MOSLEH UDDIN AHMED
Managing Director
SJIB PLC

"The MSME sector will remain the backbone of Bangladesh's economic growth, especially in job creation, export diversification, and rural development. In the next five years, we expect increased digitisation, export-oriented SMEs, and stronger integration into global value chains."

SHARIAH-BASED roadmap for the next generation of MSMEs

Shahjalal Islami Bank PLC

With CMSMEs accounting for a staggering 99.92% of Bangladesh's economic units, Shahjalal Islami Bank (SJIB) PLC is redefining its role as a catalyst for grassroots growth. By leveraging Shariah-based ethical finance, digital onboarding, and collateral-light lending models, the bank is empowering a new wave of tech-savvy entrepreneurs, women, and rural businesses.

The Daily Star (TDS): The theme for MSME Day 2026 is "The Future Generation of MSMEs." How is your bank changing its plans to support this new group of young and modern entrepreneurs?

Mosleh Uddin Ahmed (MUA): With CMSMEs representing 99.92% of Bangladesh's economic units, SJIB is aligning its Shariah-based strategy with tech-driven sectors like ICT and e-commerce. By simplifying approvals and digital onboarding, we provide fast, ethical financing alongside financial literacy programs to build investment-ready, sustainable entrepreneurs.

TDS: It is often hard for very small (cottage/micro) businesses to get loans. What new methods are you using to provide loans without requiring much security (collateral), and are these reaching people who have never had a bank account before?

MUA: We are adopting collateral-light models by prioritizing business viability and cash flow over physical assets. Through MoUs with Bangladesh Bank and private partners, we facilitate collateral-free investments. In 2025, we disbursed BDT 736.50 crore to 4,554 new customers, including BDT 55.51 crore for women and BDT 559.83 crore for rural entrepreneurs. Our SME portfolio now stands at BDT 7,151.60 crore (26.01% of total investments), exceeding the 25% regulatory target.

TDS: This year focuses heavily on youth and women. What special loan packages or services do you offer to help young entrepreneurs and women grow their businesses?

MUA: Shahjalal Islami Bank empowers youth and women through specialised products like "Prottoyee" (women) and "Prothom Uddog" (youth), offering lower profit rates and simplified documentation. Beyond financing, we provide mentorship, financial literacy training, and dedicated service desks to foster an inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

At Shahjalal Islami Bank PLC, youth and women entrepreneurs remain an important focus under our financial inclusion strategy. Alongside CMSME financing and business advisory support, we place strong emphasis on women entrepreneur training and financial literacy initiatives to improve financial capability and strengthen access to formal banking services.

MD. ALTAF HOSSAIN
Managing Director (Acting)
Islami Bank Bangladesh PLC

"As MSMEs drive economic growth through digital and sustainable innovation, Islami Bank will expand its financing, digital solutions, and advisory services. By leveraging our nationwide and rural networks, we aim to provide the financial resources and knowledge needed for entrepreneurs to overcome future challenges and remain competitive."

SCALING MSME via tech-rural integration

Islami Bank Bangladesh PLC

Islami Bank Bangladesh PLC is redefining MSME support by transitioning into a long-term development partner for the nation's "Future Generation" of entrepreneurs. By blending digital innovation with its extensive Rural Development Scheme (RDS), the bank is delivering collateral-free financing and doorstep banking to the remotest villages.

TDS: The theme for MSME Day 2026 is "The Future Generation of MSMEs." How is your bank changing its plans to support this new group of young and modern entrepreneurs?

Md. Altaf Hossain (MAH): Islami Bank is positioning itself as a long-term development partner for tech-driven young entrepreneurs. We provide affordable, collateral-free financing through specialised initiatives, including the Rural Development Scheme (RDS), Small Business Investment Scheme (SBIS), and dedicated funds for freelancers and women, to help the next generation launch and scale innovative businesses.

TDS: It is often hard for very small (cottage/micro) businesses to get loans. What new methods are you using to provide loans without requiring security (collateral), and are these reaching people who have never had a bank account before?

MAH: Islami Bank is positioning itself as a long-term development partner for tech-driven young entrepreneurs. We provide affordable, collateral-free financing through specialised initiatives, including the Rural Development Scheme (RDS), Small Business Investment Scheme (SBIS), and dedicated funds for freelancers and women to help the next generation launch and scale innovative businesses.

TDS: How do you make sure that small businesses in remote villages get the same banking services and support as those in big cities?

MAH: We ensure geographic equality by combining digital tools like CellFin and mCash with an extensive agent banking network. To support remote entrepreneurs, our Rural Development Scheme (RDS) officials provide doorstep financing and business guidance, ensuring formal banking reaches even the most distant villages without the need for travel.

TDS: This year focuses heavily on youth and women. What special loan packages or services do you offer to help young entrepreneurs and women grow their businesses?

MAH: Through the Rural Development Scheme (RDS) and agent banking, Islami Bank provides simplified, doorstep financing to youth and women in remote areas. We complement this with financial literacy and business guidance, helping the next generation build sustainable and innovative enterprises nationwide.

GROWING WITH INTELLIGENCE

TAGABUN TAHARIM TITUN

Every year, MSME Day reminds us that micro, small and medium enterprises are the backbone of Bangladesh's economy. As technology reshapes global business, the next challenge is not whether MSMEs will use artificial intelligence, but how they can use it in practical and affordable ways.

For many entrepreneurs, AI does not mean robots or expensive software. It can be as simple as using an AI assistant to draft product descriptions, respond to customer inquiries, translate content into English or Bangla, or analyse sales records in minutes. These everyday applications can save valuable time for business owners who often manage multiple responsibilities themselves.

Bangladesh is already laying the groundwork for wider AI adoption. The draft National AI Policy 2026 to 2030 highlights the importance of integrating AI across small businesses, finance and digital services to improve productivity and competitiveness. It also recognises that AI driven credit assessment could help lenders better evaluate businesses that lack traditional collateral or formal credit histories.

The opportunity is particularly significant because access to finance remains one of the biggest challenges for MSMEs. According to LightCastle Partners, citing IFC estimates, Bangladesh faces an MSME financing gap of around USD 2.8 billion. As more businesses adopt digital payments and maintain electronic transaction records, AI can help financial institutions analyse cash flow patterns and expand lending to previously underserved entrepreneurs.

AI can also improve customer service. A clothing retailer can automatically answer common questions on social media. A restaurant can forecast demand and reduce food waste. A small manufacturer can predict inventory shortages before they happen. Even simple bookkeeping tools powered by AI can help owners prepare financial reports more efficiently.

However, experts say technology alone is not enough. Entrepreneurs also need digital skills, reliable internet access and greater awareness of responsible AI use. Protecting customer data and verifying AI generated information remain essential as adoption grows.

This year's UN MSME Day theme, The Future Generation of MSMEs, reflects this shift. The businesses that thrive tomorrow may not be the ones with the largest budgets, but those willing to embrace practical digital tools that improve productivity, strengthen decision making and free entrepreneurs to focus on growth.

For Bangladesh's MSMEs, AI is becoming less about the future and more about making everyday business a little smarter.