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HE country is passing through crises like corruption; killing of political activists, businessmen and journalists; and rise of new extremist outfits like Ansarullah Bangla that call for jihad to establish their agenda of radical faith. Economic expectation turned into economic disappointment as donor assistance dipped and prices of all commodities rose sharply. The world outside Bangladesh has

changed so much with economic liberalisation jumpstarting the economies of many countries. But there is a disturbing corollary in this country: scams; apathy on the part of the administration

towards calamities; environmental disasters; and rapidly deteriorating infrastructure of schools, healthcare, road, power, railways and civic amenities, with consequent shrinking of investment opportuni-

The past years have seen a pathetic lack of leadership and clumsy attempts to plug the breaches with whatever one can lay one's hands upon-brick, wood, cloth or high promises. But rhetoric can't fill the stomach. What an average person cares about is governance that would make a real difference to his life, which successive governments were unable to provide.

In rural areas there is desperate poverty, mainly because of bad politics and uncaring governments. People with political authority often say that they have to spread their party links to grassroots level, forgetting or even ignoring the fact that people at

the bottom of the layer are unable to eke out a living or get work to stay afloat. Political philosophy, ideology or party slogan seem hollow to them.

Recently, my wife and I rode on a rickshaw driven by a boy barely 14 years old. He came from Nilphamari. Battered by poverty and deserted by his father, this young boy, Rahim, along with his sick mother and younger sister moved to Dhaka to eke out a living. Why should Rahim and his like be engaged in such a gruelling job at so young an age, when they should be in school and should have at least one square meal a day?

The governments since liberation have treated education, especially primary education, with such contempt and neglect that we are one of the most illiterate countries of the world. That's the reason why Rahim and his ilk are pulling rickshaws, breaking stones and bricks, and picking food from garbage dumps. In most districts of the north and

south west, children of poor parents cannot go to school, not because they don't like to go but because their poor parents will not let them, and they have to work to supplement the family budget.

Against the backdrop of such a bleak scenario, Bangladesh has met several targets of the MDGs with astonishing success. But the government's performances in reversing the present hopeless state of primary schooling, arresting environmental degradation, ensuring safe drinking water and developing global partnerships in the overall development programme leaves much to be desired.

Despite the fact that enrolment in primary education has gone up from 82% in 2003 to 94% now, and literacy rate up to class V climbed to 80%, the real picture is still very gloomy with regard to actual learning. A report of the Department of Primary Education and the Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP-II) said that around 70% of the children who completed primary education were unable to read, write or count



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properly. The report found students "pitiably weak" in English, which plays a key role in business, higher studies and technical education. It identified the weak organisational and educational framework and the lack of a proper physical environment in schools as the leading causes of poor perfor-

The report further says: "Non-qualified teachers, lack of devotion on the part of the teachers and poor support and monitoring from family largely contribute to the weakness." Moreover, many poor students come to school half-fed. They cannot pay attention to their studies in the afternoon classes as thirst for knowledge is replaced by hunger for food. Reports show that some 2 lakh teachers teach close to 19 million students in about 38,000 government-run primary schools, with contact hours coming to 500 hours per student per teacher annually, which should at least be 900 contact hours per year for grades 1-5.

To travel through the northern and south western districts of Bangladesh is to understand the extent of our population problem. You see that it is the poor and illiterate women who have the most children. That speaks of the urgency of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by creating jobs, which can only be done by making proper investments in the countryside. The government will spend Tk.1400 crore in the next few months to create selfemployment opportunities for jobless and mongaaffected people. Why shouldn't it be possible to reverse the worsening trend, especially in North Bengal, by setting up industries that can be run with local agricultural products? The government can set up technical training centres in the countryside so that people can acquire skills required for jobs

There can be no empowerment without literacy. The scenario in primary schooling is one of dilapidated schools, de-motivated teachers, irresponsible management and powerless parents. Along with

these, the unappealing and uninspiring contents of textbooks have made primary schooling a futile exercise. Even after discounting the dropouts, those entering the secondary stage of schooling cannot assimilate the subject matter because of the weak foundation. Says a veteran educationist: "In our mad rush for larger enrolment, quality has been compromised for quantity."

As far as the government is concerned, it is statistics about the spread of literacy that count. But if education is a means to learn skills, then a substandard education is of little use. If 90% of the children have read up to class V, and then 60% are lost in the wilderness, then what purpose will the investment serve? With such little knowledge, which organisa-

tion-either government or private-will recruit them? With such a dilemma confronting the nation, a poor family will not send its children to school to give the bureaucrats the satisfaction of adding them to a literacy statistic. They will do so if there are some benefits in that education.

The real problem is the government's lack of priorities, in terms of supervision, monitoring and involvement in elementary education, where it should be focusing its energies and attention. From teacher appointment to textbook selection, there should be no scope for politicians and bureaucrats to interfere. Veteran educationists opine that political influence peddling in teacher appointment and politicisation of teachers are largely responsible for the rot in our education system, from the primary to the university levels.

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## Sheikh Hasina's legacy ... work in progress

Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury

his is in response to Mr. Syed Badrul Ahsan's article 'Sheikh Hasina's legacy,' printed on September 4, 2013.

Sheikh Hasina's legacy is a work in progress. Each time she took the reins of this nation, hers was an inheritance of losses and she turned it to an age of plenty. Most recently, in August 2005, when she survived, with lasting injuries, a coordinated attack on her life, she had no time for herself and was mourning the losses and nurturing the wounded like the mythological Greek Goddess Artemis midwifing the birth of her twin brother soon after she was born. Sheikh Hasina had long dedicated herself to Bangladesh.

In custody after 1/11, she went back to work. While her detractors wanted her removed from the political arena, Sheikh Hasina was drawing up her dreams about Bangladesh in broad brushes. In the dock, she once asked me (I was a co-accused) whether I could be of some assistance. Dazed by the travails of incarceration, my neural capability had gone into hibernation. She persisted even under severe physical stresses, initiated by suspected poisoning.

Back in charge in 2009, she talked about the dreams she had drawn out in the prison, of Bangladesh in 2021and milestones at the journey's end. The major economies of the world had by then gone into a tailspin from a financial meltdown of immense proportions. The knock-on effects reverberated in the western countries like an economic tsunami. Sheikh Hasina held the reins of the country steady and fast, steering the fragile economy through the troubled waters. We grew faster than before (just crossed the \$ 1000 per capita threshold), our farmers smiled with plentiful bounties, our factories hummed, our schools filled with children—girls in the lead. We emerged from darkness (literally) to light. By God's grace, Bangladesh stands out as an island of relative stability and peace in an unforgiving world set on fire from the Levant to the Khyber.

Sheikh Hasina dwells easily from the hearth of a commoner to the lab of a scientist. She is equally at home talking about bhorta as about genome. Her fond memories go years back to the boat ride home through the marshy swath of Faridpur to the company of scientists at International Center for Theoretical Physics at Trieste.

I had often wondered at the coming of the day predicted by Alvin Toffler in his book The Future Shock, when fast pace of technological changes will make us strangers in our own world. But tech savvy Sheikh Hasina, 60+ now, has shown how leaders can not only keep pace but harness technology intelligently for the good of ordinary folks.

Her vision of a Bangladesh married to science and technology was summed up in Digital Bangladesh. Initially scorned by the nay sayers, she has taken digital technology to the far corners of Bangladesh-over 4,000 rural Union Information Centres, windows to the world for the commoners through internet, are eloquent testimony to her dream coming true. And these are just the beginnings of the viral growth that we are yet to witness in the years to come.

Sheikh Hasina is committed to giving democracy in Bangladesh a firm anchor, secured from the prying eyes of unconstitutional forces, nemesis of many of the fledgling democracies of the developing world. She worked hard to restore our original Constitution, which was mauled by usurpers of power to suit even criminal ends. In recent years under her watch, umpteen elections, national and local, were held and hailed as free and fair where many of her own party nominees lost. She is determined to carry forward the pathway through the provisions of the Constitution for the next and all future national elections. A leap of faith from the years of distrust. A legacy she so endearingly cherishes.

Bangladesh stands at a crossroads today. Our core values are being threatened by vested groups under the garb of Islam. Those who have chosen the path of expediency can only do so at the cost of the nation's future. One who starts her early morning with prayers and dedicates her day for the good of the people, Sheikh Hasina is not to be intimidated or deterred by the militancy of those who want to hijack our religion rooted in virtues, tolerance, humility and forbearance. She is our beacon for the future.

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## Media's role in agricultural revolution

OLTAIRE once remarked: "Reach out to people things you like to accomplish for their good." In recent years, media has emerged as an extremely effective mechanism for flow and dissemination of information and knowledge, and for reaching out to the people for better impact. Media has been able to leverage programmes and activities relating to economic and social development.

In Bangladesh, this is well manifested through the creative and innovative ideas, programmes and work of Shykh Seraj. The manner in which the media has supported agricultural development, guided and implemented by Shykh Seraj, is exemplary for the developing world.

Depending on the objectives and priorities for development, specific sector focus may undergo shifts in development strategies. Despite this, agriculture development remains the key mechanism to achieve inclusive growth. Expansion and efficient performance of this sector not only help in reducing poverty and inequalities, but also supplement other sectors and significantly contribute to economic development.

With this perspective, over the past several years, Shykh Seraj has been intensively engaged in highlighting issues related to development of the agriculture sector; enhancement of farmers' skills and upholding their views and interests (eg. ensuring fair prices and upgraded tools for farming); promoting communication; and knowledge and information sharing and dissemination. Thus, Seraj created opportunities for farmers, policy makers, academics and civil society

to engage in problem-resolving and action-oriented dialogue. Driven by strong commitment and propelled by his skills both as extraordinary media and development anchor, Seraj set a unique example through adding a new and vibrant dimension for media to suitably cater to the needs of a critically important sector of national development. In course of his work, Seraj explored structural and functional constraints and challenges that impede development of the agricultural sector; obtained and disseminated feedback from farmers; and ensured that their views are appropriately taken into account and reflected in national budget and mainstreamed into national development priorities. In course of his work Seraj also did research on agriculture development programmes and activities in other countries in Asia and evaluated how these useful experiences could best be suited to the requirements of Bangladesh.

Shykh Seraj's comprehensive role and contribution have multidimensional aspects that have useful impact on our overall economic and social development. Seraj is the first media and development personality in Bangladesh, as well as the whole of South Asia, to undertake substantive initiatives towards a sustainable revolution in the agriculture sector, building on local and regional information, activities and experiences.

Since starting his journey more than three decades ago through Mati o Manush programme on television, Shykh Seraj has progressed in his mission and achieved unparalleled success through creativity, innovations and ground-based solutions. This has enabled mass awareness, analytical discourse and the much required consensus among policy makers, civil society and the media to reach out to marginal farmers with better policy options and programmes.

Seraj also contributed to expansion of field research through intensive reviews and feedback on all core aspects of agricultural development-improved productivity, efficient product specification and pricing, farmers' share and minimising role of intermediaries, impact of policy support and deriving lessons from success stories on overall efficiency and productivity of the agricultural sector in South and Southeast Asia. Shykh Seraj generated remarkable

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momentum in sharing experiences and feedback and reaching solutions critically important for sustainability of agricultural development initiatives and programmes at both national and sub-regional levels.

In Bangladesh, the process of pre-budget consultations with relevant stakeholders adds a significant dimension in making the budget process more inclusive and comprehensive. Shykh Seraj's planning and organising of pre-budget discussions between policy makers and farmers at the local level provides the much needed opportunity for exchange of views on priority actions to achieve better outcomes.

These sessions resulted in identifying and addressing key constraints in agriculture development and support systems, higher productivity, efficient cultivation, and impact of targeted interventions as subsidies, improved marketing and service delivery mechanisms, supply of critical inputs, eliminating role of intermediaries, and enhancing focus on livelihood, incomes and sustained engagement in farming. This is a trend that most developing and agro-based countries are closely looking at for replication. These objective-driven and results-based discussions and feedback from stakeholders in agriculture collated as "farmer's budget" enables concrete, monitorable and implementable programmes that benefit overall agricultural development.

Dissemination of knowledge and information on tools, mechanisms, and farming procedures, and research at local and national levels contribute to strengthening ongoing efforts, consolidating gains previously achieved and facilitating innovations for expansion of agricultural output. In several developing countries incoherence in policy frameworks and recurring gaps in agricultural research further disconnect what the farmers have to say and offer. Bangladesh has been a notable exception to this and emerged as a success story through prudent absorption of farmers' views and opinions. Through his work, Shykh Seraj has contributed substantially to achieving this and moving towards overall efficiency and enhanced competitiveness of the agricultural sector.

Seraj and his team have been carrying on consultations for institutional support to farmers including finance, knowledge and capacity improvements, and agro-based services. He has been instrumental in mainstreaming the role of farmers in the context of national agricultural policy formulation and implementation. Side by side, Seraj renders useful advisory and advocacy support that enables deeper understanding of farmers' rights and opportunities. He has broadened his scope of activities through programmes on impact of climate change for marginal farmers and strong linkages of modern farming to environmental sustainability.

Seraj's efforts in guiding and implementing agricultural and rural orientation for students is an innovative way to familiarise our "workforce of tomorrow" on the role of agriculture and contribution of our farmers to development. This gives students the opportunity to work side by side with farmers in planting crops, irrigating land, and harvesting. Students enrolled in this programme find it very useful to have on-ground experience of learning from farmers and supporting their work. This is a remarkable opportunity to obtain first-hand information and knowledge of problems faced by farmers and gather insights on farming process and techniques.

Keeping in view the fact that poverty, deprivation and exclusion impede economic and social progress and diminish human creativity, Shykh Seraj seeks to bring out the rich cultural and social skills our farmers possess. Keeping this in view, he promotes and conducts media-covered traditional and innovative recreational activities, sports and entertainment for farmers. In addition, programmes on poor farmers' access to affordable medical care and crop insurance coverage add new dimension to the agricultural revolution.

The extent and magnitude of Shykh Seraj's work on agricultural development and engagement of farmers transcend conventional reforms. This is not only benefitting the agricultural sector and farmers but also facilitating a steady and inevitable transformation towards poverty reduction, minimising inequalities and strengthening potentials for economic growth. Seraj's work confirms that media-supported and committed development entrepreneurship offers preferred solutions to addressing constraints that stagnate growth. His role has significantly contributed to reducing poverty, given the much needed platform for farmers and agriculture to progress, and mainstreamed farmers as key agents of change-towards a developed, prosperous Bangladesh.

Today, is Shykh Seraj 59th birthday and I wish the icon of development all the very best as a friend and colleague and hope that he lives long. Bangladesh needs a son of the soil and patriot like him to sustainably develop as a strong nation in the global map.

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