

Why paddy prices are still low?

Get the middlemen out of the way

DESPITE a raft of measures undertaken by the government, which include a 20 percent incentive on rice export and Tk 3,000 crore subsidy for farmers to buy agricultural tools, the price of paddy has remained low for the past three months. A report in this paper has found that a number of problems are hindering farmers from getting a fair price for their paddy. The mere decision to export rice has not borne fruit because the export market is already dominated by regional players like India and Pakistan, both countries that offer far more attractive prices than Bangladesh. One of the biggest allegations that has surfaced is the fact that farmers have no way of selling directly to the government, because of the presence of local influential politicians who bar them from selling directly to government depots. Due to pressure from powerful syndicates, farmers have allegedly been forced to sell their paddy at throwaway prices, which are actually lower than the cost of production. These syndicates then sell the paddy to rice mills at government-fixed rates reaping windfall profits at the expense of farmers. Indeed, a particular Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) had sent an official letter of complaint to the Rajshahi Deputy Commissioner on August 27 where it was stated that the UNO was physically obstructed from reaching and buying paddy from farmers. What has become abundantly clear is that the measures taken by authorities have failed to deliver because what is really needed is to break these syndicates that are backed up by local influential people. Unless, the government takes legal steps against these interest groups, farmers will continue to sell their paddy at a loss and consumers at the other end of the spectrum will remain hostage to high prices. The difference between what is paid to the farmer and charged from the consumer, is profit for syndicates and this is where action is needed promptly and strongly.

Electrocution kills thousands yearly

Nearly as many are disabled too

WE seldom give much thought to the people who are disabled or who die due to electrocution by live wire that are found dangling on roads. This is so because this cause of death does not hog the headlines when we consider death or injury by other more common causes of death, for instance, traffic accidents. But the situation is much more dire than we are led to believe. According to a government study conducted in 2016 that interviewed some 330,000 people, it was found that 7,163 people were permanently disabled. The number of people killed stood at 9,210 and some 2,70,622 others were injured due to electric shocks. These are serious numbers. What an associate professor of burn and plastic surgery at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) tells us is that more than a third of the people admitted at DMCH are electric burn patients. Electrocution is considered by physicians to be one of the most devastating injuries since the bulk of the victims are maimed for life. Indeed, DMCH alone treats nearly 35,000 people for burns every year. Electrocution can and does result in amputation of entire limbs and all this has been going on for years. That people at large lack very basic sense and are generally unaware of handling live wires, is plain to see. When we factor in poor management by utility agencies in keeping such live wires out of people's reach merely compounds this problem. Working class people and children bear the full brunt of these dangerous dangling wires and unless serious effort is made to raise public awareness, casualty and injury rates will continue to climb. Laws also need to be enacted and enforced that would make building owners or construction site personnel liable for leaving live wires within reach of people.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Take action against the trade syndicates

There are a number of trade syndicates that operate in our country. They try to control the supply of each product in the market for their own benefit. When these traders intentionally reduce supply, product prices tend to go up exorbitantly, causing all sorts of suffering for ordinary people. One recent example of this has been the sudden rise in the price of onions. People bought one kg of onion for Tk 100-120 in the last few days—whereas the price previous to that was Tk 60-80 per kg. Such ridiculous price hikes have become common in our country. Thus, if we want to eradicate this problem once and for all, there are certain steps that need to be taken. Monopolisation of various sectors must be done away with. The monopolies that control prices must be broken down. And dependency on India, or any other neighbouring country for that matter, must be reduced. I urge the respective ministry to take stern action against those illegal traders who are responsible for this recent price hike. Moreover, the government should take appropriate measures to control product prices and ensure people are not exposed to such suffering in future. It is about time something was done to permanently solve this recurring problem.

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Onions should not make you cry

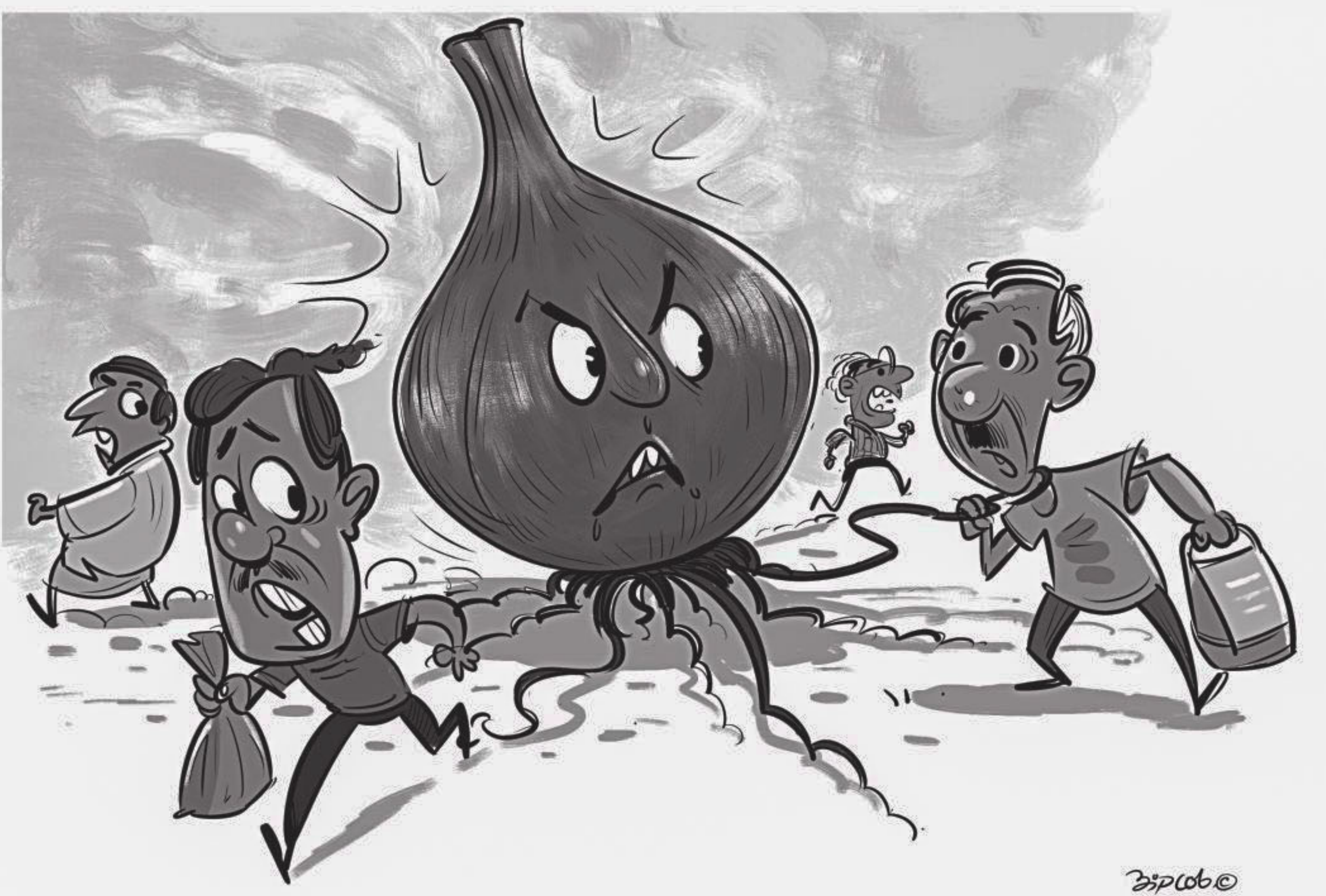
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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

WHEN things hit rock bottom humans have a tendency to find ways to laugh at them. It is related to that ambivalence of a bizarre event when you don't know whether to laugh or cry. When it comes to onions selling for Tk 120 per kg the first instinct is to want to cry and this is not the kind of involuntary crying while slicing onions, which in this particular instance would be a welcome situation. Welcome as it would mean you could afford the onions to cry while cutting them, which is no laughing matter. No, this crying is one of utter despair that one of the most important spices in our cuisine that gives that essential kick and flavour to our bhaji, bharta, salads, dopiaza, byriani, etc., would cost as much as half a chicken! Right after getting over the shock of such outrageous onion inflation people of course started making fun of the whole thing, as we inevitably do when there's nothing we can do about anything. One elderly woman, a cook, joked that her daughter-in-law called in panic a few days ago announcing the unbelievable price of onion as if the ultimate apocalypse was imminent. The mother-in-law, wizened and jaded by years of experience and many an onion crisis retorted with a sardonic laugh: "cook the meals without onion". Which, one thinks, is not a bad idea. Why, after all, cry about a mere

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vegetable/spice when there are so many other far more crucial food items to feel devastated about? Like rice, our staple, for instance—with farmers not getting a fair price for their rice because some sneaky middlemen always beat them to it, buying the rice for cheap and then selling to the government at a higher price. Thus we have the irony of the very people who grow our rice and abundant amounts of it, going hungry because of the knavery of a few. So plenty to cry about there. But can we really just forget about the grief onions or rather the lack of them have caused? Though this time much of the crisis in supply was because India, which supplies a large portion of the market (because we can't grow enough to meet the demand), was itself in a bind because of low yields. But besides that, there are those terrible traders who have hoarded the onions to hike up the prices which have caused many onion lovers to feel like a good bawling session.

Thankfully it seems our government is trying to solve the matter by importing from other countries including Myanmar for reasons unfathomable. Yet one cannot help but think perhaps we should not be so obsessed with certain food items that are not in the category of making all the difference between being adequately fed and going hungry like in the case of rice. During Ramadan despite all the warnings and threats by the government, prices of essentials will go over the moon. Yes, onions again will dominate the news for being so wanted and so pricey, along with green chillies—the paracetamol of all spices in the South Asian region. And again it is because some greedy traders will create an artificial crisis and hike up the prices knowing that rain, hail or storm, the Bangladeshi can never let go of his/her piaju and jhaal muri during Ramadan no matter how bad the heartburn or flatulence.

So what if we just boycotted these spices every time they are unfairly priced? Such a suggestion may be taken as blasphemy for some people who think life just cannot go on without onions and chillies. But before we get all fired up by the lack of fiery spices, let's take a chill pill and at least consider this somewhat-radical move. It would send a message to those unscrupulous traders and middle men that you cannot mess with us anymore and so force them to bring down the prices to avoid large scale losses. It would also give us a chance to be a little more flexible about our taste buds and make us more resilient about our food habits. Admittedly, onions are beautiful as are green chillies and give enticing aroma to our food, not to mention all the health benefits they provide. But the next time they are priced like luxury items, no need to cry over them.

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Corporate training needs a Bangladeshi spin



ANDREW EAGLE

IMPORTING corporate training modules is fraught with danger. It's time to recognise the uniqueness and strengths of Bangladeshi corporate culture, and for training providers to tailor sessions accordingly. For a while, the honey hunters of the Sundarbans took to wearing masks on the backs of their heads. They sought to fool tigers, which usually attack from behind. While the trick of the two-headed human didn't fool the tigers for long, it was such a mask I wished to be wearing at the latest corporate training session. Like the tiger, neo-colonialism hunts with stealth. We begin with a video, random people walking around a hospital, each accompanied by a caption explaining their particular circumstances. One guy has cancer. Another is worried about hospital expenses. A Middle Eastern looking chap is apparently thousands of miles from home. It's a lesson in empathy, we are instructed. Given most of the captions are negative, the video is sad. And yet more than sadness, I feel relief. "This video illustrates one reason

I'm pleased not to live in the west," I think. You see, in the video nobody actually speaks to each other. While it's good to consider that we don't know other people's circumstances, without communication there can be no empathy. Empathy is about putting oneself in somebody else's shoes; it's hardly possible if we don't know what shoes they wear. The video itself demonstrates that in mainstream western corporate culture, empathy has become a bit of a dinosaur. A typical Bangladeshi hospital, especially a public one, is an altogether different scene. In the lifts, strangers chat. They share ailment stories, and stories of a husband's brother's cousin's wife's remarkable recovery. Bedside they share food because it's impolite to eat in front of someone. Medical charts are produced for consultation from just about anybody nearby. It's hardly unusual for a ward visitor to be asked their opinion about a page of indecipherable test results. Bangladesh is about nothing if not communication. Even in a hospital ward, the guy in the next bed will soon be a kind of treatment batch-mate, in a shared hospital experience. Thus before the corporate guy following his western-normal script should be instructing Bangladeshi staff about empathy, perhaps the staff could

instruct him about community spirit, to be found not only in hospitals but also in villages, in Dhaka's little nooks, at the grocery store and in the better local workplaces. Not only will most of the staff of a Bangladeshi company know that so-and-so is about to be married, for example, they'll possibly be invited to the reception. In the west, wedding invitations are unlikely to include colleagues in general. The saddest part is that the trainer is also Bangladeshi. He must know how culturally divorced the training session is. And yet he piously ploughs on. Because it's western? Because it's "developed"? Through the four hours of lecture on time management and teamwork, Bangladesh isn't mentioned much. But on every occasion it is mentioned, it's to say something negative. A case in point is adda. Our trainer tells us what we all know, that Bangladeshi-style adda is not common overseas. Workplace adda is a time waster, we are told. But of course if we look at "out-of-the-box" companies in the west, like some of those in Silicon Valley, they go the extra mile to provide office environments that promote inter-colleague communication. They have to. They know that communication cements team spirit, that it can help minimise staff turnover and sick leave. When it's a joy to arrive at work

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because colleagues are morphed into friends, productivity is a likely winner. Bangladeshi companies are at an advantage here. They don't need gimmicks to promote colleague relations. The local culture does it for them. Adda is not a liability. It is a corporate asset of which wiser western companies would be envious. Having worked in several good Bangladeshi companies, and I note that not all are equal, this western-born human had adjustments to make. Perhaps foremost among them was to learn trust. Back in an Australian office, if I wanted a colleague to do something I'd send them an e-mail as proof that I'd asked on such-and-such a date, in case whatever it was didn't get done. In the Bangladeshi offices where I have worked, many requests are made face to face, in the lift, at the staff canteen, or by visiting a colleague's cubicle. It's been really difficult to let my guard down, to accept that actually people tend to do what they say they will, and that they won't be deliberately making problems for you by saying yes and then not doing the task on purpose. When colleagues in Bangladesh have made mistakes, they tend to apologise, a revelation to me, even in cases where it isn't necessary. Most of all, they tend to focus on collective problem-solving. It's really not Australia. Thus, any Bangladeshi company seeking to implement western corporate culture unfettered is, I believe, set to experience loss. What is needed is corporate training that is culturally specific, that doesn't try to mimic western norms and "solve" western corporate culture problems, but rather recognises the strengths of Bangladeshi society and tries to build upon them in the context of a corporate environment. Such an approach would represent truly constructive corporate development. For me, sadder than a silent western hospital is when Bangladeshis underestimate their home-grown strengths.

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