

Patients continue to be denied treatment

Take strict and immediate actions to prevent any further loss of life

DESPITE orders from the government directing all public and private hospitals to ensure treatment for patients irrespective of whether they are infected with coronavirus, many hospitals are still failing to provide life-saving medical care during this time of crisis. Yesterday, we featured two harrowing photos in this daily depicting the sufferings of ordinary people—a grief-stricken grandfather mourning the death of five-year-old Shaon, who was hit by a three-wheeler and denied treatment in at least four hospitals and clinics, losing his life 15 minutes before he reached Chattogram Medical College Hospital; and cancer patient Amena Begum and her mother, who travelled to Dhaka on June 8 and have been sleeping on the floor of the National Institute of Cancer Research and Hospital since then, waiting for the results of her Covid-19 test without which she is being denied essential treatment.

According to health ministry circulars from May 11 and 24, all private and government hospitals must have separate arrangements for treating suspected Covid-19 patients and cannot refuse treatment to patients, Covid-19 or otherwise, if they have the requisite facilities of equipment. Regardless, hospitals are continuing to demand Covid-19 negative certificates before providing treatment, which can take days, if not weeks, to arrive. How morally bankrupt must we be to allow innocent children like Shaon to die, simply because they lack a certificate? Why should women like Amena Begum lose their chance to fight their diseases simply because of a backlog in paperwork?

Unfortunately, following a petition filed by the government, the Supreme Court has stayed almost all the High Court directives on this matter, including the directives on death or denial of treatment to a patient due to negligence being a criminal and punishable offence, and on taking legal action against those displaying negligence while treating patients in a hospital. So far, the only directives that have been upheld are the submission of a report by the DGHS by June 30 on whether the health ministry circulars have been implemented properly, the formation of a monitoring cell to ensure private hospitals provide treatment, and regulation of the prices of oxygen cylinders.

But while these reports are being filed and monitoring cells are being formed, ordinary people’s lives are being put at risk every day. Strict and immediate actions are required to ensure there is no more suffering and unnecessary loss of life due to such negligent practices. The government must show its commitment not only towards fighting coronavirus, but also towards providing critical healthcare for all the citizens of this country during this crisis period.

Rare example of communal harmony set by volunteers

Those succumbing to Covid-19 deserve proper burials

AS deaths from Covid-19 have been increasing steadily across the country, arranging the last rites of the deceased and ensuring a proper burial of their loved ones have become a big issue for the families. People are still confused as to how to bury their loved ones who have succumbed to the virus due to apprehension about the virus’s possible spread from a dead body. There are instances where the families of the deceased have left the bodies in fear of contracting the virus. Amid such a crisis when the family members of the deceased are not finding the courage to participate in the burial rituals and the communities are also not coming forward with help, the volunteers of Quantum Foundation in Pabna have taken up the responsibility to arrange the last rites of the Covid-19 victims, irrespective of their religious identity.

A 12-member team of the foundation has already arranged funerals of nine deceased including seven Muslims, one Hindu and one Christian—all of them died with Covid-19 or Covid-19 like symptoms. By taking up the responsibility of the burial, they have also made the job of the local administration easy as the latter has claimed that they do not have the manpower to arrange the burial service of the Covid-19 victims.

It should be mentioned here that the WHO issued a guideline on March 24, 2020, in which it mentioned that “to date there is no evidence of people becoming infected from exposure to the bodies of those who died from Covid-19.” However, it has urged the managers of healthcare facilities and mortuaries, religious and public health authorities, and families—who tend to the bodies of persons who have died of suspected or confirmed COVID-19—to take necessary precautions as the safety and well-being of everyone who tends to bodies should be the first priority. The organisation has also discouraged hasty disposal of a dead body. It is, however, unfortunate that there is a lack of awareness among people in Bangladesh about these directives, which is why proper burial of the deceased is being hampered in many cases.

Therefore, we are humbled by the humanitarian spirit of the Quantum Foundation team who believe that everybody, irrespective of their religion, deserves to be buried with honour and dignity. We hope that the example set by them will encourage other voluntary organisations to come forward with such humanitarian services. We believe such selfless services can break the social stigma and fear associated with Covid-19 and the burial of the dead from the disease.

Why we should make farming more market-oriented

SM BOKHTIAR

ONE of the most serious challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic is the threat to agriculture and therefore to food security. So far, the government has been able to ensure a steady supply of essential food items like vegetables, fruits, fish, meat and so on across the country. But in the near future, sustainability of food production and supply might be hampered because of the continued containment measures adopted to fight Covid-19 that restrict free movement of labourers and allow limited access to the market.

In spite of the ongoing health crisis, Bangladesh has made it possible to achieve a record “Boro dhan” production (204.36 lakh tons) and expects to have 31.13 lakh tones of “Aus dhan” and 163.08 lakh tones of “Aman dhan”, as targeted for 2019-20. Besides, production of wheat, maize, potato and other crops also increased compared to previous years. As per the data of the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), Bangladesh earned about USD 9 crores and 96 lakhs during 2018-19 by exporting vegetables. During the first nine months (July to March) of 2019-20, export earnings of vegetables increased by 80 percent and it reached USD 14 crores and 67 lakhs. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the prime minister has categorically stressed that crops have to be grown on every inch of land to fill the nation’s food basket. The exclusive and timely allocation of Tk 200 crores for purchase of farm machinery like combined harvester, ripper, power tiller, power thresher, etc. paved the way to achieve 100 percent harvesting target of “Boro dhan”. Besides, an amount of Tk 9,500 crores has been allocated for fertiliser and agricultural mechanisation in the proposed budget for FY 2020-21 to benefit the farm sector.

Bangladesh has emerged as not only self-sufficient in food production, but also created its image as a food surplus country to the rest of the world. It is hoped that agriculture will become a great platform for supporting the livelihood of people amidst the coronavirus-induced crisis in industrial and service sectors. In order to elevate the agriculture sector to commercial scale, and to increase Bangladesh’s capacities to deliver commodities at the global market, there is an immediate need for an in-depth analysis of our priorities and policies.

Agriculture is the engine of the nation’s economy and around 41 percent of the population are engaged in this sector—with a growth rate of 3.7 percent every year—although cultivable land is declining by 0.73 percent per year. Agriculture shares about 14 percent of Bangladesh’s national GDP.

Indonesia is fortunate because 60 percent of its total land is cultivable and occupies top position among the Asian nations in that regard, but the contribution of agriculture in its national GDP is a mere USD 41 billion. In terms of agriculture’s contribution towards national GDP, other frontrunner countries are India (USD 397 billion), Indonesia (USD 133 billion), Pakistan, Thailand and Vietnam. It is noteworthy that Indonesia’s agriculture sector contributes significantly to the nation’s GDP despite its having a mere 13 percent of cultivable land. A comparative analysis clearly indicates that the volume of agriculture GDP is three times higher in

to say, Bangladesh agriculture is self-sufficient today in spite of several challenges. The majority of the farmers are unable to undertake “Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)” due to inadequate knowledge and resources as regards usage of advanced farm machinery, storage and quality control measures, and further processing to produce value-added products. In this endeavour, the country’s agriculture sector should move towards “safe food production” followed by “value addition” to make it export-oriented.

Farm mechanisation is one of the important elements of modern agriculture that ensures timeliness of

Bangladesh can make a transition from subsistence agriculture to market-oriented agriculture. A private-sector friendly policy can be framed to reduce the regulatory burden on the production of farm inputs such as seed, fertiliser, pesticides, farm machinery, etc.—which will attract potential investors. Environmental sustainability of agricultural production can be strengthened. The quality of public agricultural programmes can be improved and allocations to more effective programmes can be increased. The government can set up a number of large-scale agricultural and food processing hubs across the country through the



Farm labourers hold Boro crops harvested from a flooded field in Chalan Beel area of Natore’s Singra, in May 2020. PHOTO: STAR

Indonesia than in Bangladesh despite an equal (%) share to the overall GDP. On the other hand, the volume of agriculture GDP of Thailand is equal to Bangladesh, even though the former shares only 8 percent of national GDP.

In view of the above scenarios, the question is, how is Bangladesh lagging behind several countries on the volume of GDP despite its having more areas of cultivable land? If we look at the export figures of Bangladesh during 2018-19, total export was USD 40.5 billion. Out of this, readymade garments contributed USD 34 billion, almost 84 percent of the total export earnings. The export earnings by agriculture were only USD 2.2 billion.

So how can we enhance the agriculture sector’s contribution to GDP? Needless

farm operations and increases work output per unit area, and has direct impacts on land productivity and farm income. On the other hand, agricultural processing has multiple benefits such as increasing GDP through the addition of goods and new processed products; providing income and employment in rural areas (because of their strong backward linkages); creating a source of exports and foreign exchange; and stimulating agricultural production by creating new stable intermediate markets for raw agricultural products, and assisting producers to improve their farming know-how in some processing activities through vertical integration and production contracts with processors.

There are many ways through which

Agro-Processing Accelerator, a one-stop shop for agro-processors targeting both domestic and export markets involving more private entrepreneurs. Small and medium-sized storage facilities can be established—combined with adopting the best practices in post-harvest handling and storage—to improve food safety, extend the shelf life of produce, and reduce farm losses and post-harvest waste. Last but not the least, a Central Institute of Agricultural Engineering (CIAE), for continuation of R&D with support from the government and development partners, can be initiated.

Dr SM Bokhtiar is Executive Chairman, Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council. Email: ec-barc@barc.gov.bd

Confronting anti-blackness in our community



ZAHRAH HAIDER

WE’VE known for a long, long time that colourism is rampant in South Asia. And now, in light of everything that is happening in the world, we should acknowledge that

we are also some of the worst perpetrators of anti-black racism. We may fall under the same People of Colour (POC) umbrella, but we are not yet the allies we need to be.

Recently, cricketer Daren Sammy, who played for the IPL team Sunrise Hyderabad, posted a video on Instagram where he described being called “*kalu*” by some of his teammates, under the impression that it was a harmless nickname. In the video, he shared how, whenever he was called *kalu*, there would be laughter around the room, which he thought nothing of. After learning the true meaning of the word, he urged the individuals responsible to reach out to confirm whether they were using the word in a derogatory sense or not. Unsurprisingly, there are people justifying casual racism, refusing to accept that it’s a racial slur, saying it’s just a nickname. And therein lies the problem.

Several Bollywood actors have also faced criticism for showing support for the Black Lives Matter movement while also promoting skin lightening products. I remember those fairness cream adverts from when I was a little girl, and having that seed planted in my mind that “fair = lovely”. That light skin was something to strive towards, and that dark skin was something that needed to be fixed. Fair skin was associated with affluence, as only the rich could afford to stay indoors out of the shade and avoid manual labour. To have dark skin meant that you worked outdoors, and therefore meant you were poor. For these celebrities, activism seems to consist of merely posting a black square on social media with a hashtag, without putting the effort and resources into combatting discrimination and the stereotypes they’ve profited from and helped perpetuate for years. And I think part of the reason for this is that people don’t want to admit that they were or are part of the problem. People do not want

to be held accountable, and that in turn limits progress.

There are Bangladeshi rappers who use the n-word as if it adds authenticity to their image. There is a sense of entitlement there, because to them it is part of hip-hop culture and thus an essential component of the music. They feel justified in using the n-word, because to them it is something that is reserved for all POC, not just for black people. There is very little regard for the history of the word. It has been reclaimed by black people and black people *only*, and should only be used by them. Being non-white doesn’t automatically mean us brown people have the right to use a word that had been used for hundreds of years to degrade and

long as they are not black”). That is the attitude that so many Bangladeshi families hold, and I have seen this first-hand. It harks back to colonialism and the caste-based discrimination which is still so prevalent in our communities. We already have a problem with putting more emphasis on academic achievements than judging people by their character, and then we add race on top of that and end up breeding this incredibly harmful mentality that black people are just undesirable as in-laws. We create this hierarchy that places black people right at the very bottom, with absolutely no logic to support it.

It’s as if black people only exist for us to benefit from their contributions to



PHOTO: REUTERS

discriminate against black people, and is still used to this day to racially abuse black people. Similar to the Daren Sammy incident, it’s not the intent that matters. Whether it’s used harmlessly or merely as an attempt to emulate black musicians is beside the point—the word is rooted in racism and as long as non-black people continue to use it in whatever context, it will serve as a reminder that we feel more entitled to use a single word than we have empathy for the injustices that black people have faced for centuries. There is no debate. It is a word that is simply not ours to use.

Our anti-blackness is also evident in the way we would rather have a white foreigner marry into the family than a black foreigner—“*Kalo na hoilei holo*” (“as

sport, film, literature, music, art, food. We celebrate the things they create while simultaneously ignoring their plight, and limiting our allyship to a few performative acts on social media.

Black people should not have to die for us to realise that there is still a massive prejudice issue at home and in South Asian diasporas. We should not have to rely on black people to draw elaborate analogies to explain why they deserve equality. Black people are being murdered with impunity by the very people who are meant to protect them. It shouldn’t take acts of senseless violence against black people to spark conversation about our anti-black racism and how we are contributing to the systemic oppression of black people around the world. Our

silence is equivalent to complicity.

Through acts of micro-aggressions, casual racism, and then *actual* racism, we South Asians are allowing white supremacy to thrive. Comedian Nish Kumar put it succinctly: “We can either stand in support of the Black Lives Matter movement or we can be the foot soldiers of white supremacy.” We need to check our behaviour on a regular basis. We need to confront racism and biases in our everyday lives and have those uncomfortable conversations with family members. We need to educate ourselves, our elders and the younger generations, and challenge ignorance in its many, many forms at every step of the way. Racism isn’t just shouting slurs at minorities—it is systemic and institutionalised. It’s a global and multi-faceted issue that doesn’t exist in a monolith.

To focus our attention on our own relationship with it does not negate or undermine the struggles of other minority groups around the world. We should be capable of having conversations about multiple issues—it is incredibly exhausting to keep up the activism and to constantly be learning, but it’s a fraction compared to how people who experience it daily feel. We must be able to talk about things without resorting to whataboutisms. The crux of this article is specifically about the anti-blackness in the South Asian community, but it does not mean there aren’t other forms of prejudice present.

As targets of discrimination ourselves, we have every responsibility to look out for our brothers and sisters in other marginalised groups. This movement is about justice and solidarity. We know all too well what it feels like to be oppressed because of the colour of our skin, which is all the more reason to unite in the fight to dismantle the systems built to keep us down. We can’t effect change on a global scale if we do not adjust our attitudes at home.

There is currently a colossal paradigm shift taking place. The events of the last few months will, hopefully, be studied for generations to come. We are witnessing perhaps the largest civil rights movement in history, and it is up to us to decide which side we want to take.

Zahrah Haider is a freelance writer currently working as an editor for the International Bar Association. All views expressed are her own.