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INNOVATING BANGLADESH



Syed Tashfin Chowdhury reveals how the annual Anwarul Quadir prize is set to become one of the principal sources for new and innovative ideas that could usher in the next sea change in Bangladesh's development strategies



I never liked shajna (*moringa oleifera*). I, like countless millions of young people, used to cringe at the idea of having it during lunch or dinner and even shied away from daal cooked with it. So imagine my surprise when Iqbal Z Quadir, the founder and executive director of the Legatum Centre for Development and Entrepreneurship and lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA tells me that

although the vegetable is extremely popular in Bangladeshi cuisine, it is actually the leaves of the tree which carry more nutritional value than beef, milk, or any other vegetable.

‘It came as a surprise to me, too!’ says Iqbal. ‘As soon as I heard about the detail, as I am yet to read the essay myself, I researched the claim on the internet.’ It was there that he found that a gram of Moringa leaves contain 7 times the vitamin C in oranges, 4 times the calcium in milk, 4 times the Vitamin A in carrots, thrice the potassium in bananas and twice the protein in milk. ‘As such, Moringa leaves, which grow in abundance in our urban and rural environment, can become an excellent nutrient for humans, livestock and agricultural growth of our country,’ he reasons.

‘Despite living in Bangladesh and having these plants grow in our own backyard, we were oblivious to the benefits Moringa can bring to our diet. The essay that Iqbal is talking about is written by Anastasia M Telesetsky, an environmental lawyer based in San Francisco in the US, where she has proposed the wide-spread cultivation of indigenous Moringa in back-yard gardens to improve nutrition. ‘And, the innovative essay has bagged her a share in the 2007 Anwarul Quadir prize of \$ 25,000, along with Saifuddin Ahmed of Dhaka, Bangladesh,’ says Iqbal.

Iqbal points out that this was really the main purpose of the inaugural global essay contest sponsored by the Centre for International Development (CID) at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and the Anwarul Quadir Foundation of Cambridge, Massachusetts. ‘We wanted to find such proposals and innovative ideas through which the lives of the rural Bangladeshis can be improved,’ he says.

‘Besides sponsoring the essay contest this year, the Anwarul Quadir Foundation is also sponsoring the “Innovative Bangladesh” campaign and also recognising the innovators from the grassroots level of this country,’ says the scholar, who previously served as a lecturer at Harvard University. The foundation materialised through Iqbal and his family’s efforts in 2004, who named the prize after his father Anwarul Quadir. ‘He deeply believed in a socially just and economically progressive country, and in the power of ideas and individual initiatives to achieve those ends. Thus, the whole purpose of the foundation is to promote economic and social progress in Bangladesh by encouraging innovations that empower its citizens,’ he explains.

Iqbal believes that the best way to encourage innovation is through research and discussions. He points out that through this research a large global population will instantaneously find out more about Bangladesh, creating a scope for betterment for this country and discovery of its fullest potential.

‘What better way, to catalyse this process than to initiate a global essay contest where the prize money is one-half of \$ 25,000!’ he says. He reasons that although this amount was raised from gracious donors based in the US, the 141 essays submitted from writers from more than a dozen countries were strictly judged by some of the leading educationists and innovators from Bangladesh and the US.

The final winners were Telesetsky and Saifuddin Ahmed, the general manager of a large agricultural organisation in Bangladesh, seeking to improve the productivity of farmers by creating an innovative way of managing the absentee-owned land and generating large-scale employment and the production of cash crops.

Telesetsky, on the other hand, sought to empower rural villagers, especially women by promoting the use of moringa oleifera through community-based, small-scale gardens among low-income Bangladeshi communities.

The two were awarded their prize at a ceremony titled ‘Innovative Bangladesh’ at Sheraton Hotel on January 5 organised by BRAC University. The Anwarul Quadir Foundation also awarded crests to four independent innovators along with a Bangladeshi research organisation for their contributions in varying fields.

Of the four innovators, Sheikh Helal Uddin of Jhenidah received an award for developing the process of manufacturing fertiliser with locally available raw components while Munira Begum of Rajbari won for achieving great success in running a dairy farm and using cow dung for multipurpose use.

Also recognised as innovators, were aeronautical engineer and musician, Hyder Husyn for developing innovative techniques for multi-surface cleaning and scientist Dr Khalilur

Rahman for promoting solar energy systems. Pi Lab, a technological research organisation, was awarded for developing a power technology.

Following the ceremony, a closed door discussion session was also organised on January 6 where the renowned educationists, technologists and experts from varying fields from Bangladesh, USA and other countries, sat down to discuss ways through which innovative ideas can actually be implemented in the country for its betterment. 'This is just a beginning. We plan to repeat the cycle every year. We know and understand that we will make mistakes initially. But somewhere down the road, we hope that our initiative will bring about positive changes in Bangladesh through economic, industrial and social development,' hopes Iqbal.

He informs that the Foundation's second global essay contest has already begun. 'This competition is open to anyone in the world who, in 25 pages or less, can submit an innovative and practical idea that would improve the lives of low and middle-income people of Bangladesh,' he says. Iqbal points out that the proposals will be judged by four Harvard University faculty members, in consultation with scholars familiar with Bangladesh. The deadline for the contest is June 30, 2008 while the winner of the \$25,000 prize will be announced on October 15, 2008.

For more information about the contest:

http://www.cid.harvard.edu/quadir_prize/

<http://www.quadir.org>

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