

Info lady: The peddler of information

Lady in blue rides bicycles to spread knowledge across a remote village

SHYKH SERAJ

Bangladeshi farmers have revolutionized agricultural production in the country. Before independence, Bangladesh had to import food. Although the population rose and the cultivable land has reduced, our farmers remarkably kept on producing more and more and 160 million people still survives. With the help of technology, information, research and policy, Bangladesh has been able to increase agricultural yield. If we want to move onward from here, we need further technological innovation, a strategy and most importantly, access to information.

If we really want to enrich the farming community and their livelihood status, we need to create access to information and technology services based on farming, education, health etc. Information can have a revolutionary impact. Today I bring to you an innovative example of spreading the wealth of information and technology. I visited Jalalpur village in Netrokona district a few days back. A private organization named ARBAN is giving info and tech-service to the rural community here. They believe the country will be led towards holistic development through the dissemination of information. Their info ladies or the 'Tothyakolyani' are spreading knowledge across the village—they use laptop, ride on bicycles and sit with rural people on their home yards, sometimes on fields, to know their problems and figure out solutions by the power of ICT.

The info ladies are from Jalalpur. Since their roots are tied with the village, they know the rural community and needs very well. They know the people and the job becomes easier for them. I spoke to the villagers to know how they look at the job of the info-ladies.

"Have you seen those who roam around the village on bicycles?"

"Yes."

"What's their purpose?"

"They're providing valuable information on different issues- health, farming, education, etc."

People gather around a home yard. People concentrate on an info lady who comes to them on a bicycle, and they listen to her.

"My coconuts are not healthy. They fall before they grow," said one farmer.

"It's a common problem. Let me show you a video on this", replied the info lady. And showed him a complete video on



PHOTO: HRIDOYE MATI O MANUSH

Shykh Seraj working with the 'Tothyakolyani' of Purbodhola

this problem through her laptop.

"How do you get benefited by the info ladies?" I asked a villager.

"We get different information on education, health and farming. It really helps us a lot", he replied.

"What else do you learn?" I asked.

"We learn how to feed our children properly", she replied.

This is how the light of knowledge is spreading across villages. The agenda is to bridge modern technology and rural people so that they have access to information. With the help of the info ladies, each farm family of the village has been empowered. They know how to get answers to their questions. The catalyst behind this great achievement is Dnet, locally implemented by ARBAN - Activity for Reformation of Basic Needs, who also trains each info lady at their ICT Centre. To ensure that people get information on agriculture, education and health, ten info ladies are working

in Purbodhola upazila- they are often known as peddlers of information.

In addition to laptops, the info ladies also use primary health check-up tools. They determine crop diseases and carry necessary resolving tools. They have agricultural and educational information on their laptop. I had the privilege to talk with the info ladies.

"I am helping people so that they know their blood pressure. I can also administer pregnancy test, weight and diabetes checks."

"What about you?" I asked another info lady.

"I inform farmers about different pest attacks on crops."

"You are giving the rural people information on health, education and farming sector. Since my concentration is on farming... do you know me?"

"Yes, we have your videos on our laptops!"

"Are my programmes part of the info service too?"

"Definitely."

The first thing that came to my mind is whether the agricultural information service of Department of Agricultural Extension can provide information to the rural farmers like this, if they are trained to do so and have the equipment.

Regarding the pesticide free crop production and soil health testing, these ladies have updated information. Their longtime practice has created the urge. They are now well adept and cordial in inspiring the rural farmers. Most of the info ladies have chosen this profession for extra income beside their studies. However some people in the rural areas don't like their job due to backward thinking. These women are moving onward crossing all these hurdles.

"When the people first saw a lady riding bicycle, did they accept it?" I asked an info lady.

"It was not accepted at all. Many

villagers didn't like it", she replied.

"Many people comment on what we do, but we always neglect them. We do our work. We know its importance," another info lady added.

Livelihood status has changed in the rural region due to these info ladies. Farmers are more successful in overcoming their production issues.

I spoke to Executive Director of ARBAN, Syed Arifuzzaman regarding the achievements of his organization.

"Our info ladies offer diversified service for the rural people. People can easily get the education results; they know

where to get admitted. This eventually brings up the rate of literacy", said Arifuzzaman. "In the past, farmers used ancient technologies. Now they can easily get the latest and specific information on treating their crops. Farmers are now more interested on organic fertilizer use", he added.

Info ladies have a direct impact in ensuring the right to information. They inform the farmers about the farm subsidies. The service they provide helps different members of the society. ARBAN became a finalist of an event called Youth Solutions, organized by The World Bank and Microsoft, held in Sri Lanka. They received the Manthan Award in the category of Digital Inclusion for Development in 2011, held in Delhi. Although many people in Bangladesh don't know about them, the organization's achievement are already well known in the South Asia region. In 2011, they also won a National Digital Innovation Award, becoming an e-livelihood champion. It was awarded by the Government of Bangladesh.

The world evolves every single day with the power of information, we are more connected and integrated than ever before. But, those who are still out of reach of access to information services are falling behind. The info ladies are truly an exceptional example of delivering information in a handy way. This is not the picture that you see all over Bangladesh, but it could be. My story today is an example of successful use of ICT in a remote village of only one district of Bangladesh. If this model was replicated and if it was spread across the country, only then we can reach the peak of revolutionary success. This service can easily be adopted by the government. Many who aren't able to receive information from UDC (Union Digital Centre) can easily be given this service. The SAOs (Sub-Assistant Agriculture Officer) can be trained with necessary tools and they can easily be attached with such information service. Private organizations who are working with information services can also follow this great example and create their own info ladies.



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PHOTO: STAR

Sumitra Bala works in her vegetable field on a leased land at Durakuti village in Lalmonirhat district.

Self-reliance thru' vegetable farming on leased land

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Sexagenarian Sumitra Bala has set a laudable example of chemical-free vegetable cultivation on a leased land at Durakuti village of Mogholhat Sadar upazila.

Sumitra's husband Amulya Chandra Barmon, 68, was once owner of seven bighas of land but all the landed property other than

the homestead with only six decimals of land had to be sold for arranging marriage of their two daughters, said the woman.

Afterwards, the couple started struggling hard for livelihood, working as hired labourers in the village.

"With the help of a few locals five years ago, I took lease of eight decimals of abandoned land of railway in the village and started

cultivating vegetables on it," said Sumitra.

"I take good care of my vegetable field and get good yield. We also produce vegetables in the garden beside our house. People pay reasonable prices as vegetables produced in my garden are free from harmful chemicals," she said, adding that her husband Amulya Chandra often helps her in the work.

"After meeting the family requirements I also save a little for the future. We cannot afford meat or fish daily but we take fresh vegetables regularly. We are living somewhat a happy life," she said.

Locals purchase chemical-free vegetables from Sumitra Bala and so, she does not have to go to market for selling the items, said Ranjit Chandra Barmon, a villager.

Clash over land dispute leaves 10 hurt

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Munshiganj

At least 10 people were injured in a clash between two groups of villagers over erecting a shop on a disputed land in Sirajdikhan upazila yesterday.

Off them, critically injured Mohammad Khorshed, 42, Sanowar Hossain, 31, and Nurul Islam, 45, were referred to Mitford Hospital in the capital while Sohel Mia, 30, Rubel, 24, and Shahabuddin, 45, were admitted to Sirajdikhan Upazila Health Complex.

Yeardous Hasan, officer in-charge of Sirajdikhan Police Station, quoted locals and witnesses as saying that supporters of one Taher Mollah of the village attacked Azhar Bepari and his men when the later was erecting a shop on a disputed land near his house around 12:00noon, triggering a clash among the two groups.

At least 10 ten people from both sides were injured during the hour-long clash. Being informed, police went to the spot and brought the situation under control, added the OC.

Away in Noakhali, a woman was killed allegedly by her cousin over a land related dispute at Palpara village in Sonaimuri upazila early Sunday, reports our correspondent.

The deceased is Poly Akhter, 22, daughter of Mohammad Azad of the village.

Police said there had been a longstanding rivalry between Azad and his nephew Md Tareq over the ownership of a piece of land.

Around 5:00pm on Saturday, Azad and Tareq locked in an altercation and at one stage, Tareq attacked Azad with an iron rod which accidentally hit his cousin Poly on the head, leaving her critically injured.

Poly died at Sonaimuri Upazila Health Complex around 2:00am.

Speedy trial of Kibria killing case demanded

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Habiganj district unit of Jatiya Sramik League formed a human chain at Baidderbazar in Sadar upazila yesterday, demanding speedy trial of former finance minister SAMS Kibria murder case and exemplary punishment to the killers.

Leaders and activists of different political parties and socio-cultural organisations also joined the programme. The AL's labour front later held a rally at the venue with its district unit President Arab Ali in the chair.

The rally was addressed, among others, by Sramik League district unit General Secretary Farid Ahmed Raju and district Jubo League President Ataur Rahman Selim.

Earlier on the day, Shaheed Kibria Smriti Parishad and socio-cultural bodies placed wreaths at the memorial built in honour of Kibria at the bazar.

Kibria and four others were killed and 70 others injured in a grenade attack on a rally at Baidderbazar Primary School field on January 27, 2005.

Munshi Atiqur Rahman, the then ASP of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), submitted charge sheet to the court on March 19, 2005, accusing 10 BNP men. As complainant Adul Mazid Khan raised objection to the charge sheet, the CID was asked to conduct further investigation.

Later, Kibria's wife Asma Kibria protested and filed objection to the supplementary charge sheet submitted by ASP Rafiqul Islam on June 20,

2011, accusing 14 others, including former state minister for homes Lutfozzaman Babar and Huji chief Mufti Abdul Hannan.

ASP Meherunnesa Parul conducted further investigation and filed another supplementary charge sheet on November 13 last year, accusing 11 new faces, including former prime minister Khaleda Zia's political secretary Harris Chowdhury, Sylhet city Mayor Ariful Haque Chowdhury and Habiganj municipality Mayor Golam Kibria Gaus.

The two mayors were sent to jail on their surrender to Habiganj Judicial Magistrate's Court last month. On January 7, the LGRD ministry suspended the mayors as they were charge sheeted in Kibria Killing case.



PHOTO: STAR

Habiganj district unit of Jatiya Sramik League forms a human chain at Sadar upazila marking the 10th anniversary of the gruesome murder of former finance minister SAMS Kibria yesterday, demanding early completion of the trial of the perpetrators.

Bodies of 4 Narsingdi robbers handed over to families

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narsingdi

Four out of the seven alleged robbers, beaten dead by the villagers in Sadar upazila of the district on early Monday, were identified yesterday.

They are-- Aman Mollah,

35, Akhter Hossain, 34, and Md Yasin, 35, of Araihaazar upazila in Narayanganj; and Aynal Kabir, 38, of Sadar upazila in Narsingdi.

The bodies of the four were handed over to their family members after con-

ducting autopsies at Narsingdi Sadar Hospital yesterday morning.

At around 3:30am on Monday, seven alleged robbers were beaten dead by a mob in Sadar upazila after a gang of 14 looted a house and attempted to

rob another at Chakshal village.

"The dead are members of an inter-district robber gang and used to rob houses in Narsingdi, Gazipur, Narayanganj and Kishoreganj" said the OC.