say, "I have talked about this in the 47th session of ESCAP in Seoul, South Korea, last April. There I said that only farmers and fisherfolk can put food on our tables. Thus, our policies and programmes must be tangible to men and women in the paddy field,

dairy farm or fishing boat.

"But these men and women are exploited by elites who feed-dray on structural reforms that threaten their control over power and resources.

These landless, jobless, disenfranchised people are shackled to life sentences of penury by unjust economic, social and political structures that deny them access to resources.

"A permanent solution to hunger rests basically in correcting these unjust structures. This also requires mechanisms to enable these silenced people to be heard. NGOs are an invaluable partner in helping us open up to 'movements from below'. The

alternative of continued paternalistic redemption, imposed from on top, set in previous decades, however well-intentioned, is a formula for upheaval.

"We must reforest and restock fishing grounds. This task also includes revision of obsolete laws and approaches. Economic incentives, embedded in law would promote agro processing to absorb large pools of rural youth and idle manpower. Legislation on forests need to be updated, if the multiple-increase in demand for fuelwood and other forest products in the 1990s are to be met.

"Elites who creamed off land, forest and fishery riches in the past must, under revised laws, share those benefits with the poor. Otherwise, the poor will not conserve. Why should they? They have no stake in a system that offers little beyond redistribution of misery."

Mr. Khan went on to say that the traumatic colonial experience has left deep marks on and continues to exercise a profound influence over the South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka). The colonial incursion in the Indian sub-continent made control over land hereditary through various settlement patterns. All of these arrangements involved dominance by a landlord (rent-receiving) class — not necessarily owners, in the strict sense. They might themselves be 'occupancy tenants' but with

superior property rights in the soil, which permitted them to lease out land to lesser tenants, sub-tenants or 'croppers' and to extract from



Food for Works Programme in Bangladesh: 'Our programmes must be tangible to men and women in the paddy field, dairy farm or fishing boat.'

them a surplus in the form of rent.

It was clear from Mr. Khan's statements, that the problems of increased landlessness and rural poverty took on fresh urgency over the past two decades. The search intensified to find ways of making rural development institutions more effective in increasing agricultural production activities, especially achieving food self-sufficiency, and in ensuring an 'equitable' distribution of the gains from higher productivity. As Mr. Khan added, "Our technological improvement and improvement of people's attitudes are very important. We do not have to go as far as the West. We can take lessons from other countries in Asia, especially: China, Thailand and Indonesia. But it should not be ignored that in 1990 we reaped a record cereal harvest. Production of livestock kept its upward trend. Aqua culture maintained its dramatic surge. And food stocks were rebuilt.

"It is very important to work out how can the poor get organised without the support of outsiders and some minimal security provided to them? Without minimal security, evi-

dence shows that death at the hands of the powerful and the local security forces is not unlikely. Further, the need for personally disinterested external catalysts represents a contradiction. The critical limiting factor is not the poor themselves, it is the supply of capable and motivated leaders. Every elite has a few deviants willing to sacrifice or set aside their own immediate material interests to serve what they perceive as the interest of their poor country men. Finally the perceptions of rational behaviour may and do differ from one cultural context to another."

Asked what did he plan to achieve during his term at FAO and in his years later, he said he wanted to work on mutual agricultural development between Bangladesh and other South Asian countries, including the transfer of technology. And that he planned to write more books in this field, as he started off with one called 'Creative Development', which is published by the University Press Limited, Bangladesh.

Over the last decade or so scholars have been trying to argue that development has to touch the creative chords of

people. People have inherent urges for being creative and purposeful in their day to day struggle for survival. The struggle gets a newer meaning once people come together. And they move ahead. Only through such networking people can fulfil their desire for self-development.

Obaidullah Khan in order to make this point unfolds his analytical framework in his book, 'Creative Development'. To capture the perspectives he first reviews the past and current discourses on the implementation of rural 'development' experimentation in five South Asian countries. Then he investigates the dynamics of some concrete social movements. Next he explores the logic of these struggles and organisations for the kind of self-development which is indigenous and based on solidarity. The mediation by external agents is not overwhelming and thus does not retard the growth of self-confidence of the people. The animation is perhaps the suitable analytical tool which can explain this interaction.

Rahat Fahmida is a Feature Writer of The Daily Star.



A.Z.M. Obaidullah Khan: The protagonist at a FAO convention.

We Hate Us, Yes We Do!

Sabir Mustafa

"Vestal Vestal" a young boy screams at passers-by amid the human sea gushing in and out, and swirling all around Farm Gate, "Singaporean vests, only 50 taka!"

Taken a young man walks up to him and takes a close look at the vests. "You bloody rascal!" the young man screams back at the boy. "These are not Singaporean vests, these are local stuff! Who are you trying to fool?"

The young hawkler lowers his head and whispers, "Okay, so they are Bangladeshi vests. But nobody would even look at them if I didn't say they were foreign."

Obviously, the young boy knows the market in which he operates very well. The point is this: People will buy sub-

from somewhere else. Young kids very nearly break their necks (or their dad's necks) to lay their eager hands on a pair of Reebok. It doesn't really matter if the shoes are counterfeit-faked in Thailand. The main thing is the label R-E-E-B-O-K!

But if one can stretch one's wallet (or one's dad's wallet) as far as a pair of Italian leather, then one is really going places.

Or perhaps not going anywhere at all, because the shoes will probably turn out to be too expensive to waste in the rough, dusty or waterlogged streets of Dhaka anyway.

The love-affair our women-folk have with Indian sarees is

hunting for loans. Some borrow the odd thousand from relatives to buy a choice saree from Bangalore; while others pick up a few million from a nationalised bank to pay for the imported roof tiles and marbles for their new sweet little home in Baridhara. The difference is that while the relative will get his thousand back, the bank, well, that's always a lottery.

There are times when we do cross whatever limit there still is. Most foreigners tend to agree nowadays that, when it comes to making shirts, Bangladesh is the best. But do we agree with that, let alone be proud of the fact? Certainly not.

"Oh no", we scream at the mere thought, "Don't make me buy a Bangladeshi shirt. Give me something Thai or even Sri Lankan instead."

This depressing trend is giving, or already has given, birth to a new, equally depressing breed of shop-owners. This lot either don't sell locally-produced stuff at all (even with a foreign brand name), or if they do, they make sure the customer who buys them leaves the shop feeling like a thief.

"Can I have a Peps-gel please?"

"Err... have a Colgate, it's British."

"No, I really want a Peps..."

"Try another shop, we only sell foreign."

But if he has any Peps-gel, he is likely to slam the tooth-paste down on the counter, and then give you the change while looking at the ceiling.

What is really the problem with us? Do we really have a prejudice against ourselves? How can we be so stupid? All other nations hate somebody else, and we hate us!

We even seem to have more sympathy and emotion for somebody else's troubles than our own. Think about this:

between 140,000 and 250,000 died in the tidal wave of April 29, and we simply shrugged and said, "Well, more was supposed to die..." or something equally demoted. But only the other day, we were very nearly tearing hairs out of our heads because somebody was dropping bombs on Baghdad.

EVERYDAY around the Philippines, eyebrows are raised and jaws drop as people read Margaret Singco Holmes's advice column. She is a sex therapist who dispenses her advice with racy wit and humour, titillating the public and stirring up controversy.

Her column "BodyMind" appears in the Manila Times newspaper six times a week and has raised its circulation noticeably.

She is known for her straightforward replies to her readers' questions. When someone asked if it was all right to make love under water, Holmes replied: "Sure, if there are no unusual circumstances like piranhas around, and if you can swim awfully well."

"I like my writing to be like my ass," said Holmes with typical candor, "ample enough to sink my teeth into and tight as a drum."

It's language like this that has raised the heckles of the Philippines' chief censor, Manuel Morato. He looks after the country's public morals as chairman of the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board.

He has threatened legal action against Holmes. "Basically there's nothing wrong when you talk about normal sex and you educate the public, but with restraint," Morato said. "The problem is this woman flaunts sexual perversion and aberrations in a medium too public for comfort."

He added: "She's been using very lurid, vivid and very descriptive terminologies that are only used in the privacy of a clinic or in a medical journal."

Holmes disagrees and the result is a word war raging across newspapers and television talk shows. She says she uses words to describe sex organs as they are found in the dictionary: "I am a 40-year-old woman. What do they want me to use, 'flower' or 'birdie'?"

Holmes thinks that confining discussion of sex to medical journals makes the subject elitist. "How many people read medical journals? I would like to think everyone is entitled to be informed."

The subject, she insists, has to be dealt with humanly, not clinically. Sex, she says "is wet, wild, juicy. It's fun if you're lucky."

After she used the four-letter word in her column three times, Morato declared her column to be for nymphomaniacs. "A nymphomaniac is one who has more sex than you," countered Holmes in her usual staccato manner of speaking, stressing her point with fists clenched and face taut.

Morato was not amused. He said he would not take legal action himself because that would detract him from his

Passions Aroused Over a Sex Column

Filipinos apparently have a lot of questions about sex on their minds. A sex advice column in the Manila Times is enormously popular among readers, but, reports Gemini News Service, it has sparked controversy with others, including the government's chief censor, by Abby Tan.

job, but he would support anyone who would.

Holmes said she receives 50 letters a week. Only five have complained about her column but none have threat-

ened legal action. A common thread that does run through the letters, Holmes says, is concern about premature ejaculation. "The most common questions they ask are,

"Am I normal?", "Am I sick? and 'Who's to blame?'"

Fellow columnists have nicknamed her columns "orgasms". They are quite sensational in the semi-feudal, very Catholic society of the Philippines.

The controversy has made Holmes a national figure. She now hosts a television programme called "No Nonsense" on, surprisingly, a government channel.

Born into a Filipino Chinese family, Holmes has been practising clinical psychology for 16 years. After studying psychology at a Jesuit-run university in Manila, she obtained her master's degree in sex therapy from the University of Hawaii.

She is separated from her British husband and lives in Manila with her 14-year-old daughter.

She does most of her writing at three in the morning, replying to anonymous readers who hide behind pen-names like "Pink Panther" and "Hot Lady."

Holmes thinks the reason her column is popular is because Filipinos are too embarrassed to talk about sex. In her replies she focuses on individual feelings, urging her readers not to worry about the approval of parents, family or the church. Individuals are responsible for their own actions and no one else's, she says.

Holmes also points out that readers and viewers tend to forget she also gives advice on things besides sex, like marital problems and parent-child relationships. Her book of advice columns, just recently launched is a current best-seller.

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,
I married two years ago, but my marriage was not very good. My husband is very difficult. Since the past few months he was showing no interest in me. We lived in Chittagong. Two months ago he brought me to my parents house in Dhaka and told us he would return in fifteen days to take me back. But he has not returned, and has not written a letter. I wrote to him to come. But he says he is busy. I feel he does not want to come to take me. I do not want to go if he does not come. Do you think I should? What options are available for me? Please give me your advice urgently. I shall be very grateful to you.

Nilufar Begum,
35/2, Nakhlaipara, Dhaka.

Dear Michelle,
Long and indefinite absence does put a strain on the relationship. If your separation is for a specific purpose and period then you should be able to overcome your present blues with the strength of your relationship. Think of your reunion as a goal which you can achieve after crossing some hurdles. Meanwhile prepare yourselves, both of you, psychologically and emotionally, to spend the rest of your lives together.

Dear Mita,
I am a 24 year old divorcee in love with a man who is three years younger than me. In our society this relationship is not only scandalous but doomed to fail. We both love each other very much and do not feel any differences in terms of wage lengths, values etc. Do you think we will have problems after we get married because of this age difference?

Farhana, Baranai.

Dear Farhana,
I have never known a marriage to fail just because the women was few years younger than the man. If both of you are sure of your feelings and have a respect for each other than go right ahead. Though our families, friends and relatives play an important role in our lives, remember it is only you who can make the marriage work.

Dear Mita,
Our house servant is very slow in her work. She only argues all the time and makes me angry. My mother gets angry on me too. This is a bore. What can I do?

Julian, Dhaka.

Dear Julian,
I agree that dealing with servants is not always very easy. But the job becomes easier if we take a minute to think about the reasons for our frustration with them. Conflict arises out of our expectation on one side, and their inability to meet them on the other. But maybe they are not capable of meeting those expectations. So the option is to bring down the expectation or except them the way they are getting angry will not solve anything.

Dear Mita,
The person I love and wish to marry is far away from me — studying abroad. We use to be very close when we were together. Now, although I love him, it is becoming very hard to cope with this distance. We write to each other as often as possible but sometimes it seems as if we don't really have a relationship. Is there a cure for long distance love blues?

Michelle, Baridhara.

WRITE TO MITA

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toynbee Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.

Our love for foreign goods does not stop at being just love for foreign goods. We also have a tendency, borrowed from colonial overlords from the not-too-distant past, to turn up our noses at everything Bangladeshi.

standard products so long as they can console themselves with the thought that they are buying foreign stuff.

Foreign is the magic word. But even here a little bit of stratification has taken place.

Things made in the USA and Western Europe are definitely at the top of the prestige and desirability league, followed closely by Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong come next, with Thailand bringing up the rear. The rest of the world comes here, there and everywhere, depending on what the current fad in the street is.

It used to be fashionable to wear or use foreign goods, but things have progressed impressively in the last decade or two. Today it is a national obsession. We don't just like things foreign, we love things foreign.

What's worse, we gladly pay good money for local stuff disguised as foreign. Take Ramna Bhawan for instance. One would think the place was overflowing with cloths made in Britain and Japan, if one were to really believe all the sales talk dished out to customers. But do we really believe? Of course we do! Why else do we come out of that place with such unbelievable smiles on our faces?

The shoe market is another place to go wild over things

by now the stuff of folklore, and needs no elaboration. But one hears stories these days about Indian women suffering from the same kind of infatuation with Bangladeshi sarees.

Is it true? If so, then we need not worry anymore about the survival of our saree industry. All we have to do now is to step up efforts to smuggle our sarees out, while theirs come in. Supplies made, demands met, and we will all live in a happy SAARC family ever after.

But our love for foreign goods does not stop at being just love for foreign goods. We also have a tendency, borrowed from colonial overlords from the not-too-distant past, to turn up our noses at everything Bangladeshi.

While we worship everything made in Japan, we have paradoxically become the epitome of everything decidedly un-Japanese: a Japanese would almost always, unless he had knocked back too much sake for his own good, prefer to buy home-made stuff, even if it meant paying more than he would have for a foreign equivalent.

But not us. If we can afford it, then we invariably look for something foreign to buy. If we can't afford it, then we go