

A farmer's passion

Love for farming brings a farmer back to his roots

SHYKH SERAJ

On my way from Cox's Bazaar to Chittagong recently, I stopped at Eid Garh in Ramu upazila to meet a young agricultural entrepreneur named Rahimullah. He started his Baukul (bau-plum) orchard and it wasn't successful. As a development journalist, I don't generally feature stories of failures- I try to look at the irregularities and crisis and also to try to find the right solutions. But Rahim is unique. He travelled to the Middle East to work a decade back, where he was a construction worker. He worked very hard for a long time and earned pretty well.

He used to watch the success stories of farmers on our

programme and was inspired by the episodes on high value fruit: Baukul. He came back to Bangladesh and invested in Baukul orchard with his friends. Despite his efforts, he could not succeed. On today's article we will all try to find a solution for this young farmer.

Rahim's Baukul orchard on 40 kani land is now a big burden for him. This orchard is his life. This size of the land is massive and would be a dream come true for any farmer. But this is not true in Rahim's case. I was talking with him, listening to the stories about how the dream started. Rahim is the hero who turned this barren place into greenery.

"I used to watch your BTV (Bangladesh Television) episodes when I was a kid."

"How old were you then?"

"Ten. Those programmes really inspired me to become a farmer."

In 1999, poverty-stricken Rahim had to leave the country when he was a student. He left Cox's Bazaar and went to the desert land, Middle East-Saudi Arabia. He was earning, saving and also sending money back home to Bangladesh. But, he felt he should do something more for his country. "I saw a promotional video on Channel i during 2004 that a new agricultural show, called, Hridoye Mati O Manush (Soil & Men in Heart) is going to start. I was very happy as your programmes depict the stories of our dear motherland."

With an accumulated saving of Tk. 5,200,000 (52

lacs), Rahim returned to his roots, to Bangladesh. When Rahim was sharing his story, I became so emotional I was almost teary-eyed. In 2009, Rahim finally started the first-ever Baukul orchard in Cox's Bazaar, at the foot of the mountains.

At first, he sowed 700 plants and in one and a half years, he sold Baukuls worth Tk. 258,000. But, he didn't grow the plums in the right way. There should have been more. It was supposed to be couple of maunds from one plant, but he produced only a few KGs. The local Agriculture Officer told him that the next year he will be more successful. The next year was indeed better, and he sold fruits worth Tk. 8 lakh, but suddenly a disease

devastated everything.

"I found some black spots on my plums."

"Didn't you contact the Agriculture Officer?"

"Yes I did, but he told me to use a toothbrush or a cloth to wipe the spots out. Isn't that crazy?"

Initiatives by the Agriculture Department to increase produce also failed. Rahim and other local farmers were surprised hearing the unrealistic suggestions from the department regarding how to get rid of black spots from Baukul. Rahimullah found the way to make his orchard successful by following Hridoye Mati O Manush once again. In search of a solution, he reached the doors of Moyez, the revolutionary Baukul farmer of Ishwardi, whose success was featured on the programme. One day Moyez went to see Rahim's Baukul orchard.

"Have faith and patience. Surely, they'll get good result", said Moyez. Next year Rahim's fate was different. "After Moyez bhai's visit to my orchard, I could produce around two maunds of plums from one single plant. That year I sold plums worth Tk. 1,778,000." However, Rahim couldn't hold on to the success. In 2014, he faced severe loss once again. He was broken. His partners also left him.

It was Rahimullah's dream but others needed to nurture it. To earn more for his family, Rahim had to go abroad and had assigned his friends to look after the farm. When he came back again, he found that the orchard was not being looked after properly. As a result, now, Rahim is chained by the burden of loans of Tk. 23 lakh. What can he do now?

Based on what I had learnt from Rahim, I tried to narrow down why he could



n't become successful: his initial investment was too much, he couldn't give his full time and attention to it, his partners didn't have sufficient knowledge and didn't cooperate, and he didn't get timely and regular guidance from the agricultural authority.

However, many farmers in his region believe Rahim didn't fail in his attempt and regard him as the pioneer of Baukul farming in Cox's Bazar who showed the way to many farmers. Many of them also believe that Rahim should not go back to Saudi Arabia. He just needs a little help from everyone so that he can be successful and stand on his own. Moreover, local people told me Rahim's agricultural initiative has changed a lot in Ramu upazila. He has saved farming lands from the grasp of tobacco cultivation. Before I featured Rahim's story on

Hridoye Mati O Manush, I had only one question in my mind, "Will Rahim be defeated?"

Rahim was supposed to fly back to Saudi Arabia on 4 February, 2015. His work permit in Saudi Arabia will expire on 10 February, 2015. After 10 February, Rahim will not have any chance to go back to Saudi Arabia anymore. After the episode went on air, Rahim didn't fly back and now he has taken the firm decision to stay in the country and start his orchard afresh. But what happened after the episode on Rahim aired on Channel i?

Many of our audience living in home and abroad have contacted us after the episode went on air. Each of them wanted to support Rahim. Some said to help him with agricultural inputs. Some wanted to become his partners. The reputed businessmen and organizations, farmers, as well as students have

come forward. And, many more are helping him so that he can get rid of the loan of Tk. 23 lakh. During the show's broadcast, an audience called, "Tell him to stay in the country. Everything will change, the country will as well."

The incredible people of Bangladesh didn't let Rahim leave the country. With their help and assistance, Rahim is starting to believe he can turn things around. He's starting to believe once again. Farmers always come forward to help farmers. This is the age-old practice of Bengal. And the people of Bangladesh will always remain beside their fellow countrymen. The urge to help others in need has not dissipated in this age of technology, urbanity and modernity. I also hope that Rahim will not fail in achieving his dream. I will keep a close eye on his future, as I wait to bring you his success story very soon.



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Discussing the Baukul (bau-plum) orchard with Rahimullah

PHOTO: HRIDOYE MATI O MANUSH

IMPACT OF BLOCKADE, HARTALS

Kuakata beach sees a few tourists in peak season

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Businesses in Kuakata sea beach area face huge losses as the picturesque tourist spot sees only a small number of visitors during the ongoing peak tourism season.

The situation has arisen due to transport problem and security concerns amid the countrywide non-stop blockade and frequent hartals called by BNP-led 20-party alliance since January 6.

Local businessmen and traders make good arrangements especially during November to April when a good number of tourists from home and abroad

come to the area. But the picture is frustrating this season.

Visiting the area on Friday afternoon, this correspondent saw rows of empty benches on the beach amid very poor presence of tourists.

"The continued blockade has badly affected the arrival of tourists, causing huge losses to me. Now I have to borrow from others to pay staff salaries," said Zoinal Abedin, owner of Hotel Rajdhani.

"I am struggling to manage three square meals for my family of five as the number of tourists here has drastically fallen since the blockade started around one and a half months ago,"

said Md Rezaul Karim, a tea seller in the area.

Every year during this season, many picnic parties from different areas and students on study tour from different educational institutions visit Kuakata in large numbers but this time there is hardly such programmes as a panicky environment prevails everywhere, said Shamim Reza, manager of hotel Beach Haven.

Md Azaharul Islam, manager for Parjaton Motel owned by Bangladesh Parjaton Corporation, said only four tourists are now staying in the motel having the capacity to accommodate 300 guests.

"In every tourism season from November to April, our profit usually ranges from Tk 4,000 to 5,000 daily but this year we have to count losses due to the blockade and hartals," said Mathan Rakhine, a businessman of Rakhaine Market in Kuakata beach.

"Many people cancelled their advance bookings in the different hotels and motels due to countrywide blockade and hartal programme. All our special arrangements and decorations to attract tourists have gone in vain," said Md Motaleb Sharif, secretary for Kuakata Hotel Motel Owners' Association.



PHOTO: STAR

Kuakata sea beach in Kalapara upazila under Patuakhali district gives a deserted look as the picturesque tourist spot fails to attract visitors even during the ongoing peak tourism season due to transport problem and security concerns amid the non-stop countrywide blockade and frequent hartals enforced by BNP-led 20-party alliance since January 6.



PHOTO: STAR

Rakhine woman Liri sells a variety of clothes, including some woven by herself, at her makeshift shop on the steps leading to Adinath temple in Moheshkhali Island under Cox's Bazar district. She, along with other small traders in the area, now sees scanty income as her potential buyers, mostly the visitors and pilgrims to the famous temple, are much less than usual due to the countrywide non-stop transport embargo enforced by BNP-led 20-party alliance since January 6.

The Textile Seller of Moheshkhali

By ANDREW EAGLE

"Sometimes I invite the customer to look," says Liri, 40, a small-time seller of clothing and textile items, explaining her sales strategy. "Bhai, this is homemade", I will say, or, 'This is pure cotton.' If they're convinced they might buy something."

At other times customers make purchases without her saying anything. It's all a bit random. "It depends on luck," she says.

But more than luck the ethnic Rakhine widow relies on a steady stream of passersby. Without them, there's nobody to see her wares.

Business can guide us to a better future. Large busi-

nesses, at their best, offer employment, improved goods and services, and contribute to the national well-being. For the millions of small-scale enterprises across the country meanwhile, the goals are closer to home. For Liri, business is about survival.

At about 9 a.m. each day she arrives at the steps leading to the famous Adinath Temple on Cox's Bazar's Moheshkhali Island. There, she unpacks her stock of shirts, two-piece suits, sheets and bed covers, setting up her stall among several others in readiness for the day's trade. While some items are purchased on the open market others

are bought from Rakhine weavers in Moheshkhali, and some Liri weaves herself. She took a Tk 50,000 loan this year to buy stock.

In a normal month profits reach Tk 3,000, enough to cover loan repayments and feed herself and her son, who works as a mechanic. The best profits, of up to Tk 5,000 for the month, are made during festivals when hundreds of visitors and pilgrims crowd the temple steps.

"When sales are good," says Liri, "We eat fish with our rice. Now we are lucky to eat green chilli, vegetables and salt. Everyday I'm making a loss."

The current political

turmoil means only a handful of visitors reach the temple daily. By that afternoon Liri had made no sales, and the on day before she sold just two items worth Tk. 400.

She says Bhagawan - God - is running her family these days.

Of course she's hardly the only small entrepreneur to suffer. When you think of the initiative involved in establishing any business, of the courage it must take for people like Liri to embark on a venture, of the struggle to bring themselves just a little further out of the clutches of poverty, the current transport embargo is really a kick in the teeth.