

Questionable deaths of female migrant workers

Families have no one to turn to for answers

THE suicide rate amongst the Bangladeshi women migrant workers in Saudi Arabia has shot up 17 times over the course of three years (2016-2019). In fact, the total number of deaths of female migrant workers in that country (up to June 2019) is already 60. The sad part of this tale is that families of these workers are left with unanswered questions about how their loved ones died. Mostly, a message is sent by the employer, but we do know from reports by rights organisations that many domestic workers face a lot of problems, and allegations of sexual and physical abuse have risen from those who have returned from the Middle East alive.

It is up to our missions in Middle East countries to take up the matter with their respective counterparts to make sure employers respect the rights of our workers because people are dying here. We love to show off the billions of dollars we earn through foreign remittance but fail our expatriate workers every step of the way when they go to foreign lands and suffer mistreatment there. Without a proper investigation into these cases of "stroke" and "suicide", we will never know how they suffered and what is causing so many deaths abroad. If we want Bangladeshi women to go abroad as household help, it is the duty of our government and missions abroad to provide them with a legal safety net in the destination countries, without which the body count is likely to continue or even rise.

An impressive initiative

School for underprivileged children in Patuakhali

It is encouraging to learn about an initiative taken by some undergraduate students of local colleges of Patuakhali to educate the out-of-school children of their area. They started Golachipa Swapno Puron Bidyaniketon, a school for underprivileged children, in March 2017 with 28 students, and within two years of its establishment, it is now providing primary education to 85 students, 47 of them girls.

While Bangladesh has made considerable progress over the past decades in primary school enrolment, still a large number of children remain out of school due to extreme poverty and other social adversities. Although the common perception is that the number of out-of-school children is declining, approximately 2.9 million children of primary school age (6-10 years), according to the UNICEF, do not regularly attend school. Amid such a situation, schools such as this one gives children a fresh chance to get primary education. The remarkable example set by these undergrads should be emulated by others in our society.

Since the school is providing its students with opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activities such as singing, dancing, poetry recital, etc., alongside academic lessons, as well as providing them with snacks at the end of their lessons, children are willingly attending school. The school hours are also convenient for the students, many of whom have to work with their parents in the morning to earn a living. However, maintaining the expenses of the school has not been easy for the management with the increasing number of students attending it. Therefore, the government as well as the wealthy people of society should come forward to support the school and other such socially-driven initiatives. Small initiatives like these can go a long way in bringing about positive change in society.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedadlystar.net

Take measures to prevent further outbreak of dengue

Dengue fever has taken the form of an epidemic: every day, more people are getting infected, and hospitals are filled to the brim. The situation looks quite grim, to say the least. Last Thursday, while inaugurating the Anti-Mosquito and Cleanliness Week, the mayor of Dhaka South City Corporation warned that exaggerated figures and numbers are being reported. By contrast, the High Court on July 17 said that the outbreak is nothing short of an epidemic. Differing viewpoints about numbers and the scale of the issue do not help the situation, however. The fact is the dengue problem has reached an alarming stage, and it has been neglected for a while with the officials failing to procure the right insecticides.

The good news is that the city corporation is working to distribute free aerosol sprays among city schools. These measures must be stepped up to prevent the breeding of Aedes mosquito. The World Health Organization (WHO), which recently called the situation in Bangladesh "alarming," has recommended measures such as environmental management, street cleansing, solid waste management, mosquito-proofing of water-storage containers. All citizens must take these measures seriously and start playing their parts in combating further spread of this lethal mosquito-borne disease.

Nur Jahan, Chattogram



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

The curious case of milk contamination



TASNEEM TAYEB

A recent report published by a local newspaper had us sitting up on our proverbial chairs. Titled "Study finds carcinogenic element creating whitening agents in detergents,"

it was about a research study that said that almost all the detergent brands available in the market contain a fabric whiter, called fluorescent whitening agent (FWA), which can lead to severe health repercussions for the users. The agent can cause allergy, skin diseases, kidney diseases, gene-related complications and even lead to carcinogenic reactions in human bodies!

Another report is also currently doing the rounds on the Internet: it says that traces of detergent have been found in batches of pasteurised packaged milk. This new report triggers the inevitable question: what if the detergents found in milk samples contained this same fluorescent whitening agent? If this agent can cause so much damage only through external contact, what havoc can it wreak if consumed by humans?

Another question follows, quite logically: for how long had we been consuming contaminated milk, and why did the concerned authorities—read Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI)—not test milk earlier for cadmium, antibiotics and other harmful elements found in recent tests run on our milk supplies?

While there is no concrete answer to the first set of questions, the second question can be explained easily. BSTI's milk testing parameters are 17 years old. The government agency for controlling the standard of service and quality of goods, as per parameters set in 2002, can only test milk for nine variables, while developed countries can test milk against 20 to 30 parameters. And the nine parameters in question are some of the most basics of tests, like percentage of milk fat, milk protein, solubility and coliform, among others.

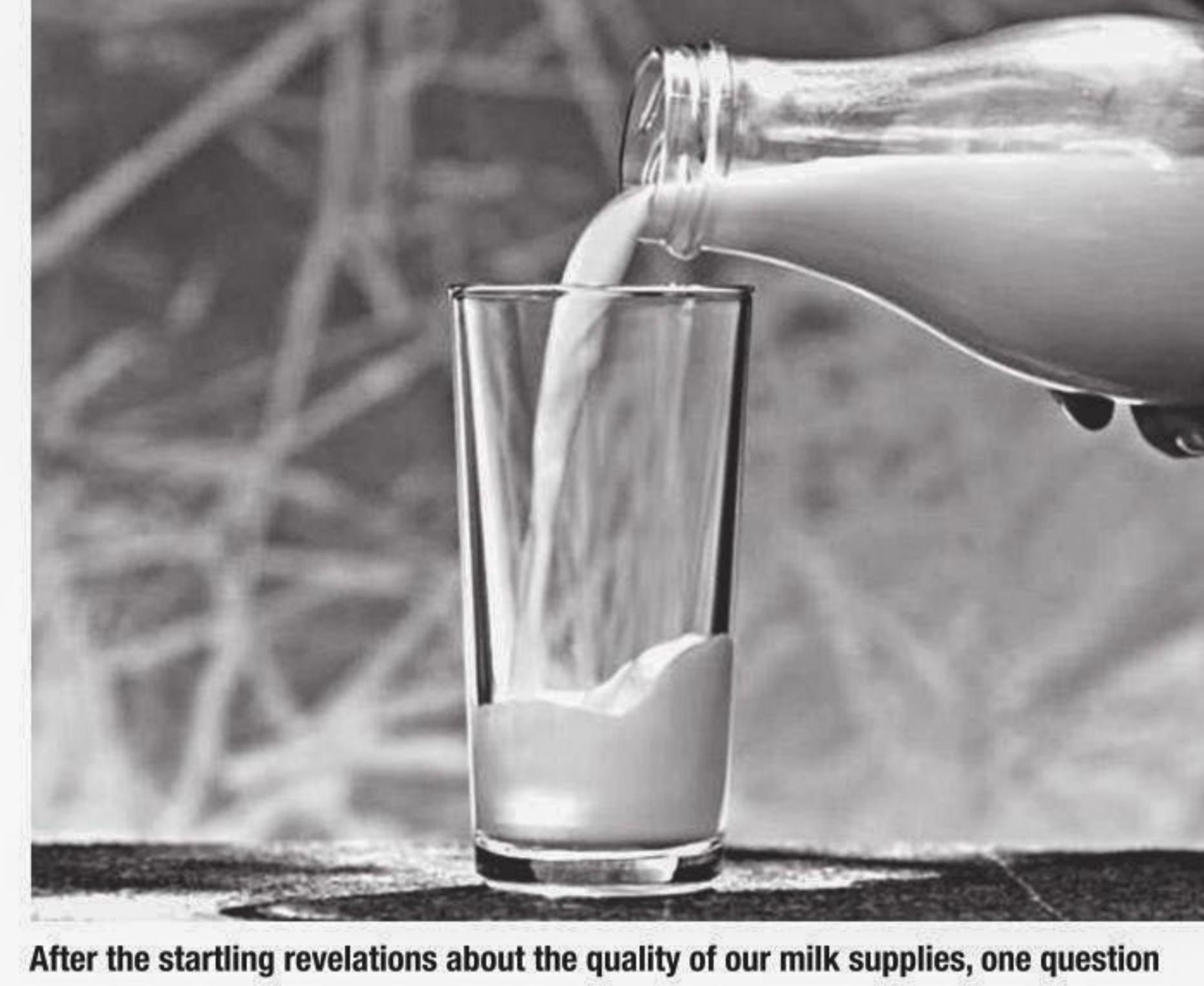
Our next-door neighbour India, for example, can test milk against 23 quality and chemical parameters and 18 chemical adulterants, while in terms of detection of pesticides in food items, it can detect up to 300 different kinds. Singapore, on the other hand, can detect up to 500 different

types of pesticides in food items.

The BSTI's website says that it is the "National Standards Body (NSB) in Bangladesh." And nearly 1,000 experts from government, academic, research, consumer, NGO and standards application bodies bring their expertise to the standardization process. The website further states, "BSTI is the member of ISO since 1974, IEC Affiliate Plus member since 2012 and National Codex Contact Point (NCCP) of Codex Alimentarius Commission in Bangladesh since 1975 as well as the member of South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO), which is the regional standards

metal, chemical, antibiotic contamination in milk, then on what basis can they certify that a milk brand is safe for human consumption? With these questions in mind, when a BSTI senior official involved with the milk standard testing issue was contacted, he declined to entertain the questions.

Prof ABM Faroque, the immediate past director of Biomedical Research Centre at the Faculty of Pharmacy, Dhaka University, who on June 25 unveiled a study that found detergent and three different types of antibiotics in milk certified by BSTI, said that milk testing parameters should be reviewed and revised every five years



After the startling revelations about the quality of our milk supplies, one question that comes to mind is: for how long have we been consuming contaminated milk?

organization of SAARC countries."

One wonders why—despite having so many resources, and association with so many bodies, including the SARSO—BSTI could not realise that its milk testing parameters were outdated, to say the least, and therefore needed to be revised. Why did the concerned government bodies not review the parameters in the last 17 years? One needs only to look at the milk testing parameters of our neighbouring countries to identify which new parameters need to be brought under BSTI's jurisdiction to test milk.

And if BSTI is not authorised or equipped to test the presence of heavy

in order to make milk standard testing up-to-date, and get it up to par with international standards.

Unfortunately, Prof Faroque had to face severe backlash from various quarters, including a government official, who threatened to take legal action against him after the study findings were made public. Wasi Uddin, an additional secretary at the Department of Livestock Services, was reported to have said, "Bring the publication to the ministry within a week if you have published the findings in a peer-reviewed journal. Otherwise, legal actions will be taken against you."

It has also been suggested that Prof

Faroque is working for "vested quarters" to destroy Bangladesh's dairy industry. Such belligerent commentary from various quarters is not only disappointing but also alarming, since it reflects the inability of these quarters to take the study findings of Biomedical Research Centre constructively and seek the way forward to address these problems to strengthen standards compliance in the dairy industry.

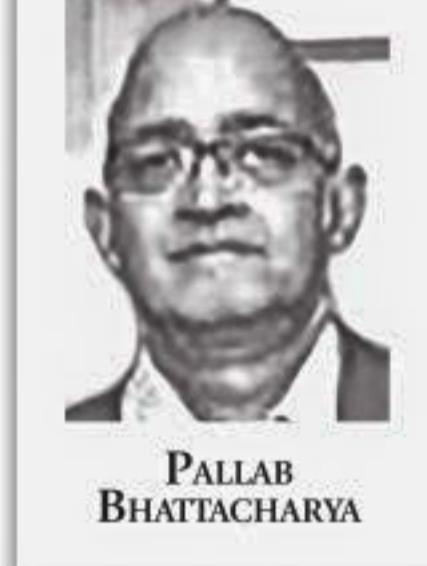
But can detection alone solve the problem of adulterated milk? Taufiqur Rahman, former director of BRAC Dairy, suggested that while detergent and fat contamination can be done artificially, the heavy metal and pesticides reported to have been found in milk are a form of natural adulteration or contamination. The cows are fed normal drinking water which at times contains heavy metal elements; cow feed may also contain antibiotics and other harmful elements which are ingested in cow milk. Often, cows are fed antibiotics to treat mastitis. Veterinarians recommend that cows on antibiotic should not be milked, but unscrupulous individuals often do not pay heed to their advice and sell contaminated cow milk to customers.

This brings us to the issue of milk value chain in Bangladesh. While BSTI can set standards for milk quality, it cannot, however, oversee the supply chain, claim industry sources. Strict monitoring and compliance measures are required to ensure that milk being supplied by the dairy farmers is safe for consumption. The government must come forward with guidelines and enforcement procedures in order to make sure the supply chain process meets the basic standards.

With the test results suggesting that milk is contaminated and adulterated, it is now essential for the authorities concerned to realise that it is not the right time for bickering. It is time for action—action to initiate drives and programmes with the concerted efforts of all, including relevant government agencies, private dairy businesses, and non-government organisations working in this field, to educate our farmers on the importance of healthy and controlled rearing of cows. It is time to empower BSTI with the right equipment to test milk for all relevant contamination and adulteration possibilities. Otherwise, reports such as these will come and go, sacrificed at the altar of the nation's chronic short attention span.

Tasneem Tayeb works for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is @TayebTasneem.

Wait for finality to NRC gets longer



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE Indian Supreme Court's decision on July 23 to extend by one month (from July 31 to August 31) the deadline for publication of the final National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam was quite

expected. The new component in the court order was the rejection of the pleas of the federal Indian government and the Assam state authorities for sample re-verification of 20 percent of the names included in the NRC in districts bordering Bangladesh, and ten percent in the remaining districts.

What was common among the federal Indian government and Assam authorities, as also NRC Coordinator Prateek Hajela, was the request for timeline extension. But their reasons varied. Hajela cited the prevailing flood situation in large parts of Assam and wanted more time to complete the apex court-mandated and supervised exercise of updating the 1951 NRC. But he was not on the same page with the federal and state governments, which joined hands in demanding permission from the Supreme Court bench of Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi and Justice RF Nariman for the sample re-verification exercise to set right the "wrongful inclusions and exclusions" of names during the NRC updating.

To press their request before the top court for re-verification, Attorney General KK Venugopal contended that the names of several illegal immigrants have been included in the NRC. Similarly, India's Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, who represented Assam government in the matter, attributed the inclusions to local influence and suggested NRC officials might have been hesitant to delete their names from the list. Both the federal and Assam governments have argued that India "cannot be the refugee capital of the world." Venugopal also drew the apex court's attention to the fact that the court, in its order in August 2018, had favoured a re-verification of ten percent of the names. He said that since there "was some variance" in enumeration in Assam's districts bordering Bangladesh, a re-verification exercise would set doubts at rest.

The federal and Assam governments were so keen on the sample re-verification of at least 20 percent of the names in districts bordering Bangladesh and ten percent in other districts that they had

even agreed to scale down their demand to at least five percent re-verification, which they argued could be done within the one-month extension of the deadline for final NRC publication.

During the previous hearing in the case last week, the Assam government had told the apex court that it received several complaints about the alleged connivance of local-level NRC officials conducting the NRC updating exercise to include and exclude the names, and hence its demand for sample re-check. But the NRC Coordinator did not agree and said these officials were not drawn from local areas. In its July 10 report to the Supreme Court, the Coordinator said that 27 percent re-verification of names, which translates to 80 lakh in real terms, had taken place in the process of deciding on the claims for

for hearing on another contentious issue related to the NRC: whether or not to allow inclusion of a person in the NRC if the name of none of his or her parents figures in the category of doubtful voter or declared foreigner. The final draft NRC, made public on July 30 last year, had 28,963,877 names and left out a little more than four million people. Another one lakh names were deleted recently during the adjudication of claims and objections.

The NRC updating exercise began six years ago as a fall-out of the 1985 Assam Accord, hammered out to end years of violent agitation against illegal immigrants in the state, with the objective of identifying and deporting the immigrants who came to Assam between January 1966 and March 24, 1971.



PHOTO: REUTERS/ADNAN ABIDI

inclusion in the final NRC and objections to those claims.

The top court bench finally went along with the NRC Coordinator and rejected the federal and Assam governments' re-verification demand. "The court does not feel the need for re-verification of the draft NRC. We are more than satisfied with the work done in the state," the bench observed on July 23.

Hajela has told the apex court that the public engagement for settling the claims and objections to inclusion of names is nearing its end, and a supplementary list of names with additional inclusions and exclusions would be published on July 31. At the end of filing of claims and objections as on December 31 last year, about 36.2 lakh claims for inclusion and nearly two lakh objections were filed.

The apex court has also fixed August 7

According to the Assam Accord, the voting rights of those who entered the state between January 1966 and March 1971 would be put on hold for ten years and those who came after March 1971 would be deported.

The NRC is being updated to include those who can prove that they or their ancestors were in Assam before March 25, 1971. What is noteworthy is that this is the date when the Pakistan army's "Operation Searchlight" began in Bangladesh, triggering the liberation war after which millions of people took shelter in different Indian states, particularly in border states.

What emerges from the contentions of the Indian and Assam governments is that the NRC is far from being flawed and that the process of updating may have been marred by irregularities and corruption.

But then these irregularities are perhaps not entirely unexpected primarily because of two reasons: one, the exercise is very large, and two, it is heavily dependent on the bureaucratic machinery. Thirdly, it has also been argued by the authorities in the apex court that many genuine inhabitants of Assam remained outside the NRC because they did not have adequate documents to prove their places of birth or legacy papers. This, too, is not surprising in a country that has not had a traditionally documentation culture. One of the main reasons for India to introduce the multi-purpose Aadhar identity card is precisely to end the absence of documentation habit. The question is: are these shortcomings big enough to mar the entire NRC updating project?

On July 17, Home Minister Amit Shah told the Rajya Sabha that the government would identify illegal immigrants and deport them as per international law. The illegal immigrants and the NRC issues figured in the Bharatiya Janata Party's manifesto for the recent parliamentary polls and the Indian President's speech to the budget session of the current parliament.

There are reports that Shah is likely to flag the issue of illegal immigrants during his proposed meeting with Bangladesh Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan in New Delhi on August 7. Ahead of the Shah-Khan meeting, the Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai said in a written reply to a question in Lok Sabha on July 23 that 10,746 infiltrators were intercepted in the last five and a half years from January 2014, along India's border with Bangladesh, an overwhelming majority of them being in West Bengal.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for *The Daily Star*.