

WORLD FOOD DAY

Pesticides, heavy metals and a healthy diet

A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

THE world today is observing World Food Day with the theme, “Healthy diet for a Zero Hunger world”. This is a worthy fight to pick, particularly for Bangladesh, a country where we are constantly assailed with news of food adulteration and contamination. The mobile court drives that fine fruit sellers and milk producers for selling contaminated products, and restaurant owners for serving unhygienic and inedible food to the customers, are a testament to the low-quality food that we are consuming day in and day out.

Take, for example, the contaminated milk episode we have experienced recently. In case we need a reminder, a study by Biomedical Research Centre of Dhaka University had found traces of harmful pesticides and antibiotics like ciprofloxacin, azithromycin and levofloxacin that are used to treat bacterial infections in humans, and even lead, in packaged milk of 14 major dairy brands. Following further tests of milk samples—amidst fire and brimstone from various quarters, with a government high-up threatening the lead researcher of the study with consequences and the milk producers “uncovering” foreign conspiracy to tarnish their good names in this chaos—it was found that the 14 brands did indeed contain elements that are harmful for human health. This resulted in the High Court banning production, distribution and sale of pasteurised milk of the said brands for five weeks.

Within days, in a surprising turn of events, the Supreme Court lifted the High Court ban on the 14 milk brands and things returned to normalcy—for everyone, including

the consumers. After the hotchpotch and uncertainty of the preceding weeks, people could finally heave a sigh of relief and go back to their business as usual. The entire milk fiasco was, as this author had written in a previous article, “sacrificed at the altar of the nation’s chronic short attention span.” We are still buying these milk brands from the stores and consuming them with the blissful ignorance of a child—an ignorance that we have chosen over food safety.

Only yesterday, another food adulteration related news made the headlines: high amounts of lead have been found in turmeric powder available in various parts of the country—an indispensable ingredient of Bengali cuisine; a product found in every single Bengali household. The report added that there is no safe consumption level for lead and it is very dangerous for pregnant women and can result in stunted growth of children.

A similar story came into the limelight in 2013, when a reputed local brand of turmeric powder had to recall its products from the local market, because the US’ Food & Drug Administration, the New York Health Department and a private laboratory found excessive amounts of lead (48ppm) in the said turmeric powder brand which had been exported to the US. Later, the brand returned to the market, and was then banned again earlier this year by BSTI followed by a High Court instruction to remove 52 products, which included the turmeric powder brand, for failing quality tests. After retesting though, the ban on the turmeric powder brand was lifted by BSTI, along with two other products.

Incidents like these have become a common scenario in Bangladesh. We have become accustomed to news of this nature, injured to them.

That said, Bangladesh has made great strides in the last few decades in increasing food production. According to government



The problem of contamination starts at as early as the pre-production process, which is why heavy metal elements have been found in cow milk or pesticides used in agriculture and unhealthy chemicals in fresh produce.

PHOTO: STAR

sources, food production has gone up 40.13 million metric tons. The country also ranks 4th in the world as a rice producer. And we stand 3rd in producing fish and vegetables—how safe they are for consumption is an entirely different matter.

Thus one cannot help but wonder, with adulterated food disdainfully making their way into our tables, how close are we to achieving food security beyond the statistics, and in the real world?

There are certainly gaps in the food value chain. And the problem of contamination starts at as early as the pre-production process, which is why heavy metal elements

have been found in cow milk or pesticides used in agriculture and unhealthy chemicals in fresh produce.

According to Prof ABM Faroque, former director of Biomedical Research Centre at the Faculty of Pharmacy, Dhaka University, the heavy metal elements might have found their way into the food chain through the water the cows are made to drink or the low-grade fertilizers we use to grow crops, which contain impure elements. Additionally, the excessive use of pesticide to protect fruits and vegetables from insects can result in contamination, since a portion of the insecticides are absorbed in the produce.

Honking our way through!



FIRDOUSI NAHER

IT’S a pleasantly cool and breezy morning and I look forward to enjoying the weather outside on my way to office. Eager to make the most of it before the rush hour traffic sets in, I leave early. No sooner do I exit the compound than the jarring sound of a horn greets me—a car behind ours, probably urging us to move faster! As we drive through to enter the main road, many more horns await us, despite it being 6:45 in the morning. The unexpectedly cool weather after a long spell of sweltering heat had made me momentarily forget about the annoying horns that plague our daily lives!

Let’s compare this situation with Sukhumvit Road in Bangkok, and Orchard Road in Singapore. Both cities are bustling metropolises like Dhaka and the streets mentioned are amongst their main thoroughfares. But the stark difference is that there is hardly any honking in those locations, even during the busiest time of the day. The roads are clogged just like what we have here in Dhaka, but devoid of the sound of horns. Everyone is patiently waiting to move when their turn comes.

Blaring horns is the norm in the streets of Dhaka, so much so that we have taken it as a way of life. Be it an elderly or a physically challenged person trying to cross the road or some school children on their way, a honk has become mandatory, needed or not. Even in standstill traffic, people blow their horns, as if the car in front had the option of flying through and making way for the honker! So much is the level of intolerance amongst our drivers that even an ambulance on duty is honked at, knowing full well that it may be carrying a patient fighting for life.

The purpose of blowing a horn is to communicate to other drivers and road users about your intentions or to alert them of an impending danger. The appropriate use is to sound a horn which is just audible and only when required. Oblivious to this, our drivers

in Dhaka are incessantly jabbing on their horn pads. The continued use of hydraulic horns, despite being banned, and other weird sounding horns make things even worse. Not only does such unnecessary honking add to the noise pollution but it also adds to the stress level of the city dwellers.

So, why this inappropriate use of horns? Ostensibly, it is the lack of awareness amongst the drivers about the negative effects of blowing horns, in addition to the dearth of social ethics. The level of education amongst most drivers in Bangladesh is very low.

in an hour. The manual control of traffic compounds the menace with the streets getting snarled with vehicles. Ironically, there are electronic traffic signals installed at almost all intersections but these are mostly not in use. Understandably, the duration of wait at traffic signals is erratic and unpredictable. A fifteen- to twenty-minute wait is quite common. Under such circumstances, drivers get impatient and vent their pent-up frustration by honking.

The haphazard parking in the city intensifies the honking nuisance. Dearth

presence in large numbers on the arterial roads create a chaotic state of affairs which have trickle-down effects on the larger roads.

As Dhaka is growing in its journey to become a global city, construction work is an essential component. However, the uncoordinated and haphazard way in which such developmental work is executed adds to the public’s woes. With pedestrians and vehicles similarly trying to manoeuvre their way through roads narrowed by stacked up construction materials or ongoing construction work or potholes or simply haphazard parking, it is not difficult to visualise the madness on the roads—and honking is an outcome of that.

Following traffic rules is the first recommendation that would come through to ease the situation and indeed so. The rules are all there but conditions for implementation need to be made conducive. Dhaka is probably one of the last remaining megacities devoid of an automated traffic signalling system. The traffic light posts, some with countdown timers, were installed several years back at a substantial cost. These need to be synchronised and put in operation with immediate effect. Not only is it physically exhaustive for a policeman to manually control traffic (and certainly inhuman in the scorching heat!) but it is also highly inefficient and ineffective.

In today’s world of machine learning and artificial intelligence, an appropriate signalling system will bring about the much-needed discipline in traffic management. Traffic rule violations must be dealt with strictly and impartially. It is the inconsistent application of rules and regulations that generates impunity amongst drivers which subsequently forces a traffic policeman aiming to control the situation to bodily stop cars from not abiding by the traffic signal—a disheartening situation which can get risky for them.

Infrastructure building works need to be implemented competently and successfully within the shortest possible timeframe with full consideration of road and pavement users. In the event of temporary road closures, notices should be put up in clear view of oncoming traffic and well in advance for

them to take an alternate route. In addition, social media could also be used for such warnings. Currently, Google maps provide the road condition (which is largely smeared in deep red!) but we need measures to minimise the red lines.

An important yet overlooked aspect are the pedestrians and it is the lack of facilities for them which promotes jaywalking. Indeed, a significant proportion of the honking is directed at pedestrians. There is a high need for construction of safe and user-friendly underpasses and foot over-bridges. There have been past instances of underpasses and foot over-bridges being a haven for anti-social elements. While these measures for pedestrian safety entail time, an immediate step could be to have zebra crossings and pedestrian traffic lights at all intersections for ease of safe pedestrian crossing with minimal disruption to vehicular traffic.

There is a dire need to generate awareness on safe and honk-free driving. The message to be inculcated is that human life is precious and must be respected. Unnecessary honking, particularly in quiet zones such as hospitals, residential areas, vicinity of schools and other educational institutions, lowers the quality of life. Massive awareness and training campaigns are needed to instil these values amongst the public and to impart lessons regarding traffic rules, road safety and the hazards of noise pollution. A sincere effort to stop the menace can eventually contribute to alleviating other traffic-related issues, most importantly traffic jam.

Bangladesh’s achievements on the socio-economic front are striking and undoubtedly laudable. But complacency arising from those achievements can become our undoing. The problems discussed in this write-up may seem trivial in comparison to the bigger problems of social welfare, but these do matter in the building of a more civilised nation. It requires a deep-rooted but a hard-to-bring-about change, particularly in our mind-set. Once that happens, it can trigger a series of positive changes that will ultimately hasten our ascent up the development ladder.

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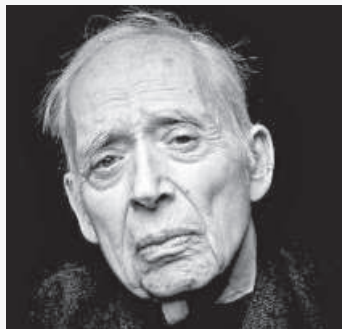
PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Commuters suffer in the sweltering heat as the city experiences a terrible traffic jam.

Owner-driven cars have a significantly lower frequency of horns than chauffeur-driven cars and in Bangladesh it is, unfortunately, the latter that dominate. That said, there are some more deep-rooted issues that prompt drivers to resort to incessant honking. The uncertainty in road conditions is prime amongst them. The speed of travel, particularly in Dhaka city, varies widely and can go down to a minimum of a few yards

of parking facilities is a huge problem in Dhaka. Even many hospitals and medical facilities have no parking arrangements. With cars randomly parked on the roads in total disrespect for other users, fellow travellers are forced to move through the narrowed roads, honking and inching their way through. Slow-moving vehicles such as rickshaws magnify the problem. Although most main roads are out of bounds for rickshaws, their

QUOTABLE Quote



HAROLD BLOOM  
(1930-2019)  
American literary critic and author

Everyone wants a prodigy to fail; it makes our mediocrity more bearable.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Meal  
7 Decree  
11 Verdi opera  
12 Poker cost  
13 Catch stealing  
14 Previously owned  
15 Wall art  
17 Narrow cut  
20 Trappers' wares  
23 Mythical piper  
24 Report for a violation  
26 Check-cashing needs  
27 Galloped  
28 Hornets' org.  
29 Calls forth  
31 Highway sight  
32 Sub shops  
33 Cubicle fixture

34 Lead on  
37 Tadpole's home  
39 Off-distressed one  
43 Formerly  
44 "The Stunt Man" star  
45 Active one  
46 "Of Mice and Men" character

DOWN

1 Nonsense  
2 LAX guess  
3 Coat rack part  
4 Up in the air  
5 Talk drunkenly  
6 Carry  
7 Tap  
8 Bold disrespect  
9 Ignored a fast  
10 Cartoonist Key

16 Roulette rounds  
17 Caught sight of  
18 Soup server  
19 One way to suffer  
21 Oompah producers  
22 Flint output  
24 Cuff site  
25 Scoundrel  
30 Fireplace bit  
33 Evil spirit  
35 Pop star  
36 Blanchett of "The Aviator"  
37 Okra unit  
38 Musician Yoko  
40 Heir, at times  
41 Ivy League student  
42 Director Spike

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

B	E	L	L	E	F	L	O	O	R
A	X	I	O	M	F	L	A	G	E
B	A	S	S	P	L	A	I	E	R
A	M	P	L	O	X	S	E	T	
			V	O	W	E	L		
R	E	L	A	Y	N	E	P	A	L
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			R	I	T	E	S		
A	T	E	N	A	G	B	T	U	
B	A	S	E	J	U	M	P	E	R
E	X	T	R	A		A	R	G	U
L	I	A	R	S		N	O	S	E

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott