

A culture of disdain for farmers

MD. RIZWANUL ISLAM

A recently published editorial in the Daily Star (Middleman Take It All, 30 December 2015) has highlighted that farmers in Bangladesh are almost cut off from the market. It is well-known that while the farmers in Bangladesh not only get a much lower share of the profit from their produce but at times of good harvest and low price, may fail to recover the cost they have to bear for the production, whereas the middlemen pocket a very substantial degree of profit. Despite the growth of industrial and service sectors in Bangladesh, agriculture is still a very important sector of the economy. If we compare agriculture with garment manufacturing the most valued sector of the economy of Bangladesh, in terms of value addition, the role of agriculture cannot be underestimated. The economic tribulations of farmers in this country and the need for taking various policy measures and building necessary infrastructure are quite extensively documented and would not be re-told here. A relatively less explored phenomenon are the social tribulations of farmers and a bizarre attitude of neglect towards agriculture. In many advanced economies such as in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Japan, Germany, Italy, and the USA etc., many farmers are not only mega-rich with very entrenched clout in national politics; the society's prevalent attitude towards agriculture and farmers is either somewhat romanticised or venerated. Such attitude towards agriculture and clout of agriculture lobbies have sometimes created such a perverse state of affairs where many farmers in the economically developed world receive market-distorting state



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aid making it difficult for farmers in the economically backward countries to compete with their counterparts in advanced economies. Of course, not everyone shares the same opinion but even those who do not harbour such a venerated attitude towards agriculture or farmers do not tend to harbour any pejorative attitude towards them. However, for strange reasons, in our country except in official policy instruments and some textbooks, agriculture and farmers are subjects of neglect at best and of ridicule at worst. Agriculture in this country is not only

less rewarding in terms of economic return, but also carries low social esteem. The low social status of agriculture and farmers in this country may be epitomised by the fact that in popular parlance, often anything unsmart or stupid or naive is labelled as *khyat* (meaning agricultural land or an agricultural worker). Agricultural work in this country is considered so risky and carry such low esteem that many would readily prefer to engage in clerical or even menial works in an office environment than to work even in their own ancestral

agricultural lands. Part of this may be a vestige of the British rule in the Indian subcontinent. In colonial days serving the British sahibs carried so much social prestige that office workers used to be termed (and still in many Bangladeshi texts continue to be termed) as 'service-holders' implying that a job in office is a matter of holding something to be prestigious. In those days with limited opportunities of office works in the private sector, it can be assumed that the prestige of service-holding was actually a reference to work for the colonial administration.

One would struggle to find the word 'service-holder' in modern English dictionaries and only linguists can tell if it was to be found in dictionaries in the United Kingdom. Agricultural work is not only one of the earliest professions that human civilisation has seen but it also serves the most basic existential need of the human race: food. May be many of us do not live for eating, but we all have to eat to live. Most farmers in this country are cash-strapped but they are not by any means unsuccessful or less civilised than the rest of the community. After all, with modest public support and technological tools at their disposal, they are quite successful in feeding people of the mostly densely populated country (except for city states such as Macau, Monaco, Singapore, Hong Kong etc) on the planet.

Let us assume a hypothetical scenario: all farmers decide not to sell their harvests for any sort of consumption in cities. In that scenario, despite huge financial resources, advanced technologies, and civic amenities at their disposal, all city dwellers, the modern, urbanised people, will simply die of starvation. After decades of chronic shortage of food, this country is now almost self-sufficient in many food grains and better social attitude towards agriculture and farmers could be a moral boost for many educated people to engage in agricultural work. It is never too late to accept that farmers may not be valued as sons of the soil but they are not unsuccessful or unsmart or any less than the rest of the population because agriculture is their living.

The writer is an Associate Professor at School of Law, BRAC University.

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Caught in the rut of rituals

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NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

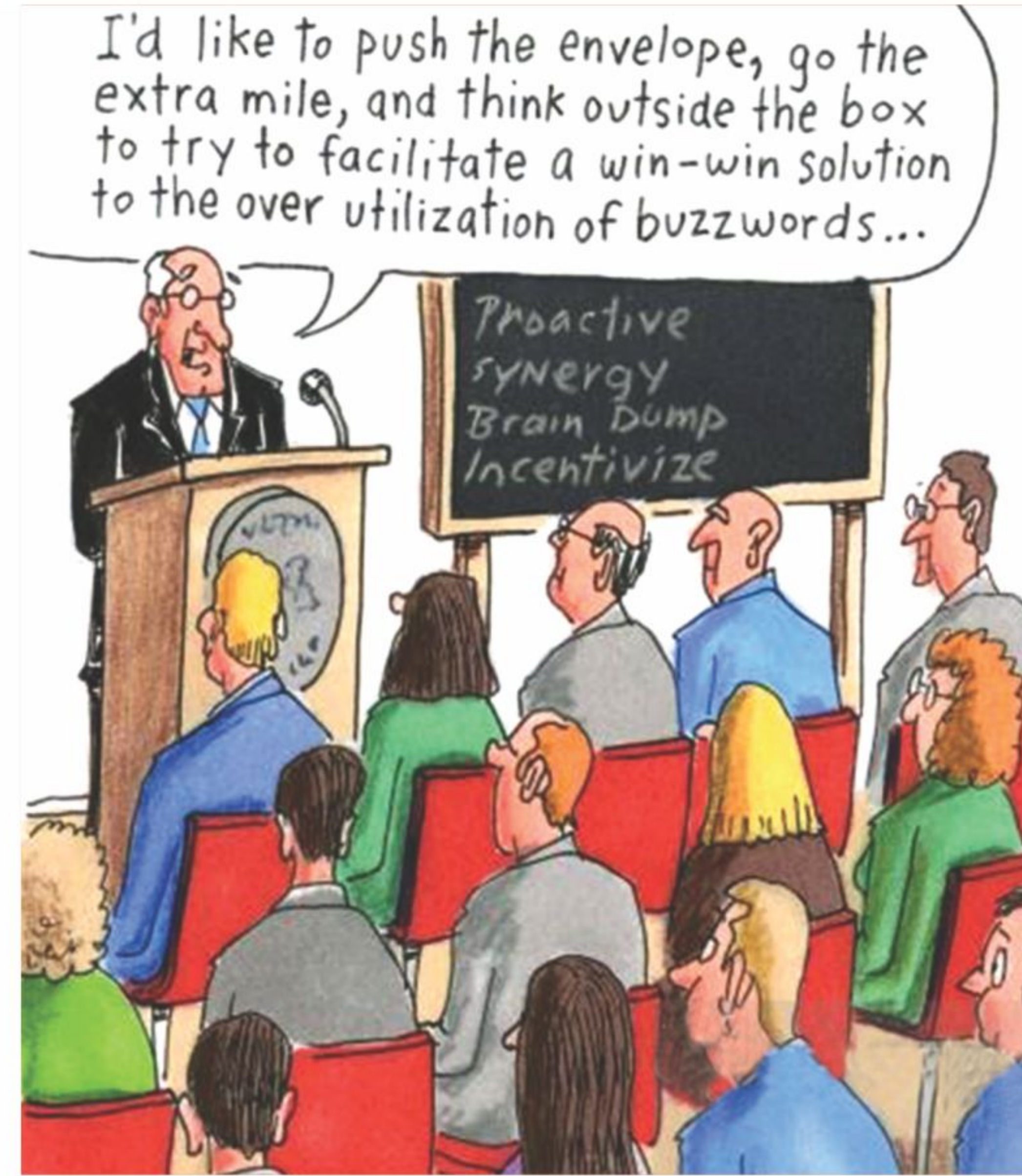
WE are a country of rituals. No we are not talking about the religious rituals that may or may not bring spiritual nirvana but those that we create along the way as culture evolves. Often they become the formulae for any kind of formal occasion and are followed through

'religiously' mainly because we have forgotten that beautiful, ethereal thing called imagination.

Am I being too vague? Well that is part of the disease - we are all too caught up in platitudes and euphemisms, generalizations and jargon that sound kind of important but ultimately, mean precious little. What pray tell, are we trying to convey when we say "we must raise awareness through capacity building and participatory action so that our programmes are goal oriented"? Jargon is no doubt, a good way to create enough fluff to evade prickly questions like 'who is going to pay for this and who really benefits'.

Oh dear I am digressing, which, by the way, is also as ritualistic as having that mandatory piece of toast with your cup of tea for breakfast. We rarely come to the point, preferring instead, to go all over town before reaching the destination. This is especially true for the Chief Guest of any function, who will say he will keep his speech at a bare minimum but then becomes completely mesmerised by the sound of his own voice emanating from the microphone, prompting him to carry on a good half an hour evoking tedious, irrelevant anecdotes; and if he is a politician, making obsequious observations about his party and leader.

Which brings us back to the real point of this conversation - rituals. While it is the endless number of seminars, workshops and inaugural programmes that keeps us going, we are also hell-bent on making these programmes as ritualistic (read hackneyed) as possible. The story has it that a good few years ago, during a book launch, a photographer, bored out of his mind with the series of speeches on a book he had zero interest in, decided that the best way to shoot would be to line up the speakers, including the eminent writer, and make them hold the book. Of course all the other photographers thought this was a brilliant idea, especially since it meant taking one single



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shot and calling it a day. Hence, the thousands of pictures we see of book launches that look like line ups at a police station to identify the culprit. No matter what the book is about or who has written it or which celebrity has come to talk about it - this is the only pose acceptable to the photographers as a 'launching pose', diligently complied with by the participants. Funnily

enough, a similar pose can be seen of suspected militants or drug smugglers who are for some strange reason, 'displayed before the media'. Here, instead of a book, the suspects (who have not yet been convicted in a court) will be standing in front of their booty whether they be biscuits of gold or a medley of grenades, bombs and the obligatory jihadi books.

Speaking of posing, nothing beats the ritualistic Facebook poses that signifies the whole point of dressing up. It is now a requirement for women especially, when they go to any function, dinner or outing, to line up sideways (so that they look slimmer) stomachs and faces sucked in, with smiles that usually show no teeth, for the FB post that may look identical to another hundred posts with different faces - and of course saris. The cost of clothing has significantly gone up these days as no one wants to repeat a sari on an FB post. Taking selfies with important people is another mandatory ritual at international events, though many times the VIP looks embarrassed, awkward or downright grumpy while the person taking the selfie sports a smug, slightly demented grin.

At public places therefore, people tend to be less interested in taking in their surroundings or even interacting with each other and more preoccupied with trying to find the best spot and expression for an FB post.

There are other more solemn occasions where ritualistic behaviour takes on ridiculous proportions. Take the placing of wreaths at memorials on particular days. This simple gesture of showing respect to the dead has been reduced to a circus act with members of various organisations or parties rudely showing each other to fit into the cameraperson's frame. The crude floral arrangements with wire that threads the flowers together are suffocated by the big banners displaying the name of the organisation whose members are so desperate to be in the 8 o'clock news. It is the same during press conferences with the actual speaker being squashed from all sides by random people showing the V sign who just want to be on TV.

So why are we so mired in stereotypical practices that add little value to our lives and only serve to make them excruciatingly duller, uninspiring and devoid of meaning? Perhaps it is a reluctance to try anything new, to break the status quo. Perhaps it is sheer laziness that makes us stick with whatever has been dishd out. Whatever the reason, unless we pull ourselves from this rut and inject some spontaneity and innovation into our lives we are in danger of being like those machines that do the same thing, the same way, over and over again.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote

HENRY DAVID THOREAU
American author, poet, philosopher

It is not enough to be busy; so are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Ship poles
6 Effect preceder
11 "Gay" city of song
12 Story meannies
13 Composer Bruckner
14 Suit pieces
15 Stadium cry
16 Japanese prime minister
18 Can. neighbor
19 Outback runner
20 Stocking stuffer
21 Myrna of movies
22 Scopes trial lawyer
24 Summer coolers
25 Popular NPR auto show
27 Concord
29 Inclined type
32 Totality
33 Take in
34 Historic time
35 Relaxing retreat
36 Apply
37 Collins base
38 Spent
40 "The March King"
42 Low joint

43 Had a go at
44 Tries to find
45 "Game of Thrones" daughter

DOWN
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3 "Childhood's End" writer
4 Old roadster
5 Capitol VIP
6 Quail group
7 Ripen
8 "Tales from Earthsea" writer
9 Attacks
10 School papers
17 Clowns often wear them
23 Maze runner
24 Ga. neighbor
26 Swears
27 Trattoria choices
28 Skiing variety
30 Van Gogh work
31 Second-largest nation
33 Some Picassos
39 Caribou's kin
41 "... Man -- mouse?"

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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