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How one man's experiment grew a tomato seedling industry

Surendra Kumar Singha's grafting technique, developed to combat tomato wilt, has helped turn the upazila into a hub producing 6.5-7 million seedlings a year

MINTU DESHWARA

In 1989, tomato plants across parts of Bangladesh were falling victim to a disease that could wipe out an entire crop. For farmers, wilt was more than a plant disease; it threatened their livelihoods.

For Surendra Kumar Singha, then an employee of the Department of Agriculture, the devastation raised a question: could anything be done to stop it?

Without the internet, he searched agricultural publications and magazines for an answer. He cannot recall the publication's name, but a Japanese agricultural journal introduced him to a possible solution: grafting tomato plants onto the rootstock of wild eggplant, a plant naturally resistant to wilt.

Surendra decided to try it. The experiment worked.

Nearly four decades later, his discovery has helped transform Kamalganj upazila in Moulvibazar into a major centre for grafted tomato seedlings, supplying farmers across the country and supporting a seasonal business worth millions of taka. Now 76 and retired from government service, Surendra lives in Tilakpur village, where locals know him as the "vegetable doctor".

WEED TO THE RESCUE

The unlikely hero of Surendra's experiment was bon-begun, or wild eggplant, a plant he had known since childhood. It grows along roadsides and on fallow land, and he initially collected it from the wild. The wild plant's natural resistance to wilt made it a suitable rootstock.

By joining the upper part of a tomato seedling to the base of a wild eggplant, Surendra developed plants that, he said, were more resistant to disease and produced higher yields.

A conventional tomato plant yields around 4 to 5 kg, while a grafted plant can produce 8 to 10 kg, he said. They also tolerate waterlogging better and can withstand heavy rainfall.

Singha initially sourced wild eggplants from Sreemangal but now raises his own rootstock seedlings with his workers.

Wild eggplant seedlings aged around two months are grafted with tomato seedlings about a month old. He mainly uses the BARI-8 and Mangal Raja tomato varieties. The grafts fuse within three to six days, followed by another 10-12 days of care before sale.

Retirement in 2012 did little to slow him down. Over the past 35 years, the entrepreneur has taught the technique to around 1,200 people in Kamalganj.

He now employs eight workers, all trained by him. Together, they grafted 120,000 seedlings this year, selling each for Tk 10 to Tk 12. Surendra invested around Tk 5 lakh and generated sales of about Tk 10 lakh, though he declined to disclose his net profit.

A GROWING SEEDLING HUB

The technique has spread across Kamalganj, turning the upazila into a major hub for grafted tomato seedlings.

According to the local agriculture office, the upazila produces and sells around 6.5-7 million seedlings annually, generating transactions worth Tk 50 to Tk 60 million in a single season. Nurseries have emerged in areas including Adampur, Jalalpur, Bangaon, Kandigaon, Madhyagaon and Najatkona, supplying farmers across the country.

Bajendra Kumar Sinha, another resident of Tilakpur, has been producing grafted seedlings for around 35 years. With the help of 12 workers and family members, he produces about 100,000 seedlings annually, selling each for Tk 12 this year.

"I produce 100,000 grafted seedlings on approximately 30 decimals of land. The production cost is around Tk 5 per seedling. If a seedling dies during the care period, the cost of that particular plant can rise to Tk 6 to Tk 7," he said.

The grafting method has created a seasonal trade worth Tk 5 crore to Tk 6 crore, supplying millions of seedlings nationwide and supporting farmers, nursery owners and seasonal workers, despite rising costs and falling tomato prices

Farmers from other regions initially came to Kamalganj to learn the technique, but grafted seedlings are now produced in many parts of the country, he said.

The business has also created opportunities for tomato growers and seasonal workers. Abdul Mannan, a farmer from the Sukurulla area, has cultivated summer tomatoes for nearly a decade on about 13 kears of land, equivalent to around 1.5 hectares.

"Last season, cultivating 13 kears cost me around Tk 25 lakh, and I earned about Tk 55 lakh," he said.

Mannan also produces around 1 lakh seedlings annually. His production cost is about Tk 4 per seedling, which he sells for Tk 8 to Tk 10. Buyers come from areas including Brahmanbaria, Kishoreganj, Jaintapur and Sunamganj.

But rising costs and falling tomato prices are putting pressure on growers. Mannan said he had already spent around Tk 20 lakh on cultivation this season, with another Tk 6 to Tk 7 lakh likely to be needed.

He had expected prices of Tk 120 to Tk 150 per kg, but tomatoes were selling for around Tk 90 to Tk 100. He attributed the decline to imported tomatoes entering the market through letters of credit.

For tomato farmers, the technique can bring substantial returns. Moin Uddin of Ghoramara village said he invested Tk 1 lakh in seedlings and made a profit of around Tk 2.5 lakh. Wholesale buyers from areas including Brahmanbaria, Sylhet and Habiganj come to purchase tomatoes, he added.

Summer tomatoes are cultivated on about 60 hectares in Kamalganj, involving around 480 farmers, according to the agriculture office.

Nilufa Yasmin Sweety, additional deputy director (plant protection) of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Moulvibazar, said the department was providing technical guidance to farmers experimenting with grafted tomatoes in summer and winter.

What began as Surendra's search for a way to combat wilt has grown into a business serving farmers far beyond Kamalganj. But as input costs rise, tomato prices fluctuate, and the technique spreads to other regions, local entrepreneurs face the challenge of sustaining their earnings.

The eight percent we never say

MAHTAB UDDIN AHMED

At a town hall, a CEO asked his staff: "Be honest. What is holding this company back?" Silence. "Speak freely," he insisted. "Nothing will happen to you." At last, someone raised his hand: "Sir, the canteen tea is too sweet." He was applauded for his courage. The product everyone privately knew was dying retired two years later, taking the company with it.

"Are you challenging me?" "How dare you?" "Have I come this far by cutting grass?" Across the subcontinent, these are not questions. They are devices for ending conversations, leaving whoever raised the issue feeling guilty. We call it respect for hierarchy. The person at the top calls it peace and quiet.

The reflex follows us from the family table to the boardroom. A junior questions a plan, and the discussion shifts from its merits to the junior's manners. A child disagrees with an elder, and the matter is settled with one word: beyadobi. Teaching people to speak respectfully is sensible. But "respect" quietly expands to mean "say nothing that makes me uncomfortable".

A Harvard Business Review article on high-performing teams calls what people hold back in difficult conversations the "last 8 percent". Its author found that, on average, people stop about eight percent short of what they wanted to say. That measures his study, not our country. Given our allergy to being challenged, our unsaid share is unlikely to be single digits. We may be running a surplus.

The silence is not stupidity; it is arithmetic. The speaker alone pays the cost: a frown, a stalled promotion, lifetime membership of the "difficult" list. Everyone shares the benefit, including the frowning boss. Any accountant can predict what happens when costs are private and gains public: supply dries up.



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The bill arrives later. The article describes a manufacturer whose major projects repeatedly derailed, costing tens of millions of dollars, because employees raised concerns only when the damage was serious. Speaking up had become an emergency, not a risk. Bad news eventually travels upwards. It arrives like a patient after three faith healers: softened, delayed and politely deprived of its pulse.

Nor is this confined to offices. The Digital Security Act became a symbol of how law can make citizens think twice before speaking. It was replaced by the Cyber Security Act 2023, itself repealed by the Cyber Security Ordinance 2025. The names keep changing; the memory of legal pressure on speech remains. When criticism is treated as a threat, people learn to price candour everywhere, including the Monday meeting.

The article identifies three cultures that smother candour. The "family" culture: we care for one another too much to upset anyone. The transactional culture: we are blunt, but nobody trusts anybody. The fear-based culture: silence is a sound career strategy. None is unique to our nation, but where hierarchy is sacred and disagreement personal, all three flourish, sometimes in the same department.

The alternative combines care with courage: challenge an idea without being branded disloyal; hear criticism without reaching for the "How dare you?" file. Rudeness is not honesty, and no meeting needs a debate champion. Concerns must be raised early and taken seriously.

Leaders can start with three questions. What are we avoiding saying? Which decision are we postponing to spare someone's feelings? And the hardest: what do I do that makes people hesitate? A leader who asks for candour and punishes the first candid answer has briefed the whole organisation in one move. Respect does not require silence. The most valuable sentence in the room is usually the one someone is still afraid to say. The second most valuable is the leader's reply: "Tell me more," said and meant.

The writer is the founder of BuildCon Consultancies Ltd and BuildNation Ltd

Marico profit falls 7%, declares 350% dividend

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Marico Bangladesh Ltd reported a 7 percent year-on-year decline in profit for the first half of the current financial year, despite higher sales, as a significant increase in material prices weighed on earnings.

The company, however, declared a 350 percent cash dividend for shareholders.

The multinational consumer goods company posted a profit of Tk 324 crore in the April-September period of the financial year ending in March 2027, down from Tk 348 crore in the same period a year earlier, according to its financial statements published yesterday.

Earnings per share (EPS) fell to Tk 102.52 in the first six months from Tk 110.52 a year earlier.

Meanwhile, the company's sales rose to Tk 1,056 crore in the first half of the financial year from Tk 1,011 crore in the corresponding period last year.

ACI's loss widens for fourth straight year

FEDA AL HOSSAIN

Advanced Chemical Industries (ACI), one of Bangladesh's largest conglomerates, reported losses for the fourth consecutive year in FY2025-26, as inflationary pressures and higher operating expenses widened its losses.

The group's consolidated loss per share stood at Tk 8.59 for the year ended June 30, 2026, compared with Tk 7.40 a year earlier, according to a price-sensitive information (PSI) disclosure published yesterday.

ACI has been posting losses since the financial year ended June 2023. Its last profitable year was 2022, when earnings per share stood at Tk 12.30, according to its financial statements.

Despite the losses, revenue grew 14 percent in FY2025-26, while gross profit increased 20 percent, reflecting performance across key business segments, ACI said in the disclosure.

"Operating expenses increased amid inflationary cost pressures and continued investment in demand generation, outlet network expansion and capability development," the company said.

Borrowing costs also rose to support working capital requirements and strategic investments, it added.

The group's operating cash flow deficit also widened. Its net operating cash flow per share (NOCFPS) stood at negative Tk 58.53 for the year ended June 30, 2026, compared with negative Tk 51.63 a year earlier.

ACI said the figure mainly reflected working capital deployed to support its operations and growth.

Despite the losses, the group's board recommended a 15 percent cash dividend and a 5 percent stock dividend for FY2025-26. The recommended cash dividend is the lowest since at least 2021. For the previous financial year, ACI had recommended a 25 percent cash dividend.

In a separate disclosure on the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE), ACI said its board had approved the formation of a new subsidiary, ACI Renewable Energy Limited, at a meeting on October 28.

The subsidiary will have an authorised capital of Tk 50 crore and a paid-up capital of Tk 10 crore. ACI will hold an 85 percent stake, subject to approval from the relevant authority.

ACI shares rose 0.28 percent to Tk 177.60 on the DSE as of 2:07pm today.

As of September 30, 2026, sponsors and directors held 47.27 percent of the company's shares, while institutional and public investors held the remainder.

Beximco Pharma recommends highest dividend since 2020

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Beximco Pharmaceuticals has recommended a 60 percent cash dividend for the financial year ended June 30, 2026, the highest since at least 2020.

The dividend is up from 47.5 percent paid for the previous year, following a rise in the drugmaker's earnings.

The company's earnings per share (EPS) increased 30 percent year-on-year to Tk 20.17 in FY2025-26, according to a disclosure published on the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) website yesterday.

The company's consolidated net operating cash flow per share also rose to Tk 21.33 for the year ended June 30, 2026, from Tk 16.19 a year earlier.

Shares of Beximco Pharmaceuticals edged up to Tk 143.10 on the DSE at 12:56pm today, compared with the previous day's closing price of Tk 143.

The company's 50th annual general meeting (AGM) for FY2025-26 depends on the holding of its 49th AGM for the previous financial year, it said.

An application seeking permission from the High Court Division of the Supreme Court to excuse the delay in holding the 49th AGM is pending.

The hearing has concluded, and the court is scheduled to deliver its judgment on November 1, 2026, Beximco Pharmaceuticals said.

The company will inform shareholders of the dates, times and other arrangements for both AGMs after the judgment, in accordance with legal and regulatory requirements.

As of September 30, 2026, sponsors and directors held 30.13 percent of the company's shares, while institutional investors, foreign investors and the public held the remainder, according to DSE data.