

Sown &

Reaped



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Farms advance, not farmers

Shykh Seraj is a journalist, media personality and an agriculture development activist. He has been working on agriculture issues over the last three decades. His investigative documentaries and in-depth reporting have pointed at solutions to various problems farmers in Bangladesh face. He sensitised farmers on the agriculture budget and subsidies given to them. At the age of 56, he visits remote areas, talks to farmers and reports on their sufferings. He promotes success stories and encourages young educated generations to engage in farming. His relentless efforts did not go in vain. He has been applauded and awarded by various national and international organisations for his outstanding activities. He received the prestigious United Nations FAO AH Boerma award in 2009 and Ekushey Padak as the youngest Bangladeshi. Seraj is also an Ashoka fellow. Last week, The Daily Star interviewed Seraj at his Channel i office, where he is

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WHEN Shykh Seraj started the pre-budget seminars with farmers in 2005, he was surprised that they did not know anything about it. They were totally unaware about the subsidies on fertilisers, diesel and power for irrigation.

"Many said they neither got it (budget) nor ate it," says Seraj. "They (farmers) were least aware of their rights."

The situation has now changed. Farmers who thought the budget was a myth, started regarding it as an important issue. They now advise the government not to provide subsidies in cash. Rather, they want it through inputs, such as fertiliser and diesel, to avert misappropriation of public money by vested quarters.

Field-seminars on farmers' budget reached its seventh year. Over this period, he witnessed how the farmers became aware of their issues and rights.

"In this year's seminar, a farmer pointed that if an MP (law-maker) can enjoy tax exemption benefits to buy a Tk 4-5 crore car by at just Tk 40-50 lakh, why are farmers not given tax waivers on the import of agriculture equipment," says Seraj.

Based on his experience, he said farmers are now more conscious than ever before. They get relatively better prices for their produce. The influence of middlemen has also come down significantly.

But there are still many things to do for the farmers and the sector.

He says a farmers' chamber of commerce is vital to ensuring their rights. More investment in the farm sector and sub-sectors, like poultry; crop insurance; a supply of adequate quality seeds; a boost in investment subsidies and its proper utilisation; and high value added crops are all crucial to ensuring food security for a nation of nearly 160 millions.

He also talks on futures sale of agriculture commodities and setting up of go-downs and storage facilities under public-private partnership. He also emphasises the use of advanced technology in the farm sector for further boosts in production.

"I feel we should have a chamber of commerce for farmers. We have recommended it in this year's budget proposals," says Seraj. The chamber would deal with farmers' issues, he said, and cited an example of the pulse growers' association in Canada that is so strong that it even lends money to the government.

It is sad to see the poultry sector ignored by the government -- there are around one-lakh poultry farms that employ nearly 50 lakh people -- he says.

"It is the same with the fisheries sector." Eggs are being sold at prices lower than production costs, he adds. The poultry sector does not have easy access to bank loans because bankers believe it is a risky industry.

The government also did not do anything for them, Seraj says.

"For years now, I have been talking about crop insurance. It is not for crops only. If a farmer's cow dies, he loses everything."

The supply of quality seeds is still a major problem and many farmers lost their crops by using low quality seeds, says the agriculture development activist. Jhalak, a hybrid seed, is one such example that has caused crop losses in some areas this year.

The government, through Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC), meets only 5-10 percent of seed demand. The rest is supplied by the private sector.

"BADC should provide at least 20 percent of the seeds," he said. Seed contract growers, present on a limited scale, can be expanded, instead of handing over activities to the private sector, he adds.



Shykh Seraj

Large companies are still reluctant to invest in the farm sector, despite great returns, he says.

"An investment of just one take can bring returns of four taka, which no other sector offers," says Seraj. Among the big companies, only PRAN has come forward with investment in the farm sector, he adds.

"Businessmen have to change their mindset. Investment in this sector can change the lives of crores of farmers as well as the investors," he says. More investment can establish agro-processed industries and high value crops in the country, says the Ashoka fellow.

Many items can be made from rice only, he says, naming China that produces around 70 items from the staple. Paddy wastage can produce cooking oil, but Bangladesh is least bothered about it, he says.

Investment can also be made in storage facilities, which are inadequate, he adds.

He urged the government to take a strong position against donors who oppose subsidies to the agriculture sector.

Seraj cautioned people and the government against the excessive use of pesticides in farming. "We are having poisonous food, vegetables and fruits," he says. The use of pesticides also reduces soil fertility, he adds.

Policymakers can encourage the use of barmy compost and other organic fertilisers, he points.

He said the 3 percent import duty on agriculture equipment

should go now.

Seraj advocates the construction of countrywide storage facilities to avert losses by farmers. Around 30 percent of crops are lost during the post-harvest period.

If future commodity sales, including agriculture produce, can take place across the world, why not it in Bangladesh, he says.

Education on agriculture should be made mandatory, like civil defence training in many countries, according to Seraj.

He has taken an initiative to educate students on farming and recently, four students of East West University were taken to the fields to work by themselves.

Seraj placed a total of 53 recommendations with the finance minister, based on feedback he received at half a dozen seminars held at rural areas. Of these, 17 recommendations were in regards to crops, 14 for poultry, 11 for fisheries and 11 for livestock.

He wants the government to save farmlands from random industrialisation, more allocation for research and development, empowerment of the agriculture extension department, integrated pest management club, and fair prices for farmers' produce.

The import of eggs and chicks from India must be stopped for national interests. A tax holiday and easy bank loans to the poultry sector are two other proposals for the upcoming budget.

Fisheries must be considered as a farm sector and it has to be given benefits as such. He urges the government to introduce insurance for the poultry farmers as well.

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To do the impossible

A Bangladeshi living in Qatar has disproved the proverb, 'Ploughing arable land by a donkey is not possible', by doing so. He leased some hilly land in Qatar, cut the hills, and turned it into plain lands. It is then that the question of ploughing the land arises. He was concerned over how he will do it without the help of a cow that is not available in Qatar. Finally, he ploughed the land by a donkey -- an impossible task.

The name of the person that did the impossible is Farid, a man from Chittagong. Shykh Seraj, an agriculture development activist, has witnessed this task.

Seraj cited this example to show how Bangladeshis are good at farming -- where he is doing it is immediate.

He said hundreds of Bangladeshis are farming in Oman and Qatar. They have taught them to eat vegetables. Expatriate Bangladeshis are even farming in San Francisco in the United States.

The question came on the eve of taking land on lease in foreign countries by Bangladesh to secure its food requirements.

"I don't know how it will be done, how the crops will be brought back to Bangladesh," said Seraj.

But he sees huge potential in exporting farmers and

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agriculture officials to countries like Oman and Qatar to help Bangladeshi farms. The Bangladeshis cannot understand their language, says Seraj.

"We can send skilled manpower, both farmers and officials, to work there," he says. Now, a lot of Nepali farmers are working there, he adds.

He said the garden visa in Oman for the Bangladeshis has long been shut on wage issues. It needs to be resolved immediately, he adds. The main crops grown in Oman are tomatoes, eggplants, dates, bananas, limes, and carrots.

