

Organic food getting popular as toxic chemicals pose danger

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Organic food is becoming popular among the consumers of Dhaka city.

Against the backdrop of a campaign against adulterated food during the past few years, many people are opting for food that are not produced or processed artificially, tainted with toxic chemicals that pose grave danger to the public health.

It has also become easier to

find organic food in the city, which was once available only in rural bazaars and suburban markets on a limited scale.

Organic foods are produced without the use of chemical pesticides and artificial fertilisers. Animals are reared without the routine use of antibiotics, growth hormones and food from these animals are processed without ionising radiation or

food additives.

Organic produce must not be genetically modified and has to be grown with environmentally non-intrusive methods.

NGO-backed ventures Shashya Prabartana, Proshika and some department stores started selling organic food at different times. With the number of health conscious consumers on the rise, the sellers reported a rapid increase in demand for such food.

Balam, Radhuni Paagol, Abchhaya, Modhushail, Chamara, Shorshori, Pakri, Shishumoti, Porangi, Begun Bichi, Shaheb Chikon and Digha, lentils, atta, spices, mustard oil, puffed rice, molasses, potatoes are their popular items.

Shashya Prabartana is the sales outlet of Ubinig (Policy Research for Development Alternative), which is among a few pioneer organisations working for popularising ecological

including three main production centres in Pabna, Tangail and Cox's Bazar and smaller centres in Kurigram, Sherpur, Chapainawabganj, Natore, Sirajganj, Kushtia and Noakhali. Around one lakh farmers are involved with Naya Krishi Andolon, half of them are women.

Organic foods, however, cost more than the average products and are still not within the reach of the common people. "Organic



Little Rahad on his father's lap while Dr Salahuddin fixes his dressing.



An organic food shop in the Mohammadpur area in the city.

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"In the beginning only customers we had were our friends. It took a long time to make the public aware about the benefit of ecological agriculture and organic food. We now have many regulars who prefer safe food," said Shahid H Shamim, director of Prabartana.

Various local species of rice including Kalijira, Kumari, Birol, Binni, Tulsimala, Banshiraaj,

agriculture and organic food in Bangladesh.

Their movement, known as the Naya Krishi Andolon (new agricultural movement), started in 1988 on a small scale. Products were available only in rural markets in the early stage. In 2002, it was first made available in Dhaka in its Mohammadpur outlet.

Today Ubinig has 10 production centres across the country

food still has limited customers, so production volume is still very low, which eventually increases production cost. The scene will change we hope as it is becoming popular every day," said Shamim.

On average 160 customers now buy organic foods from Shashya Prabartana a day. The outlet also has home services at a minimal charge.

"This is a very small number compared to other commercial ventures. We would like to approach cautiously," Shamim said. "Organic farming requires a sensitive natural balance. We don't want to ruin the balance just to increase the stock," he added.

The next big name in organic farming is Proshika, which started ecological agriculture before Ubigin back in 1978 and currently supplies vegetables and a small amount of fruits to different department stores in town. Marketing in Dhaka started in 2000.

Proshika has an outlet in Mirpur.

Qazi Khaze Alam, director of Natural Resources at Proshika, said, "The idea was to practise sustainable agriculture that does not degrade the environment."

Organic farms do not release synthetic pesticides into the environment, some of which have the potential to harm soil, water and local terrestrial and aquatic wildlife.

Alam mentioned that a critical aspect of organic farming is its marketing which is beyond the scope of the farmers. "This is why we tried to build up a marketing chain so that the farmers can sell their produce," he said.

Alam pointed out that a better link is needed between the consumers and the farmers and Proshika is still struggling to make it happen. Proshika has tried selling organic food items through hawkers but it did not work.

The NGO has farms in Madhupur, Ghatail and Shakhipur of Tangail district and in Belabo and Raipura in, Narsingdi that mostly send produce to Dhaka. Every day around 2 tonnes of vegetables come from these centres.

Obtaining certification by the authorities for organic food is not yet mandatory in Bangladesh. "There is no way for the consumer to identify organic food. This will enable unscrupulous entrepreneurs to sell food that are not organic, terming them safe," he said.

Alam pointed out that vegetables are perishable. Safe transportation of the goods and proper preservation is absent in the country. This is an area that needs attention.

MOVE TO MAKE COCHLEAR IMPLANT AFFORDABLE Into the exciting world of hearing, speech

DURDANA GHAS

Little Rahad will feel just on the top of the world.

The three-year old boy underwent successful cochlear implant last month. Doctors said he will be able to hear soon.

Rahad is one of the three child patients waiting to enter an exciting world of hearing for the first time.

They were operated upon during a workshop on cochlear implant held at the Department of Otolaryngology and Head-Neck Surgery of Mitford Hospital during February 18-20. Specialist doctors from home and abroad joined the event.

"I cannot tell you how happy I am to know that my son will now be able to hear and learn words," said Shafar Uddin, father of Rahad. Before coming to the workshop he had consulted many doctors for the treatment of his son.

Shafar came to know about the implant from a BTV programme three months ago and contacted Dr Salahuddin, assistant professor, ENT department, Salimullah Medical College. The doctors then selected Rahad for three other patients from a list of 56 for cochlear implant.

Five operations were done in the workshop including four cochlear implants. Operation, treatment and medicine costs amounting to Tk 2 lakh were borne by the government and from the donations by pharmaceutical companies while the cost of the device, around Tk 7 lakh, is borne by the patients.

"If the treatment was done in India or Singapore it would cost Tk 10 to 25 lakh. We are trying to provide the same treatment at

Mitford at a relatively affordable cost," said Dr Mohammad Abdullah, head of ENT department at Mitford Hospital.

Three-year-old Ifi is another patient, deaf from birth, who was given an implant during the workshop. His school-teacher mother Taslima Begum took him to India in January where the doctors said he needs an implant.

"I could not afford the implant there. When I came back home I heard from a relative about the workshop at Mitford and took him here," she said.

Around 32 ENT doctors from across the country took part in this workshop, third in a series, conducted by three specialists from abroad.

"Since 2006 we have been trying to arrange the workshop with international doctors. We will train up our doctors gradually so that we do not need the help of foreign doctors anymore," Dr Salahuddin, one of the organisers, said.

Cochlea is a part of inner ear, which is responsible for hearing. In the 1970s USA first started cochlear implant to treat deafness. The small device is planted inside the ear. It is a major treatment to treat hearing disabilities.

In December 2006, this operation was done for the first time in Bangladesh in Mitford Hospital, a public hospital.

"When I saw this treatment in other countries I thought how we can have it in our country where patients can reduce the cost of the device, around Tk 7 lakh, is borne by the patients," said Dr Mohammad Abdullah.

A few years ago Dr Nadeem Mukhter, a Pakistani audiologist, contacted Dr Abdullah after reading his article on

cochlear implant in the online edition of The Daily Star and then expressed his desire to come to Bangladesh.

He along with two cochlear implant surgeons, Prof JM Hans from India and Dr Iqbal Javed Khan from UK, came to Bangladesh to attend the workshop.

"This is our initial step. We want everyone's assistance to perform this difficult task and let people with hearing impairment know that this treatment is available in Bangladesh so that at least those who can afford the treatment can have it," said the doctor.

"If banks lend money at a low rate of interest for cochlear implants, then patients from middle or lower-income groups can afford it. For an example, Rahad's father had to sell his landed properties to buy the device. If there were lending opportunities he might not have done so," said the doctor.

Hi Care Hearing Centre, an NGO, will provide the special speech therapy treatment to these children free of charge.

Kaniz Fatema, chief audiologist, Hi Care Hearing Centre, said it may take six to 12 months for a child with an implant to pick up words to speak like normal children.

Adults, who have lost hearing ability, may take three to six months to learn since they have an idea about the sound of words and their meanings in the brain.

Rahad's device will be switched on by next month. And then he will start learning to speak like newborn babies.

"I am hopeful that he will be able to hear and talk," said Rahad's father with a happy smile on his face.

Most taxicabs unfit, in terrible state

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Most of the taxicabs now plying the city streets are battered and smoke-emitting and are unfit for the job.

Most of these vehicles break down in the middle of the ride and many cabs do not have working air conditioners.

According to Abdul Sattar, driver of a black taxicab, his car has practically turned into junk in only four years.

"Vehicles like these can, by no means, be used for commercial purposes. It [the car he owns] troubles constantly and there's always something wrong with it. Almost all the fare earned through it have to be spent on its repair," said Abdul Sattar.

A good number of these CNG-run taxicabs are also operating with substandard CNG equipment and parts, jeopardising public safety.



But it's completely unacceptable that we receive such a poor service in exchange for the high fare," she said.

Taxicab owners allege that around 8,000 out of the 11,000 taxicabs that were authorised to operate in the city streets have become virtually unusable and the rest are barely functional now.

The cab owners blamed a group of unscrupulous businesspeople for making a huge profit by importing substandard vehicles.

According to sources at Bangladesh Association of Taxicab Operators, around 8,000 cheap and poor quality taxicabs were imported from the neigh-

bouring state without considering the fact that heavy-duty and durable vehicles are a must for taxicab operations.

The number of operational taxicabs, both black and yellow, is decreasing by the day with around 3,000 cabs presently operational in the city.

"It was a bad decision to import these vehicles to be used as taxicabs. They are mediocre in quality and have low durability," said Badda resident Abu Hashem, owner of six black taxicabs.

"Majority of the cabs are completely beat-up already. If you watch closely, the number of taxicabs in the streets is decreasing day by day. Almost all the

taxicabs are running in a terrible state and most don't have valid fitness certificates," he added.

"A lot of the taxicab owners have lost all of their investments. I know a few owners who were compelled to sell their taxicabs at a huge loss," said Golam Hossain, another taxicab owner from the same area.

One such taxicab owner is Abul Kashem who had to sell the two taxicabs he owned at a loss of nearly Tk 3 lakh.

"The conditions of my cars became really bad within a year and I was spending almost all the income on repairs. Later I had to sell the cars at a huge loss," Kashem said.

Kashem is yet to repay the

loan that he took to buy the two taxicabs and he now drives a cab that belongs to someone else.

According to owners, almost half of the taxicabs are now sitting idle in different garages. The rest are under the possession of banks and other financing firms as their owners failed to pay the loan instalments.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) has decided not to issue fitness certificates to taxicabs below 1,300 cc. Since the blue and black taxicabs are 800 cc vehicles, their fitness certificates will not be renewed so that they cannot operate in the city.

Humayun Rashid, director (operations) of BRTA, said, "We have decided not to renew their fitness certificates considering the deplorable condition of the taxicabs. Taxicabs that have exceeded their duration of eight years will not be allowed to operate on the streets."

"The yellow taxicabs will be allowed to operate only if they pass the fitness test," he added.

A few thousand battered taxicabs are roaming the city without valid fitness certificates and some are even putting lives of their passengers as well as the public at risk. Owners of these cabs do not apply for fitness certificates fearing that the vehicles would be barred from running in the city.

Although the BRTA has a mobile court for Dhaka city, its authority is limited to issuing fines to the offenders. It is the responsibility of traffic officials of Dhaka Metropolitan Police to confiscate unfit vehicles from the streets, said BRTA sources.



Although the Pehela Baishakh (Bengali New Year) is six weeks away bookbinders have already started production of Haalkhata, used by traders who observe the traditional event through the practice of estimating annual balance at the end of Bengali New Year. Some celebrate the day with sweets and much fanfare.