

## SPOTLIGHT

As a small farmer, Shyamol's life was never easy. In his 10-decimal land in Rajshahi's Durgapur village under Godagari upazila, Shyamol used to grow rice. Like many other farmers of his village, he inherited that land and his profession from his ancestors. With the crop, he could hardly meet the expenditures of his family of six—his wife, elderly mother and three children. He also had to pay instalments of his debt which he had to take for buying seeds, fertilisers, pesticides and for hiring a tractor to cultivate his land. Due to the falling price of paddy and increasing price of fertiliser and diesel in 2016, Shyamol decided to grow vegetables on his land. So, he grew radish and green chilli that year. In his small patch of land, he produced around 30 kg of radish and another 25 kg of green chilli. However, such high yields turned out to be a fatal curse for him.

When he took his produce to the local market, it was already saturated with radish and green chilli coming in huge quantities from all the surrounding villages. As there was no storage facility for his perishable produce, Shyamol had to sell the radishes at only Tk 10 per kg and chillies at Tk 40 per kg. Despite four

months of hard labour and financial investment, Shyamol could not earn even Tk 2000.

It was a mortal blow for Shyamol who is the only earning member of his family. Just a month after this disaster, Shyamol was diagnosed with a tumour in his stomach. With his ailing body, he again took a loan from the local usurer and planted rice on his land. However, that time he had to employ at least eight labourers to sow seeds and to harvest. Although the harvest was good, the profit was too little to pay for Shyamol's soaring debt, medical treatment and other expenditures. Utterly frustrated, Shyamol Kundu took his own life on November 12 last year.

Shyamol's suicide was not an isolated incident of a psychological illness. In the same year, a small farmer in Jhenaidah named Kawsar committed suicide due to persistent losses with his crops. On April 7, a farmer in Habiganj district's Baniyachang upazila also committed suicide as he failed to pay off his increasing debt. According to a 2016 study conducted by Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, 55 percent of the suicide victims earned less than Tk 4000 per month and most of these victims are farmers or agricultural labourers.

Due to lack of storage facilities and

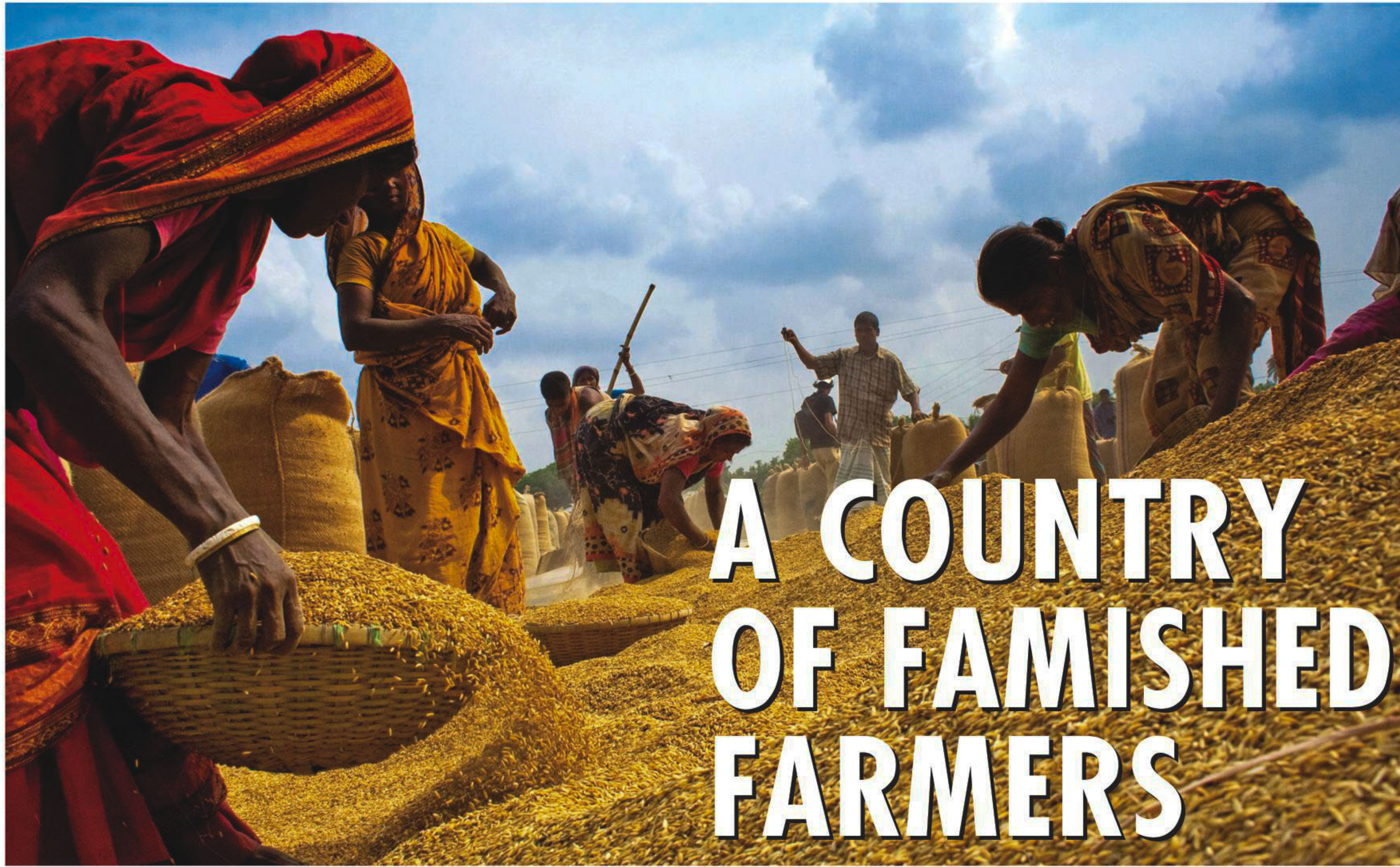


PHOTO: MOHAMMAD MONIRUZZAMAN

# A COUNTRY OF FAMISHED FARMERS

## An unfair market threatens Bangladesh's food security

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

purchasing process so that no farmer is deprived of a fair price by the millers."

Shykh Seraj, the prominent agricultural development activist and journalist, however, states that the government has never procured rice or paddy directly from the farmers. "The government doesn't have the infrastructure to procure directly from the farmers," he argues. "They procure it from the millers and the wholesalers and they become the actual beneficiaries of the government's increased rate for rice and paddy. This syndicate is making huge profit and the growers remain poor as usual."

"As a result, many rice farmers are now cultivating more profitable crops like fruits and vegetables," adds Seraj. According to Dr K A S Murshid, Director General, Bangladesh Institute of

Development Studies, "If the government wants to reach every farmer for purchasing paddy or rice, the procurement cost will be too high. So, to keep the rice market under control, the government should procure more rice and paddy for the public stockpile. The amount the government procures every year is too negligible to influence the market."

However, like Shyamol, vegetable farmers are also incurring huge losses every year with their perishable produce due to lack of storage facilities. In 2017, farmers produced 1.02 crore tonnes of potatoes which was eight percent more than the year before. At local large-scale food markets, the farmers had to sell potatoes at only Tk 2.5 per kg. Only 53 lakh tonnes of potatoes could be stored in cold storage and 15 lakh tonnes of potato remained unsold. According to Bangladesh Cold Storage Association (BCSA), "The loss of the farmers had exceeded more than Tk 12,000 crore due to lack of storage facility and high yield." Md Mosharaf Hossain, President of BCSA, says, "If the storage facility is not

increased and if the extra produce is not exported or utilised through relief works, last year's loss might be repeated this year as there will be another high yield of potato in districts like Bogra and Munshiganj."

However, price of this produce is spiralling as they enter urban markets. The potatoes that were sold at the local market at Tk 2.5 per kg are sold in Dhaka at Tk 15-20 per kg by the retailers. The situation is similar for other vegetable growers as well. Shamsheer Alam, originally a rice farmer in Bogra's Muradnagar village, produced 70 maunds (2800 kg) of cauliflower from one acre of land in 2017. To produce this 2800 kg of cauliflower, he had to spend Tk 6000 for seeds, Tk 2500 for the tractor, and Tk 15,000 for fertiliser, irrigation and labour costs. However, he had to sell each cauliflower at Tk 3 in the Mahasthan food market in Bogra which was sold in Dhaka for Tk 30 at least.

Farmers like Shamsheer Alam in Bogra are passing their days in extreme hardship. He says, "My backbone was

which areas according to the market demand," suggests Seraj.

The experts also emphasise on reducing influence of the middlemen from the market. According to Dr M M Akash, "The government needs to form two price commissions: one for the price of the agricultural produce and one for the food products. These commissions will monitor the market and determine prices for these commodities for the individual markets. Price commissions can also ensure supply of the food crops in the public stockpile so that the crops can be supplied in the market in time of shortage. As there is no such commission in Bangladesh, even price of the coarse rice is now beyond purchasability of the people who are living below the poverty line."

Every year, the Bangladesh government invests a huge amount of its revenue in the agricultural sector to ensure subsidised supply of fertiliser, diesel, seed and agricultural equipment. In the budget of 2016-17 fiscal year, Tk 13,600 crore was allotted for the



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

broken. I don't think I will be able to recover the loss in my life time. Many farmers like me in Muradnagar cannot afford a square meal a day."

"If we get a plate of rice for lunch, we only eat boiled potato or rice starch for supper. Sometimes, we cannot buy even a kilo of rice for the whole day. I was a wealthy farmer. I never imagined that I would spend days in hunger like this," adds Shamsheer.

According to experts, as the government doesn't have any estimation of the national demand for food crops and vegetables, farmers suffer heavy losses due to high yield because most of them grow the same crop assessing the current year's demand. "To solve the crisis, the government should establish more cold storages near large-scale local food markets through public-private partnerships where farmers will be able to store their produce at an affordable cost. On the other hand, the government should also estimate the national demand for food crops and vegetables. If such assessment can be done on a yearly basis, the farmers can be informed of which crop should be cultivated in

agricultural subsidies. Despite such investments, an uncontrolled food market creates persistent poverty among Bangladeshi farmers which has significantly threatened food security in the country. In terms of food security, Bangladesh is 5th among five countries of South Asia and 22nd among 23 countries of Asia Pacific.

Recently Bangladesh's Law Commission has prepared a draft of the Bangladesh Food Security Act, 2018. We hope that this act will address the issue of ensuring justifiable price of agricultural products for the farmers by creating an accountable price chain in every market. The development policy of quantitative growth of agricultural products without ensuring a sustainable market for the growers and consumers has already pushed a huge number of farmers below the poverty line. If the act does not address these issues and the government fails to enforce the act properly, our agriculture, our country's economic backbone, might be broken in the near future.

The writer can be contacted at shahmatwaz.khan@thedailystar.net



INFOGRAPH: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY