Samson H Chowdhury
An entrepreneur who built his empire on ethics and values

AHSAN HABIB

Business must serve people: this was the principle Samson H Chowdhury lived by. He saw no conflict between business and ethics, only the possibility of using both as a force for good.

From scratch, he built Square Group into a conglomerate spanning pharmaceuticals, textiles, consumer products and healthcare, yet never strayed from his core belief.

That conviction guided his family, too. It pleased him when his son chose to build a hospital rather than a luxury shopping complex, and it inspired him to carry on with an expensive cancer hospital project, even paying personally for medical equipment.

"Do not just chase profit. Do not measure everything by numbers," Chowdhury would tell his son.

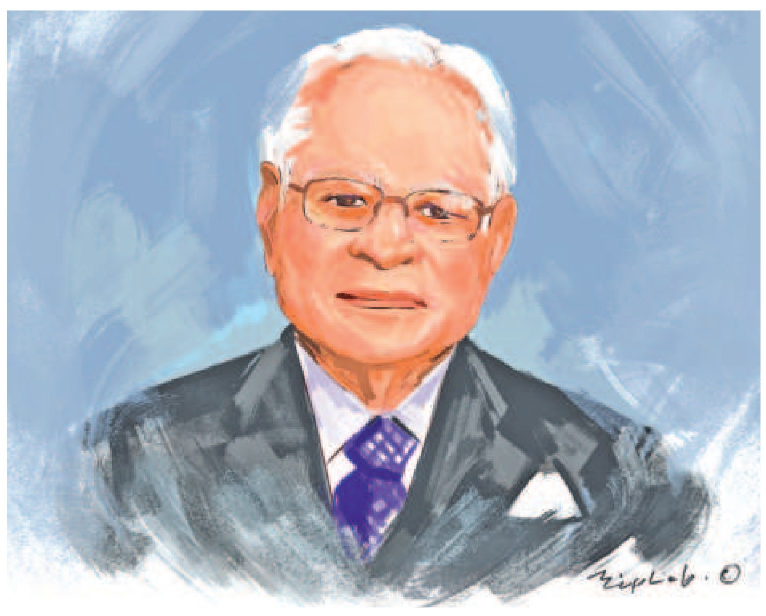
Samson H Chowdhury, who died in 2012, would have turned 100 this year. Even after his demise, his spirit of service endures. On his birth centenary, his philosophy is evident across the business empire the tycoon founded.

To mark the occasion, his children are launching mobile clinics to provide primary healthcare in remote areas. Staffed by doctors and equipped for basic diagnostics, the clinics will also distribute free medicines.

The family also plans to set up a medical college and hospital, a nursing college, an old home and a school for children at Amin Bazar on the outskirts of Dhaka under a trust.

Their vision is a community where elderly people and children can interact, learn and enrich each other's lives. The hospital will offer quality healthcare at an affordable cost. And the construction of the project is set to begin this year.

Chowdhury was born on September 25, 1925, in Pabna. Son of a small-town medical practitioner, he saw early how essential healthcare was to ordinary people and how limited access could turn curable illnesses into tragedies.



Samson H Chowdhury
(1925 - 2012)

That childhood shaped his sense of business and social responsibility.

After finishing his education, he briefly worked as a medical representative in Kolkata. In 1958, he returned to Pabna and, with three friends, opened a small pharmacy in Ataikula. They called it Square, symbolising perfection and fairness -- ideals he wanted in life and work.

At that time, few thought a local firm could compete in pharmaceuticals, a market then dominated by foreign multinationals.

But Chowdhury was determined to prove otherwise. With time, he built Square Group into one of the country's largest conglomerates, embedding honesty, discipline and fairness into its corporate DNA.

A powerful example of his approach came in 2010 when Square planned the Square Cancer Centre.

The project was moving slowly due to concerns about its heavy investment and long payback period. At one stage, he issued a cheque from his personal account to buy medical equipment for cancer patients.

He called his son Tapan Chowdhury, now managing director of Square Hospitals Ltd, and said, "Do not just chase profit. Do not measure everything by numbers."

"You have come this far not only because of your hard work but also because of the people of this country, the doctors who trusted your products and the patients who had faith in you. This hospital is for them. Do not worry about the money, think about the benefit to people."

Originally, Square had planned a luxury hotel or shopping mall in Panthapath area in Dhaka, and even signed an agreement with the Central Group of Thailand. But after Tapan lost his son in a road accident, he chose to build a hospital instead.

"My father was so happy when he heard this," Tapan recalls.

The father summed up his philosophy simply: honesty sustains success. "Even if it takes longer, success built on ethics and quality will last," he often said.

In the 1990s, when the value-added tax (VAT) was introduced, many competitors evaded it to cut costs. But Chowdhury refused.

"VAT is paid by consumers. It does not belong to us. Companies that steal tax money will not survive," he declared. Time proved him right; those firms disappeared.

He also stayed grounded in governance.

When his son became an adviser to the caretaker government in 2007, Chowdhury still went to the Secretariat for business matters and sat in front of a deputy secretary for official tasks.

When urged to avoid it, he replied, "A farmer cannot expect a good harvest if he does not go to his farmland."

Under his leadership, Square avoided the trap of being a family-dominated enterprise. Instead, it encouraged a corporate culture where employees and directors worked as a trusted family, helping the group thrive across three generations.

Chowdhury believed in walking the straight path of honesty, accountability and respect for people. His life showed that business can be both profitable and principled.

A century after his birth, his message is now more relevant than ever. In a global business environment often scarred by scandals and short-termism, his story proves that ethics are not a barrier to success but the foundation of it.

Let the market decide IPO prices

SHAHIDUL ISLAM

For decades, Bangladesh's capital market has been trapped in a policy mistake of its own making: regulators, not the market, have set the prices of initial public offerings (IPOs). In most cases, shares were issued at their face value, usually Tk 10. Sometimes regulators permitted a small premium, based on their own judgment. On rare occasions, they allowed the so-called "book-building method", but with restrictions so tight that the outcome was never truly market-driven.

As a result, IPOs were systematically underpriced, as shown by their price performance at debut trading. In a well-functioning market, newly listed shares should rise about half the time and fall about half the time once trading begins. In Bangladesh, almost every IPO has skyrocketed on debut, often by 300 to 800 percent. Manipulation may have played a part, but the deeper reason is clear: regulators fixed IPO prices at a fraction of their fair market value.

This distorted system bred a dangerous illusion. Because the underpriced IPO shares were awarded by quota and lottery, investors came to view them not as investments but as jackpots, gifts handed out by regulators. It fuelled a culture of speculation and unrealistic expectations, eroding the seriousness of the market. Investors began to believe that regulators had a duty to guarantee profits. Even routine downturns in the secondary market sparked street protests by small investors, who blamed regulators for their losses. Regulators often diverted their energy to propping up market sentiment instead of focusing on their real mandate: ensuring transparency, fair play and the protection of investors' rights.

The damage did not end there. Many high-quality companies stayed away from listing despite enjoying tax incentives as large as 10 percent at one time. Why would a company sell shares at an artificially low price? For many, the answer was simple: it would not. The result has been a double loss. Companies missed the chance to raise capital efficiently, while investors were deprived of genuine opportunities. The economy as a whole lost out on the benefits of a deep, liquid and credible capital market that could have been a source for raising long-term funds.

The consequences are stark. Today, Bangladesh's stock market capitalisation is only about 7 percent of GDP. In India, the figure is over 100 percent. Even Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal fare far better. Our market, instead of being a pillar of economic growth, remains stunted.

The distortions spread even further. The guaranteed windfall from underpriced IPOs, coupled with quota-based allocations to market intermediaries and other institutional investors, created an artificial demand for licences to operate as market intermediaries. The outcome is absurd. Bangladesh, with an equity market capitalisation of barely $30 billion and virtually no corporate bond market, is home to 68 asset management companies, 66 merchant banks and hundreds of brokerages. The mismatch between market size and the number of intermediaries is glaring.

The way forward is clear. Two reforms are urgently needed. First, IPOs must be priced by the market, not by regulators. The role of the regulator should be that of a referee, ensuring transparency, disclosure and fair play, not a player that dictates price. Second, quota-based allocations must end. Whether in jobs or IPOs, quotas distort meritocracy, reward connections instead of competence and undermine trust.

Bangladesh's economy has long outgrown its outdated IPO pricing model. If the country wants to attract good companies, protect investors and build the kind of capital market the economy deserves, it must finally let markets work the way they are meant to: through competition, transparency and meritocracy.

The writer is CEO of VIPB Asset Management Company and former president of CFA Society Bangladesh

Thai tourism hit by strong baht

ANN/THE NATION

Thapanee Kiatphaibool, governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), said the Thai baht has appreciated by 7.24 percent since the beginning of the year, rising from 34.23 to the US dollar in January 2025 to 31.75 in September.

She noted that the stronger baht has inevitably influenced travel decisions, particularly among foreign tourists, as it raises the overall cost of visiting Thailand.

By comparison, the Chinese yuan strengthened modestly by 2.35 percent over the same period, from 7.1028 to 7.2963 yuan per US dollar. The Japanese yen appreciated by 5.51 percent, moving from 157.72 to 147.95 yen per US dollar, while the Vietnamese dong gained 3.38 percent, from 25,510 to 26,374 per US dollar.

The baht's appreciation, which runs counter to movements in rival tourism markets such as Japan, China and Vietnam, has prompted the TAT to assess the exchange-rate impact. When foreign travellers exchange their money for baht, they receive less, making hotel rooms, food, and entry fees appear more expensive.

TAT estimates that Thailand could lose 15-17 percent of projected tourism revenue as visitors cut back on spending or choose cheaper destinations in the region. The perception that Thailand has become a costlier option compared to competitors is also driving some Thai travellers abroad, with China, Japan and Vietnam among the preferred destinations.

Currently, the baht ranks as the second-strongest currency against the US dollar, trailing only the Swiss franc, which has gained 12.32 percent. The euro has also strengthened, rising 5.18 percent against the dollar.

The sharp depreciation of the US dollar has been a key factor behind recent currency shifts, beginning with the reciprocal tariffs imposed by the US president in April 2025. The situation worsened in July as the tariff implementation date drew closer, fuelling uncertainty over the economy amid expectations of higher living costs and rising product prices, with tariffs in some partner countries climbing as high as 20-40 percent. This, in turn, raised concerns over forthcoming US economic indicators.

Thailand's strengthening baht has had a direct impact on the US tourist market, which has shown signs of contraction since May. From January to April 2025, US arrivals to Thailand had been growing steadily, surging by 22 percent in January and by around 7-12 percent each month from February to April.

However, between May and August 2025, the market contracted by about 2 percent, coinciding with the baht's appreciation following the US tariff move in April. Immigration Bureau statistics show that between September 1-19, 2025, Thailand welcomed around 33,400 American tourists, a 5 percent drop compared with the same period last year.

As the US is considered a "super long-haul" source market with inherently higher travel costs, the weaker dollar, combined with a stronger baht, has reduced Americans' purchasing power in Thailand. This has become a critical factor in the slowdown of arrivals.

Southeast Asia trade deals in coming months
US official says

REUTERS, *Kuala Lumpur*

The United States expects to finalise trade deals with more Southeast Asian countries in the coming months, US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer said during a meeting with regional counterparts on Wednesday.

Greer was speaking in Kuala Lumpur at the start of a meeting with economic ministers from the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, amid concerns within the export-reliant bloc over the impact of US tariffs on their economies.

Indonesia and Vietnam have already negotiated new trade deals with the US

Tariff rates have been set at 19 percent and 20 percent for most of the region. Laos and Myanmar have been hit with a 40 percent rate, while Singapore has a 10 percent tariff.

Greer said talks with respective countries on the levies have been progressing well, with agreements to be finalised "in the coming months or even weeks, for some." "We believe that there are many areas where our interests align, and we can work together to achieve shared goals of bringing reciprocity and balance to the global trading system," he said.

Indonesia and Vietnam have already negotiated new trade deals with the United States, securing lower tariffs in the process.

But Vietnam, the world's sixth-largest exporter to the United States, risks losing $25 billion annually as a result of the 20 percent tariff imposed on its goods, which would make it the worst-hit economy in the region, according to estimates released by the United Nations Development Programme.

Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand hit hardest in Asean by US tariffs

ANN/THE NATION

A report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) warns that recent changes in US tariff policy have had a significant impact on Asean economies, with total exports to the US projected to fall by as much as 9.7 percent. The heaviest losses are expected for export-driven economies such as Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand.

CAMBODIA MOST AT RISK

Cambodia is seen as the most vulnerable, with exports to the US forecast to contract by 23.9 percent. The country relies on the US for around 58 percent of its total exports and faces average tariff rates close to 19 percent. In addition, Cambodia could come under scrutiny as a potential transhipment hub for goods seeking to bypass US duties.

VIETNAM'S EXPORTS PLUNGE, GDP HIT

Vietnam is next in line, with exports to the US expected to decline by up to 19.2 percent, according to the UNDP. Key sectors, including garments, footwear and electronics, now face average tariffs of roughly 20 percent, and the US has accounted for 36.6 percent of Vietnam's overall export volume.

Philip Schellekens, UNDP's chief economist for Asia-Pacific, told Reuters that in a worst-case scenario, a 20 percent tariff hike triggering severe inflation in the US could slash Vietnam's export earnings by as much as US$25 billion (around 790 billion baht) in a single year, nearly one-fifth of its annual total.

"No Asean country is harder hit by the US tariff hikes than Vietnam," Schellekens said. "And in terms of absolute trade value, only China in East Asia suffers more."

Vietnamese customs data already reflect the shift. Exports to the US in August slipped 2 percent from July, with footwear, in which Vietnam is the world's second-largest producer, plunging 5.5 percent. Overall, the downturn in exports is expected to drag Vietnam's GDP growth down by about 5 percent.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

The full impact may take years to materialise, though some effects could be cushioned by exporters absorbing part of the costs, diversifying to new markets, and boosting domestic consumption.

Still, the World Bank has revised down its forecast for Vietnam's economic growth this year to 6.6 percent, from 6.8 percent earlier, following the introduction of US tariffs. That projection falls well below the government's official target of 8.3-8.5 percent.

THAI EXPORTS FORECAST TO DROP 12.7%

Thailand is also facing significant fallout from Washington's tariff measures, with exports to the United States projected to contract by 12.7 percent. The decline stems from heavy reliance on key export sectors, including automobiles, electronics and food products, all of which are now subject to average tariff rates of around 19 percent.

Additional pressure is evident in data showing that Thailand's exports outside the US market also shrank by 1.9 percent in August, underscoring the difficulty of finding new destinations to offset lost demand. The country also faces potential scrutiny as a transhipment hub for goods seeking to evade tariffs.

Still, not all Thai products are affected. Roughly 26 percent of exports to the US remain exempt from tariffs, particularly certain electronic goods that form a critical part of American supply chains. These exemptions are expected to cushion the overall impact, at least in part.

TWO STRATEGIES FOR ASEAN

According to the UNDP, the path forward for Asean amid shifting global trade dynamics is not to retreat from globalisation but to adapt with strategic resilience. The agency outlines two key approaches:

Asean must diversify beyond its traditional export markets and strengthen regional supply chains to cushion against external shocks. Examples include Malaysia's bid to position itself as a hub for semiconductors and data centres, and the creation of the Johor-Singapore special economic zone.

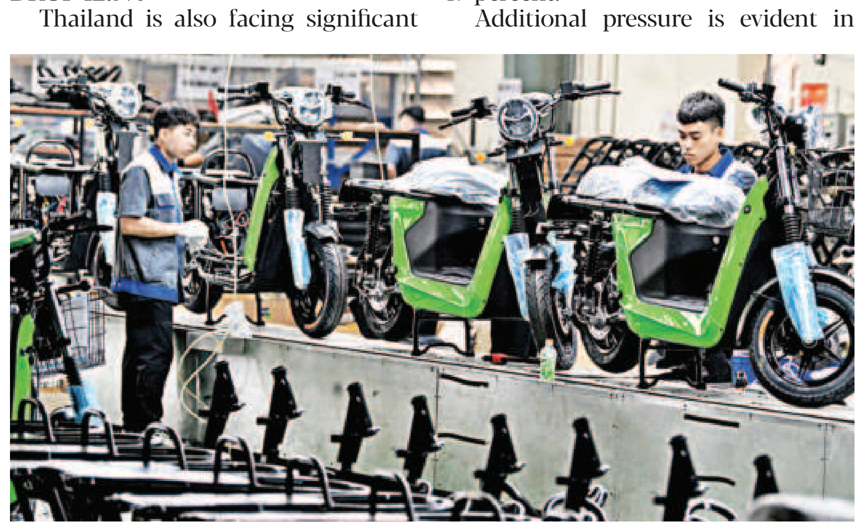


PHOTO: AFP/FILE

This photo shows workers assembling electric motorbikes at the Selex factory in Hanoi. Vietnam's exports to the US is expected to decline by up to 19.2 percent.