

Gachihata — a farm with a difference

By Masud Hasan Khan

KOTIADI (Kishoreganj) : A 100-acre farm in Gachihata union here stands proudly as testimony to what magic private initiatives can work in the country's agriculture sector.

Some 100 kilometers from the capital, the Gachihata Aqua-Culture Farms Ltd. is now a household name to the fishermen of Kishoreganj — where integrated fisheries is still a foreign word, and fishing means just hauling from the 'haors' (huge natural waterbodies) and selling in the market.

The Gachihata Farm accommodates 53 fish ponds along with 12,000 poultry and 89 livestock and earns about Taka 40 thousand a day.

Now, a pick-up truck loaded with some 500 kilogram of fish, about 2500 eggs and 120 litres of milk speeds through the unmetalled rural roads to catch the early morning train to Dhaka where the 'farm-fresh' products sell quickly in the morning.

"This all happened when I went for integrated farming instead of our traditional fisheries practice," said Md. Akhtaruzzaman MP, the owner of the farm.

Briefing a group of visiting journalists Saturday, he pointed out that it was a little planning, innovation and lots of hard work that yielded 'gold' in his plot.

The whole farm area is divided into 53 ponds of different sizes. These waist-deep waterbodies are embanked high above the usual flood water level so that no water, except rain, could enter or spill over the ponds.

The poultry sheds are built in the ponds on long bamboo poles while cattle paddocks are raised on the embankments.

Besides, 15,000 mahogany saplings have been planted all

over the farm area.

"It was not easy to start the farm.... and everyone thought I had gone nuts," recalled Akhtaruzzaman.

The office building of the Gachihata Farm looked like a western ranch house and a Bangladeshi 'khamar bar'. In a spacious veranda, there were two autographed portraits of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia with a slogan below: "People are the source of all power."

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Besides, the rice producers had no jobs for most of the year and they have to live on money from the rest of the employed population, he said. Again, crops failed because of frequent flooding, pest attacks and other natural disasters.

Integrated farming, on the other hand, employs people round the year, produces more and generates money among the poor, he added.

Akhtaruzzaman suggested that the seven lakh acres of floodplains in the country, most of which remained uncultivated most of the year, could be brought under integrated farming for higher production.

However, the system works better when individuals form cooperatives, he pointed out.

The MP, representing Kishoreganj, said he wants to switch over from sweet water fisheries to inland shrimp cultivation for exports.

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"Of course, that will depend on how we face the challenges of the future," he added.

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