



Showing best practices from other countries.

He has introduced participatory communication in a fun way.



### Shykh Seraj has broken many barriers to become one of them.

For a TV show about farmers—thin, bony, illiterate peasants, and agriculture—the mundane business of producing rice and jute, *Mati O Manush* might not have been a bright idea. But Shykh Seraj, award winning development activist and journalist, crafted it in such a way that it grabbed the audience by the collar and demanded attention, breaking the inertia that has always been associated with television.

"I wanted to use TV as a tool for educating the mass and giving them power," he says. For a guy with such lofty ambitions and someone who actually delivered on them, Seraj is cool and down-to-earth. We are at his office at channel i, a privately owned popular TV channel of which he is a founding director and the head of news.

Everyone here is in a festive mood—last night the managing director of the organisation, Faridur Reza Sagor, his longtime friend, had been selected for the Ekushey Padak, one of the highest civilian awards of the country. Seraj was its youngest recipient in 1995.

The year was 1980 and more than 80 percent of the population was involved in agriculture which accounted for about 29 percent of the GDP. "A lot of people ridiculed me for launching a show about farmers," he says, looking nostalgic.

It eventually became so popular that Bangladesh Television gave it the prime time slot—right after the Bangla news at 8 pm. "I had many barriers to break. On television, one could not speak in local dialects unless given permission from the ministry." So here he was with a TV camera and a big microphone speaking to the rural farmers in formal Bangla and inquiring about their lives. They could not communicate with that guy. "One day I broke with tradition and started speaking in a dialect they could easily identify with," he says in a no-nonsense tone.

He wanted to become one of them. "Back then, most farmers probably had only one piece of clothing and more often than not, it was torn. So I made a 'pilot shirt' which was usually worn by people with blue-collar jobs."

Today the green shirt is synonymous with *Mati O Manush*—folks even in the remotest of villages recognise him as somebody they can talk to—somebody who, despite being a city guy, understands them. "This is what effective communication can do," he says avidly.

A lot of people wondered why it became such a hit even among the urban viewers. "But when a farmer catches a shoal of fish and they are jumping inside the net, is it not entertaining to watch? When the camera zooms in on a vast field of dancing crops, is it not entertainment?" he looks askance.

Now that the development journalist redefined entertainment for the urban audience, he wanted to address how to get the educated unemployed involved in agriculture. "With that in mind, I concentrated on three things: beef fattening, fishery and poultry. Today the fishery industry and the poultry industry is worth 35,000 crore Taka and 30,000 crore taka respectively."

The visionary activist had bigger plans—leaving BTv in 1996 and co-founding Impress Telefilm Ltd, the first television software production



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

He motivates his crew with his drive and energy.

house in Bangladesh. "In 1999, we started channel i and I managed it till 2004"

During these years he did not come in front of the camera and yet *Mati O Manush*—literally earth and man—was still very much on his mind. He knew people wanted to watch it again. And he had been preparing by doing research on the latest technological breakthroughs to meet the new challenges.

On the 21st February, *Hridoye Mati O Manush* took off. "This time I wanted to focus on production, marketing, policy support, best practices and new technologies. Although farmers were producing more, they were not getting the right price. I wanted to show the audience why."

With that in mind, on an early morning on February 4, 2004, he took his crew to Belabo, Narshingdi to document how a cauliflower sold by farmers at the rate of Taka 3 each, through layers of middlemen, reached the Shantinagar bazaar in Dhaka to be sold at Taka 30. That was the first episode of *Hridoye Mati O Manush* aired on the 21st February, 2004. "For the first