

# The beginning

SARWAR AHMED

An email last December asked that I attend an urgent meeting in Singapore, without an agenda. Preceding this invitation, I was asked to sign a secrecy agreement. Taken by surprise, I met up with colleagues from around the Asia-Pacific region, as we checked in at the hotel with all of us wondering what was up.

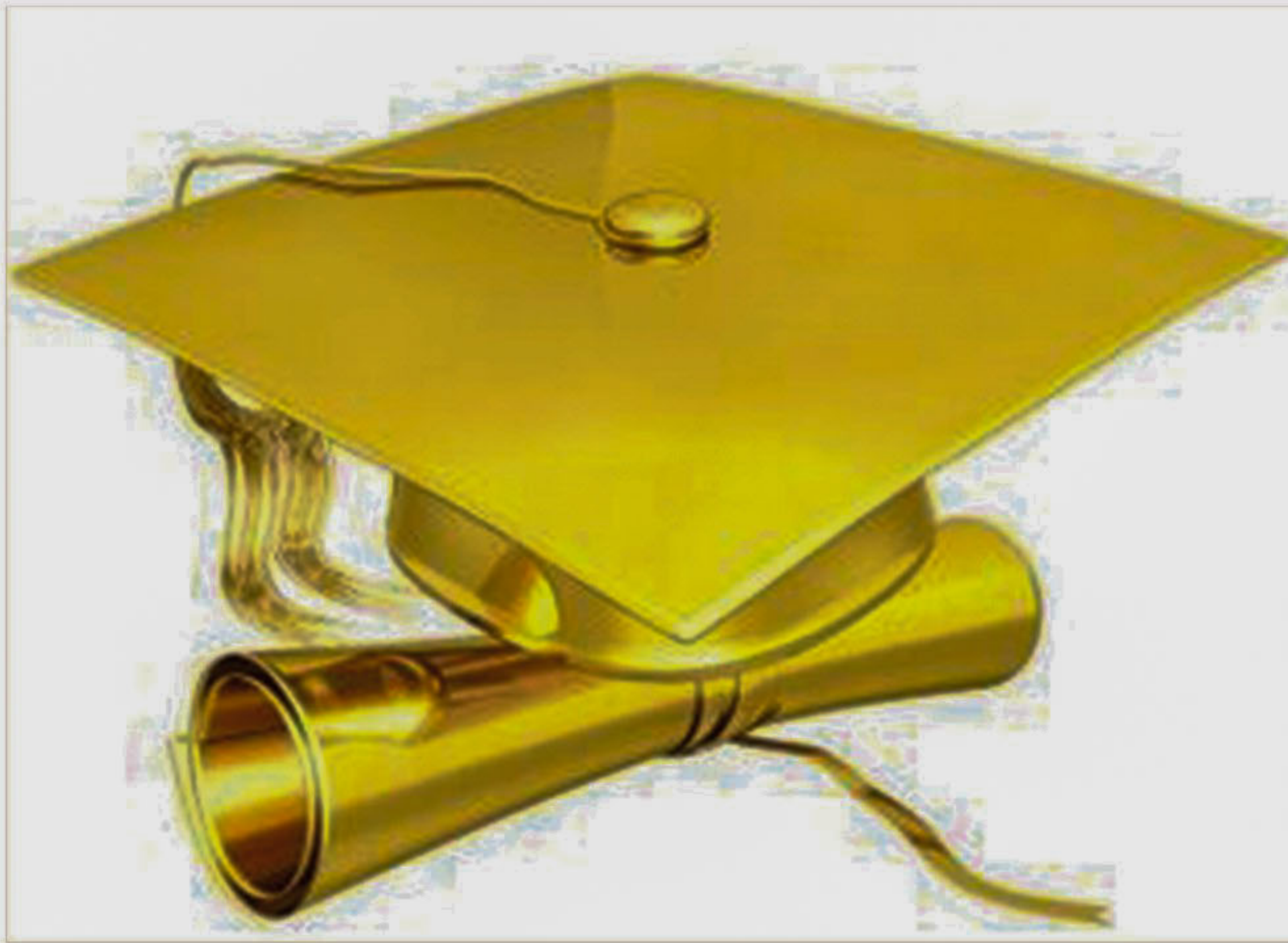
The meeting began with a formal announcement by our APAC Regional Heads of Crop Protection and Seeds that Syngenta will now be integrated into one global business, and will not remain as the separate crop protection or seeds businesses.

We were invited to design the organisation structure of a new concept, which was to be announced in February this year. The excitement and thrill of being part of a team drawing up a new organisation for the company was tempered with a sense of depression.

Through this column, I will chronicle my corporate life journey that formally began when I joined Ciba-Geigy in January 1981. For my MBA internship, I had chosen Ciba-Geigy early in October 1980. This was the first time Ciba-Geigy had invited interns from IBA. As we got to know later, Mr. AKM Shamsuddin, an MBA and Logistics Manager in Ciba, had convinced management to try out MBA interns for project work.

All I knew of Ciba-Geigy then was that it was a pharmaceutical company and I had already started thinking about various marketing activities in that direction. Abdul Bari, Mahub Chowdhury and I, the MBA interns, were ushered in to meet Managing Director Georg Wyss in his office on the first floor of 64 Dilkusha. We were surprised to learn that Ciba-Geigy had an agricultural division, which was by far larger, in terms of revenue, than the other businesses -- pharmaceuticals, dyes and chemicals.

We were assigned to the agricultural division as our internship programme.



brands' perception, way off from his major of qualitative business application. At a loss, he managed to go through a steep learning curve to make sure he could scrape through with his project.

He joined Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation (BTMC) as a research officer soon after completing his MBA, but only for few months. Thereafter, he joined ICDDR,B in its computer department, which was the beginning of his IT career that eventually led to his migration to Australia, a favourite destination then.

My favourite subject was marketing, made more so by Dr Alimullah Miyan, now the vice chancellor of a private university, IUBAT. I was fortunate to have been initiated into marketing by his presentation of the conceptual framework of marketing. He also made sure that we read the 800 plus pages of Kotler's Marketing Management book, cover to cover, which got me the eye glasses I wear today.

For my MBA internship project, I was assigned to build a marketing information system, reporting to Walter Reinhardt, the agro marketing manager. Here was an opportunity for me to translate what I read into reality.

To develop a credible sales data base, I scoured through all sales invoices for the year and manually prepared a compilation report of sales by customers, products, sales territories. The PC or ERP systems we are so accustomed to today did not, of course, exist. The electronic calculator in 1980-81 was a fixed asset dutifully registered in the company's asset register. I had to take permission to use it to prepare the database, returning it for safe keeping under lock and key, each evening.

Our hard work paid off, leaving a positive image with the management of Ciba-Geigy who took on to hire a flock of MBAs later on.

The writer is managing director of Syngenta Bangladesh Ltd.

As Georg explained, the pesticides business had been privatised in 1979, a year before then, and Ciba-Geigy was establishing its distribution network as well as taking over its stocks from the government. He had the vision that being an agricultural economy, it was worthwhile to invest in the agricultural sector in Bangladesh.

Bari was tasked to develop a footprint of Ciba-Geigy's product delivery and distribution routes throughout the country. Mr Shamsuddin asked him to collect some road maps. Wondering what to do, Bari thought the best place to find road maps was the Roads and Highways office, opposite Ramna Park.

He approached four faced individuals in that office who were not at all helpful. Soon enough, an employee

shadily came to him and whispered that he would be able to give him a copy of a map showing all the roads in the country for Tk 10. Having felt a sense of helplessness, he paid up to get the map, his first ever unfortunate encounter of 'tipping' that disturbs him even today.

Towards the end of our internship, Dhaka University students were celebrating rag day. Bari's rickshaw was passing the Rokeya Hall gate when one student splashed some coloured water at him. It left visible marks on his only decent shirt. He had no choice but to go to Ciba-Geigy in that colourful look, as he had a meeting with Mr Shamsuddin where he would submit his report, which was somehow saved from the colours. Totally embarrassed,

Bari cannot remember what was discussed at that meeting, as Mr Shamsuddin was quite puzzled by his attire.

Bari joined the MIS division of BCIC upon graduation. Some of our batch mates, including Bari had received the BCIC scholarship to support educational expenses with a condition that they must serve BCIC for two years. The rough and tough complexities of real life, coupled with organisational politics hit Bari so much that he left BCIC after about a year, returning the pro rata scholarship money. An IT career took him afar to Australia where he is comfortably settled now.

Chowdhury, the other intern with me, was given a marketing research task of gauging Ciba-Geigy's product

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# A hard road to recovery for US motor home capital

AFP, Elkhart, Indiana

Once idle factories are ringing again with the welcome sounds of motor homes being built, but this Indiana town seen as a bellwether for the US economy is still hurting nearly two years after the recession officially ended.

"We are just crawling out of this recession -- I mean crawling. It seems like our finger nails are just down to the skin here," said Elkhart county commissioner Mike Yoder.

Elkhart is known as the recreational vehicle (RV) capital of the world and more than half the jobs in the area are in manufacturing -- four times the national average.

That used to be a blessing for generations of workers who could land a reliable job at a decent wage with a steady hand, strong work ethic and an eighth grade education.

It became a curse when the RV industry was hit with the double whammy of a spike in gasoline prices and the credit crunch.

After fluctuating between two and five percent for most of the past 20 years, the unemployment rate in the Elkhart-Goshen area jumped to 9.4 percent in July 2008.

By March 2009 unemployment here hit a peak of 20.1 percent -- double the national average and one of the highest in the country -- as RV orders dried up amid the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

--- "It was scary" ---  
President Barack Obama visited this Midwestern town of 52,000 four times -- twice as a candidate and twice as president -- to highlight his economic policies.

Stimulus dollars poured into the area -- to fix roads, sewers,

an airport runway, the local theater -- and Norwegian electric car company Think garnered national headlines when it picked Elkhart for a new plant.

Most importantly, RV orders started to pick up again.

After bottoming out at 166,000 units in 2009 with a retail value of \$5.2 billion -- less than half of the number sold in 2007 for \$14.5 billion -- RV shipments rose 46 percent to 242,300 in 2010 as dealers began to restock their lots.

Shipments are forecast to rise 8.6 percent this year to 263,100, but only if rising oil prices don't once again put the brakes on demand for the gasoline-guzzling vacation homes and trailers.

If sales don't pick up, dealers will send those shiny new RVs right back to the factories, leaving manufacturers on the hook for everything but what amounts to a restocking fee.

The frantic pace of work at Jayco -- one of the biggest manufacturers left standing after an intense period of bankruptcies and consolidation -- speaks to the company and the industry's optimism.

Clinton Lehman slides a cabinet base into a small trailer and quickly drills it into place while a co-worker works on the roof.

Lehman, 30, was out of work for nine months before he was called back to Jayco.

"It was scary at first, but it was

not so bad because I knew there were lots of other people in the same boat," he said.

Things are worlds better now. The shop floor is busy. Most of the people he knows are working again. He doesn't have to worry any more about how he'll pay for his daughter's clothes, or books, or dinner.

There's a good future in the RV world, said Dave Eash, vice president for sales and marketing at Jayco.

Attendance has been great at recent trade shows and there's a lot of pent-up demand in the market.

Millions of baby boomers are retiring and RVs are also attracting a growing number of younger people.

And the industry has slimmed down with leaner and more efficient operations.

"We're very confident of where the industry is going," Eash told AFP.

"People are looking for an affordable way to take a vacation, spend time with family and have a lot of fun."

It's not clear if there's a good future for everyone in Elkhart.

--- "They say everything's getting better but I don't see it" ---

The receptionist at the local unemployment office greeted most people who walked in on a recent sunny afternoon by name. Unlike the dilapidated shopping mall, the parking lot here was full.

While the unemployment rate here may be looking better these days -- it was down to 11 percent in March -- only about 6,000 of the 24,000 jobs lost in the downturn have come back.

Meanwhile, the official labor force has shrunk by 13,000 people -- or about 13 percent of the 2007 average -- because so many people have left town or simply given up.

Fred Clair, 38, has been out of work for more than two and a half years. He lost his house to foreclosure and had to move in with his parents. He has no idea what he'd do without their help.

"They say everything's getting better, but I don't see it," Clair told AFP after yet another visit to the unemployment office. "Most of the people I know are still looking."

Clair's unemployment benefits ran out in September. He managed to find a job in February, but was laid off two and a half weeks later when that section of the RV plant closed. Since then, it's just been one disappointment after another.

Getting Clair and the thousands of others like him back to work is going to be "really, really difficult," warned county commissioner Yoder.

Employers are wary of hiring people who've been out of work for so long, especially if they're over 50.

Despite a major retraining effort, Elkhart's workforce is still not educated enough to attract employers in industries other than manufacturing. Yoder's hope lies in the entrepreneurial spirit which led to Elkhart's past prosperity.

"I know the dreams are out there and I know that in the last two years from an economic development standpoint we've planted a lot of seeds," he said.

"We're just waiting to see what grows."



Workers at the Jayco factory in Elkhart, Indiana, assemble a recreation vehicle (RV) on a fast-moving assembly line.

AFP