Daddy, Don't Sell the Farm

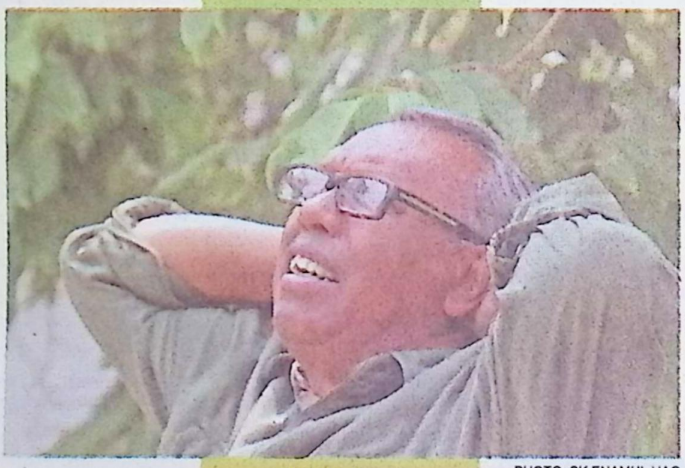
In Bangladesh, it's not uncommon to see farmers throw away their produce on the roadside as a form of protest, to express their frustration. Forget profit—sometimes they cannot even recover the primary costs for inputs like seeds, fertiliser and pesticides. "I would say farmers get zero support in these matters," says Shykh Seraj, award winning agricultural development activist and journalist.

Although grown locally, we import many vegetables such as onions and ginger. "The government could discourage LCs through which these vegetables are imported by increasing tax on import and giving subsidies on agricultural inputs."

If we don't give farmers this kind of support in a so-called open economy, how can they compete with imported products? It's like throwing you into a river with hands tied on your back, and then asking you to swim ashore. "We tend to think that agriculture is an issue that concern villagers. If agriculture had been an urban issue, the problems of the farmers would have been solved long ago."

The definition and scope of agriculture have to be broadened. Agriculture is not only paddy harvesting for which the government had provided ample support with a view to achieving food safety. "You have to look at farmers as an integrated group who grow vegetables, fruits, and own or work in fisheries, dairy farms, poultry farms, etc."

Many poultry farms and fisheries owned by young entrepreneurs are closing down due to the rising cost of feed and lack of policy support. "Who are we supporting— the young entrepreneurs or companies that import agricultural and poultry products?" says Seraj who has inspired many farmers to be self-reliant. "In Gazipur, some poultry farms have been turned into low cost rented housing for garment workers because it is financially more viable. "But such establishments hardly have the same social utilities," says the host of the legendary TV series *Hridoye Mati O Manush*, the popular sequel to *Mati O Manush* that remained a hit in the state-owned BTV in the 80s and 90s.



Shykh Seraj

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Bangladeshi farmers are perhaps the most neglected and laborious lot. Helping them will help the economy.

We need to rethink business. Business is not only importing something and selling it in the local market. It is also producing raw materials; adding value all the way to finished products. A businessman could invest in producing tomatoes that are ideal for making tomato ketchup. The government may provide policy support by putting high tax on its import. Thus we could become self sufficient in tomato ketchup and even export it to other countries. Similarly, business initiatives could be launched to produce potato starch or chips and export them to foreign countries. "A small country like Bhutan has emerged as a major exporter of jams and jellies," reminds Seraj.

It is often the middleman who robs the Bangladeshi farmer of the fruits of his industry. "In this scenario, factories will buy directly from farmers and this model could be replicated all over the country," says the Ekushey Padak winning journalist. "Farmers will be able to build their own organised forum which will empower them to bargain prices."

Cost of fertilisers and pesticides is a big concern. "Through new technology like Leaf Colour Chart (LCC) the heavy dependence on fertilizers such as urea can be reduced. Farmers need to be trained on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) which is more environment-friendly and has less adverse effects on crops. They need weather based crop insurance."

Our farmers have performed miracles in many countries among them Oman, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. "A farmer named Farid tilled a piece of land in Qatar with a traditional Bangladeshi plough made in a local metalsmith shop. Unable to find any bulls, he had a couple of donkeys pull the plough. The rest is, as they say, is history," says the TV host who featured Farid, originally from Chittagong in one the episodes of his TV programme.

In Bangla there is a proverb that goes like: you cannot make a donkey pull the plough.

Bangladeshi farmers like Farid have proved that you can. ■