

Vitamin A-enriched 'Golden Rice'

Another achievement in food sector

IT is undoubtedly great news that Bangladeshi scientists will be conducting field test on a vitamin A-enriched rice variety called Golden Rice, prior to taking it to the production phase. Golden Rice, a new type of rice that contains beta carotene, is being developed as a new food-based approach to solve the severe vitamin A deficiency affecting tens of thousands of children and pregnant women in Bangladesh. The success in developing this new rice variety is consistent with the progress made by Bangladesh in producing the first three zinc-rich rice varieties in the world.

It was in the late 1990s that two European scientists developed Golden Rice after inserting beta carotene-enriched rice gene from daffodil to rice; but after years of research and experiments, Bangladeshi scientists at IIRI have deduced that it would be more productive to transfer the beta carotene from rice than daffodil.

In Bangladesh, people rely on rice as a staple food for fulfilling their dietary needs. However, as rice does not contain any vitamin A in itself, this dependence often leads to severe dietary deficiency in vitamin A. As per the World Health Organisation, one in every five preschool children and 23.7 percent of pregnant women in Bangladesh is vitamin A-deficient.

If produced successfully, it will no doubt add a nutritional value to our staple diet, and be an easy means of vitamin consumption for populations who cannot afford expensive vitamin supplements and food rich in vitamin A.

US bombing of hospital in Kunduz

Are apologies enough?

NOTHING can explain away the bombing of the hospital being run by the Doctors Without Borders in Kunduz on October 3. Reportedly, this is one of the most horrible and noticeable cases of civilian deaths inflicted by US forces in the 14-year war in Afghanistan – a war that was declared all but over by the US president. The air strike killed 22 persons including ten doctors and injured more than 30 people.

It is surprising that in spite of the fact that all the parties involved in the conflict in Afghanistan had foreknowledge about the location of the hospital it was targeted by the US air force. And so far, though we have had four different versions of the incident, it can be said with certainty that it was not an error caused by the heat of the battle, and the casualties cannot be dismissed as victims of collateral damage.

President Obama's apology will be of little comfort to the families of the dead and the injured. The current incident brings into greater relief the issue of civilian deaths in such circumstances which have so far been passed off as collateral damage not only in Afghanistan but also in countries and regions where conflicts are raging. In Afghanistan alone, 14,000 civilians have been killed, good many of them by the US forces.

In this instance, there have been gross violations of rules of war. And it is only fitting that an international inquiry be conducted to ascertain the truth and hold to account those responsible for the bombing and the deaths.

SEEING THE INVISIBLE

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

M AHFUZA Akhter Happy, age 11, has suddenly become visible for the wrong reasons. She became newsworthy for being the unfortunate victim of a well-known cricket player and his wife. Beaten black and blue with her foot fractured, it was sheer luck that she was able to escape her attackers and get help of the police. Ironically, it is the celebrity status of her employer that

made Happy the centre of public attention and it is also why media pressure has ensured that Shahadat Hossain and his wife Jesmine Nahar Nrittya were arrested.

Normally, house-helps like Happy belong to the invisible class – children doing adult chores and at the mercy of employers who belong to the 'respectable' classes of society. They are the silent little helpers who sweep floors, wash clothes, take other children to school, dust furniture, press feet, apply oil on the mistress's hair, feed the master's baby, buy groceries from the corner store, carry heavy shopping bags, cook – basically be on call almost 24-7. All this they do with their employers and their family members barely giving them a second glance. Except when they make mistakes. Nobody remembers that they are children, some as old as or younger than their own. All that is noticed is that the *kajer meye* (maid) has slipped up – not done her chores properly or forgotten to do it altogether. The punishment for such slip-ups range from a mild scolding to severe verbal abuse or physical torture.

Take 15-year-old Nazma Begum from Moulvibazar, who ended up in hospital with fractured wrists, severe cuts and bruises. Barely able to bear her pain, Nazma told a journalist how she was routinely tortured with hot water, knives and canes by her employer's daughter whose house she had been sent to.

Who are these sadistic people, in horror we ask ourselves? Frighteningly, in public they are 'normal' and well-respected. Many of them are women who are mothers; all the more appalling that they would inflict such pain on children. In Happy's case, her torturers were both the cricketer and his wife. Sometimes the entire family is involved in these unspeakable acts.

It is hard to digest the truth that humans are the cruelest species on earth, getting pleasure out of hurting fellow human beings. Domestic workers, especially if they are children, who have no unions and are not even recognised as part of the formal workforce or under the purview of labour laws, are the easiest targets. The Domestic Servants' Registration Ordinance 1961 requires self-registration of domestic workers with local police stations in Dhaka, but does not provide any legal redress against abuse and poor working conditions. Thus, a domestic worker can be paid anything

or nothing (often in the case of child domestic workers), work impossible hours and live in subhuman conditions – depending on the whims of the employers. There are laws and legal provisions that can also apply to domestic workers but that too, only when they are severely tortured or worse, killed by their employers. There are no laws that prohibit a domestic worker from being treated like a slave, from being humiliated, given substandard food, slapped around every now and then, and deprived of free time, weekly holidays and a decent wage. There are no unions or associations to help a domestic worker fight for her rights.

The power structure of our society allows for the

(now 2014). The draft policy addresses important points such as fair wages, proper contracts of employment, fixed working hours, leisure and holidays, festival bonuses, maternity leave, healthcare, identity cards, as well as schooling and vocational training. Compensation for accidents and legal action against physical and sexual abuse are also included.

It is not clear why this draft has still not been graduated to a policy that can, if sincerely implemented, ensure the rights of domestic workers. There is no reason why domestic workers should be excluded from the rights stipulated by labour laws and international conventions. It is estimated (according to the draft policy) that there are around 20 lakh domestic workers in the



influential and wealthy to dodge the legal system. So even when an employer pushes her maid off the terrace or burns her with a red hot spatula, she can get away with it by paying the right persons in the right positions or simply offering out-of-court settlements the family may be coerced or persuaded into agreeing to.

The blatant exploitation of domestic workers, especially those who are children, has prompted leading human rights NGOs and trade unions to form the Domestic Workers Rights Network. The Network has in turn led discussions with civil society groups and the government to form what is known as a Draft Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy 2010

country. Given that these are the people that make life infinitely easier for others and allow them to work and enjoy their leisure time, it is grossly unjust that they should be treated with such disdain and neglect.

It is shameful that a nation that prides itself for its valorous emancipation from racist oppressors should fall victim to a feudal mindset where home workers are looked down upon as lesser human beings. Unless we get rid of our classist views and show respect to all our fellow citizens, especially those who take care of us every day, we will not be able to rid ourselves of this stigma.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Op-ed, The Daily Star.

Ekhon baazta hai ...

CHINTITO SINCE 1995



NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

DOWN memory lane, and this I am going to do from time to time, as many readers of this page may not have read the pieces appearing in

the *Daily Star* twenty years ago. Here goes a Chintito (item) that appeared under Pinch of Salt, Chintito's then banner head; the context is sadly not totally lost.

It is extremely impolite and improper to speak in anything but the native tongue or in a language not agreed upon between the communicating persons.

Picture this: You are walking on Oxford Street in London and a person of brown complexion but with distinct sub-continental features stops you quite abruptly and demands "Time kya hai?" meaning (perhaps), "What's the time?" The unsuspecting amongst us Bangalis will perhaps volunteer, "Ekhon baazta hai duita baiza ponero minit hota hai," (It's fifteen past two). It's ludicrous! The patriotic stance should be an absolutely blank look. Or, if you wanted to be polite you could beg his pardon in English because both of you were on English soil. And, if you chose to be both polite and patriotic, combine the blank look with a classical Bangali mind-boggler, "Aapna theek chintey paarlam na," (Don't think I remember seeing you before).

Being brown and from India the British ruled, I could be from anywhere;

from Peshawar to Panchagarh, from Goalondo to Goa. Well, if you want to bring the question of height, that's a dimension beyond any sensible confabulation. Again, being brown and short, I could be speaking in any of the languages that make this tanned subcontinent so much more colourful and vibrant. Actually, if this *kya hai* chap, who could be from anywhere north of Bangalore, used a bit of sense, he could have walked up to the Big Ben and looked up. The time is always there and you don't have to stop strangers and query in stranger languages.

feeling was hurt. That's the value of experience.

It is common knowledge that many Bangalis are rather charitable when it comes to speaking in a foreign lingua. Many a Dhaka trader will make *idhar to udhar* to strike a business deal with an Indian or a Pakistani counterpart. Why? If the chap on the other side can't understand Bangla, speak in English, recognised as a secondary language in both countries. And, if he can't decipher your English and if he is restricted by a handicap of 'yes, no, very good', take the cue from the elderly ladies; stick to your

Use an interpreter. But, never let your counterpart have the upper hand by coaxing you to speak in his tongue in your own country. Your pride, your history, your very being should refrain you from doing that. Of course, when you are visiting him, you could always try and pick up his language. The principle should be to speak in your own tongue in your country and to try and speak the foreign tongue when you are abroad. And, today, there are always common third languages to choose from.

There was this Bangali doctor, volunteering for the PLO in Lebanon, using sign language to communicate on a complicated subject such as medicine with a Kashmiri, who had insisted that they parley in Urdu. The Bangali had the last say, without speaking a word.

Then there was this Bangladeshi student sitting in the office of the Bangladesh Association in Sheffield. Up comes this Pakistani and gives the Bangali a nudge from behind with a verbal 'khayriat?' query. The Bangali scholar was unmoved. After the third 'khayriat' poke, the Bangali swung around with a "Sorry?" The Pakistani was puzzled and inquired, "You don't understand Urdu?" The Bangali student could see 1952, 1969, 1971 flash by and replied "Urdu?" to let the poker know that even the word Urdu was unknown to him. The Pakistani does not give up and asks of the Bangali, "Are you Malaysian?" With glistening eyes, head held high, the Bangali replied, "No, Bangladeshi!"

The writer is a practising architect at Basha Bari Ltd., a Commonwealth Scholar and Fellow in the UK, a Baden-Powell Fellow Scout leader and a Major Donor Rotarian.

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An elderly Dhaka lady went to Bangkok for a check-up, accompanied by her son. She knew a bit of English but definitely no Thai. Next to the flat in which they put up, there was an elderly Thai lady who knew no English. One evening when the son returned home, he found his mother and the neighbour in perfect harmony. One was speaking in fluent Bangla and the other in flowing Thai; the old-timers were having a whale of a time. No language barrier there. Actually, what the two ladies did was the most sensible thing to do and nobody's

respective languages. If the business you are discussing is worth it, the deal you will strike will be better. Being equal, you will draw more respect from your overseas business friend.

It may be encouraging to remember that man has been trading from early times. For as long as one cares to remember, ships from bizarre lands have discovered virgin havens to trade their wares. Merchants have travelled many a month to stumble on exotic places. Never has language been a hindrance to business.

COMMENTS

"Govt failed to ensure security: Claims Ershad"
(October 6, 2015)

Reaz AU

You are right but what did you do in this regard?

"Ex-PDB chairman brutally murdered"
(October 6, 2015)

Mohammad Shah Akramul

There are similarities between this killing and Maulana Faruqi's killing.

Zubair Ahmad Bulbul

Now the government will claim that BNP and Jamaat are involved in this killing.

Amina

It's so unfortunate that nowadays, people are being killed brutally every day.

Latifa Begum

We have no security.

"PM dedicates UN award to people"
(October 6, 2015)

Muslim Ahmed

Thanks a lot for dedicating the award to people.

Ahmed Choudhury

So she dedicated the award to "us"? Well, thank you. But what we really want is to have the guarantee

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Increase in transport fare

Due to the rise in fuel prices, a transport fare increase has been put into effect since October 1, 2015. Passengers now have to pay 10 paisa more per kilometre. But the bus companies are paying no heed to the government guideline and asking for more money from passengers. Sometimes they forcibly take the money.

I am a regular commuter of Fulbaria (Gulistan)-New Airport route. The distance of this route is 21 kilometres and the previous fare was Tk 20. So the new fare should be Tk 22.10. But the bus conductors are charging each passenger Tk 30 which is not right. Quarrelling and altercation over bus fares have become regular.

May I request the authorities concerned to take necessary measures to stop this malpractice in the buses?

M.A. Kashem
Nazimuddin Road, Dhaka

Killing of foreign nationals

An Italian national was shot dead in Dhaka's diplomatic area Gulshan and a Japanese national was also killed in Rangpur. These two murders were committed in a span of five days. Who could be behind these horrible crimes? What is the motive



for killing these foreign nationals?

It is the duty of the law enforcing agents to unearth the mystery and arrest the criminals. The murderers must be caught at any cost. But we are noticing that the higher-ups have started blaming so and so, even though the investigation is yet to make any headway. It is not the right approach as it will influence the investigation.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong