

Violence still dominates polls

A precursor of what is to come?

We are appalled by the level of violence and chaos associated with the local government polls on Thursday in various polling centres of the country. The pictures published in various papers, of men brandishing guns in Chittagong during clashes between supporters of two rival ward councillor candidates, leave little to the imagination regarding the toxic atmosphere created in the polling areas.

There are reports of violent clashes, capture of poll centres, and snatching of ballot papers in other polling centres across the country. In Tangail a Jubo Dal leader was killed during clashes between locals, police and political activists during the Union Parishad polls.

Why were these individuals allowed to brandish weapons to intimidate rival supporters and, no doubt, voters in general? Why couldn't law enforcers prevent such unwholesome incidents? This only indicates how little control law enforcers have when thugs affiliated with the political elite are given carte blanche to do whatever they like without facing any consequences.

Such incidents are hardly unprecedented but they do add to our anxiety and uncertainty regarding what lies ahead during our national elections. If this is the kind of violence, unruliness and blatant intimidation displayed in our local government elections, what can we expect during the parliamentary elections?

Strengthening local government is fundamental to development and democracy. If the elections to fill the necessary polls are not carried out in a free and fair manner, it is not possible to ensure that deserving candidates are chosen by the people. It also violates the ordinary voters' right to vote without any coercion or fear. It takes away the power from the people.

If this is a precursor to the scenario in the national elections, it will only serve to substantially diminish voter confidence. And that would spell disaster for our democracy and our future.

We can only appeal to the government to rein in these unruly, violent elements, many of whom are affiliated with the ruling party, and ensure a level playing field in the national elections, one that is free from violence and intimidation.

ACC public hearing on PDB

People deserve better service

THAT the public often encounters harassment in government offices to obtain utility services is hardly a new phenomenon, but rarely do details come out in public. A recent public hearing by Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) at Chittagong Power Development Board (PDB) headquarters was such a rare occasion for people to speak out.

The hearing reflects the frustration and helplessness of ordinary people due to the corruption, irregularities, poor quality of service and harassment at certain government offices. One victim, for example, complained that when he queried about why his electricity bill had far more units than the actual reading the metre at his residence showed, the local metre reader asked him to "jump off the roof of a high-rise."

There have been numerous reports on how electricity bills of many users contain exaggerated figures and units than those that the metre actually shows. The authorities have done little to address this issue. The testimonies of the clients at the public hearing should prompt efforts to improve quality of service at the public utility service provider. PDB should adopt better technologies that will automatically and precisely prepare the electricity bill.

We also hope that the ACC commissioner instructs his officers to investigate the allegations of corruption that the public made at the hearing.

It is high time the commission took stern punitive actions against corrupt public officials. This would not only help curb corruption in the public sector but also contribute to improving the quality of service at government offices.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

The plight of elderly pensioners

In 2005, the government for the first time increased pension for public servants who were to retire under the sixth National Pay Scale (NPS). The subsequent NPS's in 2009 and 2015 also saw increase in pension. All these increments caused some level of disparity among pensioners, but the eighth in 2015 did so the most.

To put it in context, a pensioner retired under third NPS attaining the highest pay of the seventh grade now draws Tk 4,050 per month, while pensioners with the same status and pay scale retired under the eighth NPS draw Tk 28,534. The pension of eighth NPS is equivalent to or more than 390 percent of that of the fourth, 260 percent of that of fifth, 219 percent of that of the sixth and 194 percent of that of the seventh NPS.

The man who retired under third NPS is now 85-89 years old. Those who retired under the fifth or above are also now around 70. These retirees are incapable of doing any job or business. Many of them are detached from their families because their children are also now old and retired. These pensioners have no one to look after them.

Therefore, we appeal to the government to increase their pension so that disparity among pay scales reduces to a reasonable level.

Wahidul Islam Akhand, By email

IN SEARCH OF A benevolent reader



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

WRITERS are not usually the most beloved of creatures to those who know them. The reason, as Samaresh Majumdar once explained, has something to do with how they source material for their writings. He said he collected material from real-life events, social gatherings and personal anecdotes confided in him, and used that in his novels, sometimes to the chagrin of his sources. Creative writers need "inspiration" and even when something, say, the idea for a story, seems to come out of nowhere, it can be traced back to a flash of inspiration not too dissimilar to the kind that their counterparts in nonfiction occasionally need.

The history of modern literature is also a history of "literature in a hurry"—in this case, newspaper columns. There are clearly marked differences between the two although that line tends to get blurred sometimes. For example, how will Zafar Iqbal or Anisul Hoque be remembered 50 years from today—as fiction writers or columnists? It's not a foregone conclusion as one might think. Despite a number of bestsellers to his credit, in recent years, Zafar Iqbal has acquired a loyal fan base thanks to his columns published by different newspapers and online news portals. Away from home, you have countless examples of writers turning to occasional column-writing for the benefits that it offers: a continued by-line exposure, increased visibility leading to a strong following, a chance to intervene in critical matters.

The thing is, whatever mode of writing you are into, you follow a common pattern: you forage for material to base your work on, develop and polish your content, have it edited, and wait for feedback once it is in the public domain. But to what end?

Oscar Wilde had once famously quipped that the difference between journalism and literature is that journalism is unreadable and literature is not read. What he said over a century ago may sound prophetic if compared with the current state of affairs in the writing business. Today, readers are in awfully short supply but the same cannot be said about writers. Readers are the Holy

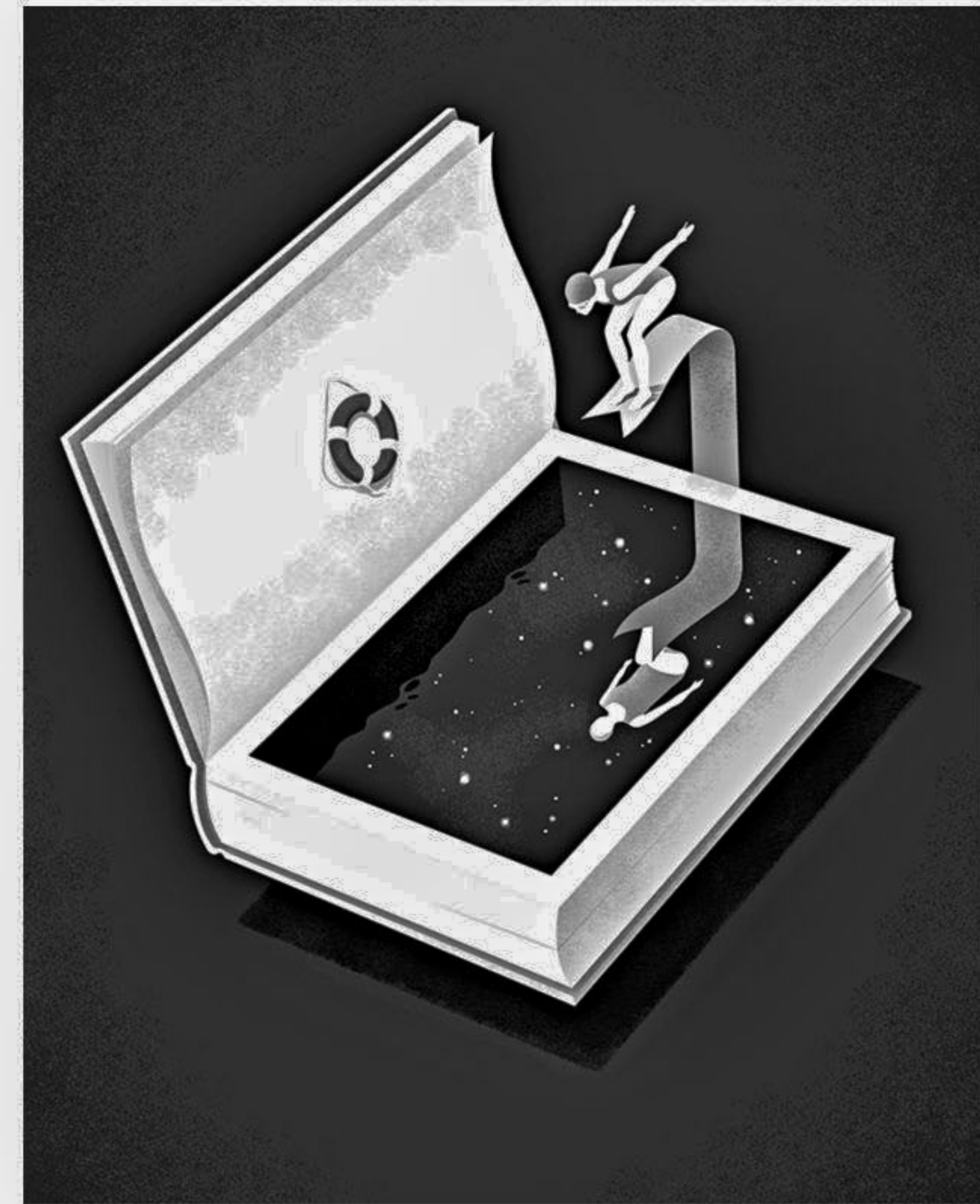


ILLUSTRATION: ANDREA DE SANTIS/BEHANCE

Grails in an otherwise unholy industry plagued by mediocrity and cheap publicity. Increasingly, the urge to have readers is becoming as genuine as that for anything fundamental in our life.

A writer is no longer a private person. A writer is a public figure—a celebrity, if you will. But the industry being a free-for-all, most writers today are deeply invested in the outcome of their product rather than the product itself. You're either that or you run the risk of being irrelevant, elbowed out of the limelight by your more interactive and self-promoting counterparts. Once, before there was Internet in Bangladesh, a book's success depended on how well it had been received and how profound its impact was on society. Writers, on their part, used to rely on literary addas and book reviews to connect with their readers. Their works spoke for themselves. Now it's them who are doing

the speaking, mainly because somewhere along the way both writers and readers have lost their confidence in each other.

It is this crisis of confidence that has forced publishers, editors and writers to seek recourse to the secret corridors of the hearts of their readers. What is it that a reader wants from a writer? It's like asking what women look for in the man of their dreams—the answers to both are never simple. Is it, then, surprising that the most frequently asked question about Facebook is how to boost your fan count or get people to like and share your posts? The idea is, social media will help you get people to love what you have so lovingly produced: your books or columns. True, social media has empowered the voiceless but it has also enabled those with a loud voice to speak ever more loudly, for better or for worse, notably an emerging breed of tech-savvy writers who would make it virtually

impossible for you to ignore their ingeniously manufactured promotional posts.

I know some people who never fail to remind how many times their posts/columns have been shared online or how many "followers" they have. And February is like Christmas for these people. I remember my newsfeed getting bombarded with promotional posts on books during last February. A writer-friend of mine had a few unique tricks up his sleeve. He began each of his posts with a touching story from his past, which invariably culminated with a "news" update about his latest book. It's like a story within a story. The news was, of course, not as touching: his surprise at having been approached by an autograph-seeker, getting photographed shoulder-to-shoulder with a famous author, or merely an acknowledgement of his presence in the bookstall. This happened almost every day. I watched helplessly as my newsfeed got invaded by video diaries, book launch alerts and Messenger updates. All these publicity tactics at the expense of personal privacy and basic sense of decency are leading to...well, not much.

According to Bangla Academy, some 3,646 new books were released in the Ekushey Boi Mela 2018 while the total sale of books amounted to Tk 70 crore, a paltry amount given the high footfalls on the venue. Although sale is not the only indicator of the condition of this industry, the insanity that surrounds it says a thing or two about the industry as well. In the newspaper business, the desperate hunt for readers is also an indication of its inherent vulnerability. When attracting readers by any means necessary becomes the goal, quality is bound to suffer.

In his 1921 absurdist drama, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello talks about six members of a broken family—six "unfinished characters" who are in search of an author to "finish their story" in the way it should be. Today, that process appears to have been put in reverse. Authors are now in search of readers—benevolent readers who will grace their works with kind attention and make them feel valuable and in control of their life. The world has indeed changed a lot.

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Email: badiuzzaman.bd@gmail.com

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

India's war on antimicrobial resistance



ABDUL GHAFUR

LAST year, a 30-year-old teacher suffering from a severe bloodstream infection arrived in my emergency room for treatment. The woman had been in and out of local clinics with a stubborn chest infection and fever, and by the time I examined her, she was receiving chemotherapy for blood cancer. Instinctively, I treated her infection with an antibiotic from a group of drugs known as "carbapenems," strong medicines commonly prescribed to people who are hospitalised. But after further tests I discovered that she was carrying a strain of bacteria that is resistant to most antibiotics in our therapeutic arsenal. There was no option but to treat her with drugs that I knew would be largely ineffective; she was lucky to recover.

Sadly, many patients are not so fortunate. Around the world, people are being admitted to hospitals with infections that do not respond to antibiotics, and relatively benign germs—like *Klebsiella* and *E coli*—have become potent killers, shrugging off medicines that in the past easily contained them.

Antibiotics are different from almost every other class of drug in one important and dangerous respect: the more they are used, the less effective they become. When microbes are repeatedly exposed to antibiotics, the bacteria eventually win.

Each year, an estimated 750,000 people die from antimicrobial-resistant (AMR) infections, and the death toll will climb unless the global health community acts decisively. In the absence of detailed and reliable reporting from all countries, the British government commissioned a series of reports on AMR, estimating that by 2050, as many as ten million people could die annually from AMR complications. Moreover, the economic impact of "superbug" outbreaks could top USD 100 trillion; low-income countries would suffer disproportionately.

Uneven and unregulated antibiotic usage is one of the most important

reasons behind the AMR crisis. In developed countries, doctors prescribe antibiotics for even the most basic maladies, like the common cold. Stronger regulations of antibiotics prescriptions in these countries, like those implemented in Finland several decades ago, could help to mitigate resistance.

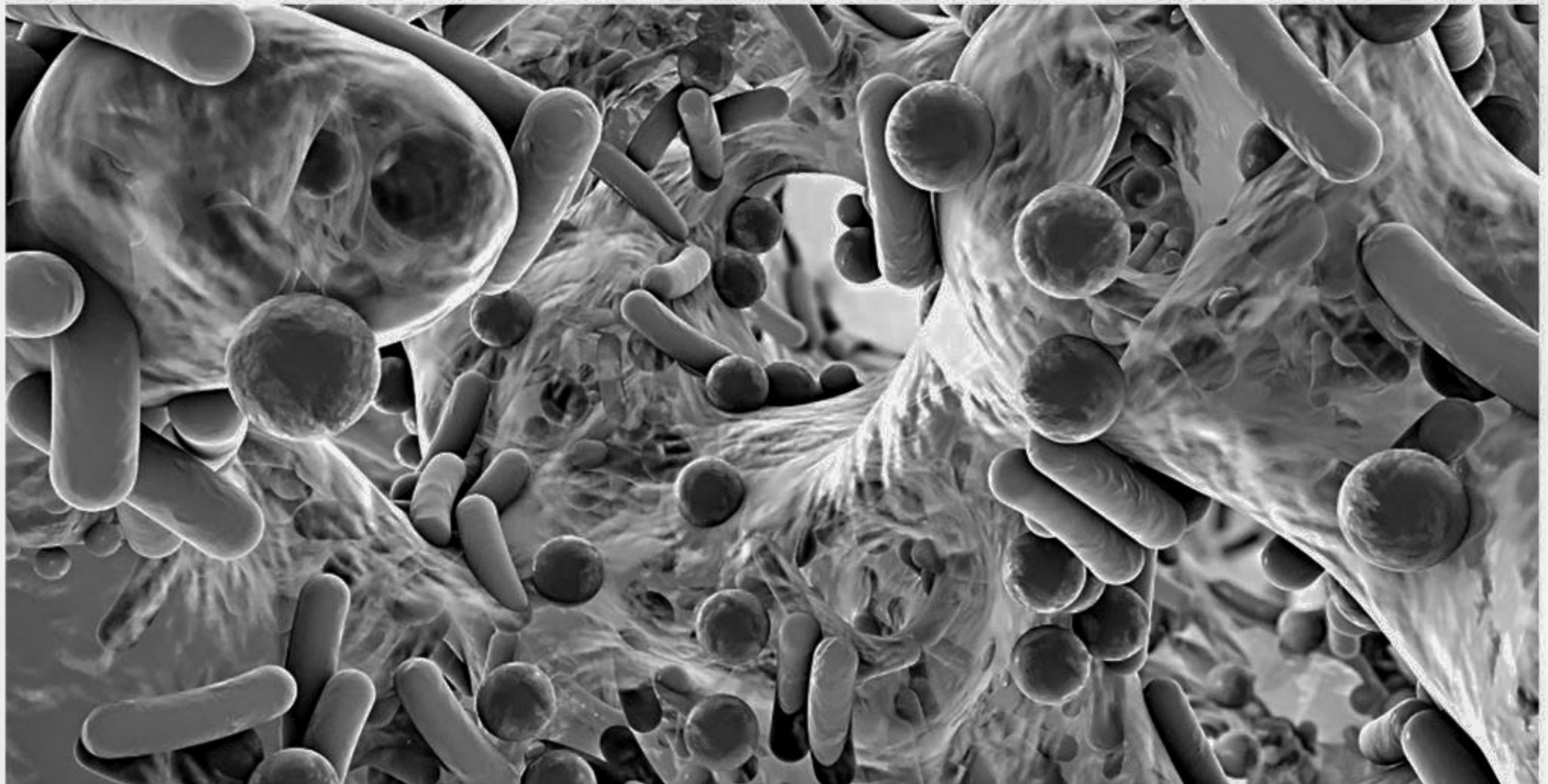
Yet such rules alone will not be enough, because in much of the developing world, antibiotics can be obtained without a prescription. Inequalities in access to medicine, excessive use, and poor sanitation services complicate the problem further.

The second tier includes carbapenems, which, as my patient last year discovered, are increasingly ineffective. And the third group, including colistin and other "last resort" antibiotics, are drugs that must be used sparingly and only for medical emergencies.

Clearly, guidelines are an important first step in addressing the global AMR challenge. But governments, medical associations, and hospitals must also commit to tackling the antibiotic crisis together. That is what the health-care community in India is doing. In 2012, India's medical societies adopted the

packaging of antibiotics must be improved to ensure that patients are better informed about the drugs they are taking. India's Red Line campaign—which demands that prescription-only antibiotics be marked with a red line, to discourage the over-the-counter sale of antibiotics—is a step forward.

Meanwhile, health-care communities in advanced economies must find the political will to reduce unnecessary antibiotic use by people, and in agriculture. "Last resort" antibiotics should never be used as growth promoters in livestock farming, but



Biofilm of antibiotic resistant bacteria, closeup view.

PHOTO: DR KATERYNA/FOTOLIA

And when farmers use antibiotics to speed the growth of chickens and other livestock, drug-resistant germs find new ways to enter the environment.

In 2017, the World Health Organization, in an effort to address these challenges, classified antibiotics into three groups and issued guidance for how each class of drugs should be used to treat 21 of the most common infections. For example, the first of these groups consists of medicines that should always be available to patients, preferably by prescription. Amoxicillin, the preferred medicine for respiratory-tract infections in children, is in this

Chennai Declaration, a set of national recommendations to promote antibiotic stewardship. Last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi used his monthly radio address to urge doctors to join the effort.

Still, the AMR threat remains real; containing it will require concerted effort. In India, for example, we must implement the regulation, formulated by the Indian Health Ministry, controlling over-the-counter sales of antibiotics. The WHO's advice should strengthen support for this move.

Moreover, as a recent study co-authored by the Public Health Foundation of India argues, the

achieving this will require significant changes to current practices.

Superbugs should strike fear in doctors and patients everywhere, but fear cannot lead to paralysis. The next time a patient arrives in my ward with a treatable infection, I need to be certain that the medicine I prescribe will be effective. Luck should never play a role in a patient's recovery.

Abdul Ghafur, a Chennai-based infectious disease consultant, is the coordinator of the Chennai Declaration.

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