Moheshwarchanda: The Helaluddin Story

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There was a time when Helaluddin was merely a day laborer struggling to make his ends meet. Like many others in his village, Helaluddin was poor, unable to feed his children or find work. But this 60-year-old has a renewed confidence in the future now. Helaluddin, a worthy disciple of Omar Ali, the main architect of Maheshwarchanda, is now leading the way of "Modern Farming" to help farmers become self sufficient, profitable and independent.

EVER since my graduation, I had been nurturing the idea of returning to Bangladesh. Soon that dream took a backseat to a routine of a 9-5 job and lazy weekends. I finally returned home last year after a decade-long trip to the US. Starved for a vacation, I refused to take up yet another "job" right away and lounged around for almost a year. The calling to do something meaningful was there, but my resources were limited. That's when my good friend in the US also returned with infinite spirit and an amazing idea. Along with some expatriate Bangladeshi youths, she was working on setting up an initiative to identify, document, and create a partnership with innovative grassroots initiatives in Bangladesh.

Through one of the brainstorming sessions for this project, I met Naimuzzaman Mukta. Mukta Bhai, a leading member of a team of 70 eminent journalists in Bangladesh, told us that they have hundreds of such success stories stashed away in their storage. We decided to go through these reports and start making site visits. Our first success story is that of "Maheshwarchanda", a village in the Jhenaidah district and Kaliganj subdistrict.

When I got on the 7:30 am bus to Kaliganj, I was secretly worried about traveling through such heavy fog and actually making it to our destination. The excitement of exploring a village for the first time in my life was overshadowed by the anxiety of a potentially hazardous journey. Mukta Bhai and I were at the station at 7:00 am. Dr. Gul Hossain, one of the most reputed agricultural scientists, joined us minutes before departure. The journey was rather smooth and painless. We crossed the river Padma by launch. It took us a good six hours to get to Kaliganj, where we had our lunch of mughlai parata and tea. We rented a Rickshaw Van to take us to Maheshwarchanda. This was another first for me. Dr. Hossain and Mukta bhai sat on the front of the van while I carefully sat myself on the back, facing the traffic. We started for the village at around 2:30 pm.

I am embarrassed to admit that up until recently, my idea of rural Bangladesh was profoundly influenced by images fed by BTV drama serials. A humble cottage, a few banana trees, chickens running around and a haystack finished up, this is what I thought to be a village. Poverty and hunger automatically came in mind. This idea started changing long before we even reached the village. Perfectly paved roads, Acres of Lichi trees, Sugar Canes, Mustard crops, countless Fisheries and the abundance of Livestock put my pathetic city existence to shame.

As we entered the village, a 60+ man welcomed us with a big smile and open arms. He was at the time sweeping the streets as though it were the most enjoyable thing to do in the whole world. He wore a watch that didn't work and walked so fast that a 30 yr old was having a rough time keeping up with him. He is Md. Helaluddin, popularly known as "Member". This man is the Farmers' Leader of Maheshwarchanda village and the protagonist of my story.

Member wasted no time and hurried us to his home where an extravagant meal of "chaal er pitha", fresh, raw honey and "Khejur er gur er payesh" was awaiting us! I was too busy looking around and admiring the simple yet remarkably clever planning of his home and the land around it. Member's bedroom had no roof. His floral printed mosquito net was neatly tucked away and a very inviting Shitol Pati was showing itself off on his bed. Piles of freshly picked organic eggplants in the kitchen, baby lettuce, Papaya, Boroi in his garden, Aloe Vera, Mint and many other medicinal plants growing somewhere in the back, all of this make Helaluddin a very happy man. "Helaluddin Rani" (Mrs. Helaluddin) proudly declares that her husband writes "boi" every night. I deciphered the meaning of that much later. Helaluddin maintains a journal!

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