

A canal here, a bird refuge there...

One by one, we're losing precious natural resources to greed and apathy

For those keeping score, Saturday's print issue of *The Daily Star* came as another reminder – if reminders were at all needed – that Bangladesh is fast losing its natural resources to pollution, encroachment and degradation of all kinds. It came as a warning that insufficient response from the state is as much responsible for this as reckless conduct by private citizens and entities.

The two reports that were printed shed light into the predicaments of a canal and a bird sanctuary. The first, Karikapara canal, a 3-kilometre stretch of water running through the Khulna city, is on the verge of extinction due to pollution and encroachment. Every day, untreated waste water from a number of wards flows directly into it, while household and industrial garbage is also dumped there, choking the life out of it. This has been causing all sorts of problems both for the aquatic species and residents and farmers of the area. Meanwhile, unchecked encroachment has seen structures illegally built along its banks, narrowing it down to a point that it can no longer be used as a route to transport agricultural produce.

The canal is one of 47 flowing through Khulna city and adjacent areas. The city corporation, which has 31 of them under its jurisdiction, apparently has a list of 460 grabbers and 382 structures built on 26 canals. The question is, why is it sitting on that list? Why was nothing done to protect these canals? Grabbers are usually influential people, which partly explains why eviction drives are so infrequently conducted, or so unsuccessful, in the country. Other state initiatives to protect or revive waterbodies have also been found similarly lacking.

The second report of the day also paints a sad picture of official interventions. It's about a waterbody in Nilphamari known as Nilsagar, once a favourite place for migratory birds. Things changed after 1999 when a project was taken up to develop it into a bird sanctuary, which instead had the opposite effect. Reportedly, as part of the project, century-old indigenous trees were replaced by foreign varieties that neither grow big enough to provide shelter for birds nor produce food for them. As a result, Nilsagar started to attract fewer birds. This shows how insufficient or inappropriate action can lead to disastrous consequences, which natural resources in Bangladesh are no stranger to.

The continued assault on such resources – rivers, canals, hills, hillocks, forests, green spaces, agricultural land, etc. – has been a recurrent theme in Bangladesh's development narrative. Over the last decade or so, we have seen how the triple whammy of pollution, encroachment and bad policy/governance led to indiscriminate destruction and degradation of nature. Numerous warning flags have been raised and ignored, both in equal measure. This is deeply alarming. There is only one way to go following this path: down.

This must change. We urge the government to take a long, hard look at the gap between its environmental commitments and actions/inactions. It must recommit to creating an atmosphere in which all – individuals and institutions – are aware of the impacts of their decisions and held accountable for their failures or transgressions.

Project to modernise farming must work

Farmers need to be motivated and given necessary tools on time

There is no question that the government's project to introduce integrated farming, using modern agricultural tools, is a farsighted initiative. In order to ensure higher yields, mechanisation of farming and cultivating larger plots of land are essential. The traditional farming of fragmented plots is not economically viable because it is not cost-effective to use mechanised farming on separate plots. Thus, some sort of consolidation of land is necessary to make this TK 3,020-crore project work. That is, however, proving difficult to implement. The project has reportedly encountered major bottlenecks in the form of farmers' reluctance to adopt the synchronised farming method.

As a result, a good policy initiative is finding no headway even after two years. One can imagine that the basic groundwork for getting all the farmers on board with this initiative, which was undertaken in 2021, has not been properly done.

The main idea behind the project is to boost crop production as well as reduce the cost of farming by using transplanters, harvesters and other equipment on 50 to 60 acres of land. But farmers are not eager to do away with the aisles separating their plots, which is a prerequisite for the project to work. While the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) has demonstrated how this synchronised farming can be done with good results, by cultivating the hybrid SL-8 variety of Boro on 110 blocks in 61 districts, somehow farmers are still not fully convinced.

The Daily Star's report on this cites farmers in Tangail who alleged that they were ready to form groups among themselves and adopt the mechanised farming method, but they had not received the necessary equipment. The plan is to sell 51,300 machines among farmers at 50-70 percent discounts with subsidies, but as of December 2022, only 16,236 were distributed. This is a major gap and must be addressed immediately.

Having sufficient dialogue with the farmers to motivate them to remove the separating aisles in their plots and adopt this new method is vital. Farmers should be made to understand how efficient and cost-effective mechanised farming can be. This will ultimately lead to greater profits for them. Apart from a vigorous awareness campaign involving all stakeholders, the government must ensure that the farmers receive the various mechanised tools on time and with adequate training on how to use them. To gain their trust in the project, it must ensure that farmers' land rights are in no way jeopardised.

We urge the authorities to reinvestigate the project's implementation with full force. We need reforms like this in our agriculture to ensure our future food security and give our farmers the returns they so deserve for feeding the nation with their arduous efforts. Successful implementation of this project is, therefore, crucial.

Walk the walk to fight AMR



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Back in 2013, the head cardiologist of a renowned hospital in Bangladesh suggested breathing pacemakers as a last resort to keep my grandmother alive. She had developed an infection that turned out to be resistant to antibiotics. My grandmother had spent most of her life in a conservative village where women rarely go to hospitals, since most doctors are male. Instead, they rely on quick remedies like antibiotics, recommended by pharmacists. The pacemaker could only keep her breathing for three more months.

Long before antibiotics were available, a simple wound often meant the end of someone's life due to a bacterial infection. Beginning in the 1950s, greater availability of antibiotics not only changed that, but also reduced child mortality and improved life expectancy rates. Major surgeries or even cancer chemotherapy would not be possible without effective treatment of bacterial infection.

But these lifesaving drugs, when misused, allow disease-causing bacteria and fungi to grow uncontrollably, and no longer respond to antibiotics designed to kill them. This defiance is popularly known as antimicrobial resistance or AMR, and the pathogens that don't respond to a variety of antibiotics are commonly referred to as "superbugs." A Lancet study estimated 1.27 million deaths associated with bacterial AMR in 2019, more deaths than by HIV or malaria.

And yet, globally, the use of antibiotics is still on the rise. A recent study covering 204 countries shows a 46 percent increase (of daily doses per 1,000 people) in antibiotic consumption between 2000 and 2018. South Asia is among the regions where antibiotic resistance continues unabated for all ages.

So, while antibiotic use in high-income countries plunged in recent times, it has increased rapidly in low-income countries. For instance, in high-income countries, the antibiotic consumption rate (daily doses per 1,000 population) dropped by four percent between 2000 and 2015. Conversely, its consumption increased by 77 percent in low-income countries. In the absence of diagnostic facilities in these countries, both doctors and patients trust antibiotics under the assumption that every disease is bacterial.

Unlike many low-income countries, Bangladesh is self-sufficient, with the capacity to produce antibiotics locally.

Besides, the country has a very high pharmacy density (7.2 pharmacies per 10,000 people) compared to other regions, including the EU and the US. People here must also worry about extensive out-of-pocket expenses when it comes to healthcare. Hence, they prefer a quick fix to an illness, such as using antibiotics. Also, more people can now afford expensive antibiotics.

These trends have been exacerbated even more by the pandemic. For instance, the perception of antibiotics as "big" medicine has been one of the

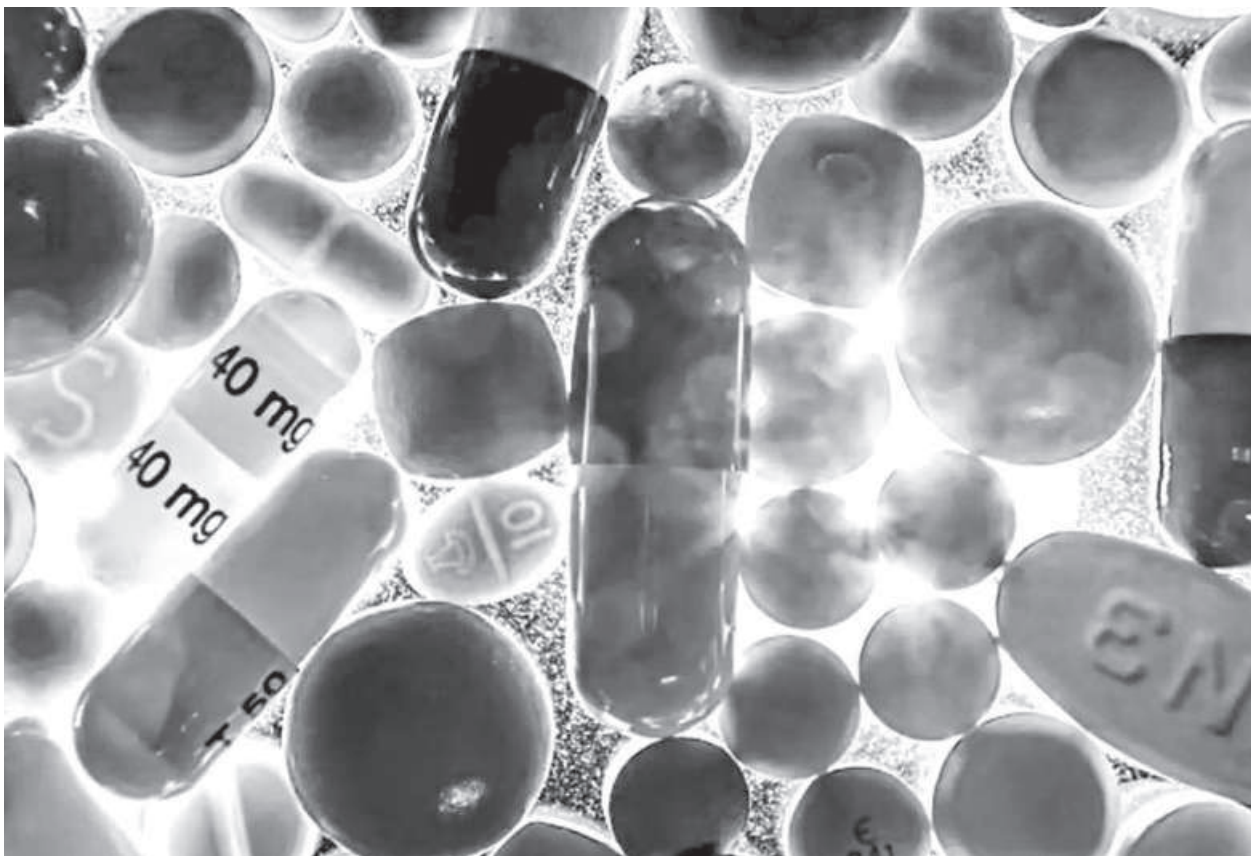


PHOTO: AFP

key social drivers of antibiotic use in Bangladesh during the pandemic. Also, the lack of confidence to treat severe Covid cases and commercial pressure drove the use of expensive antibiotics.

Misuse in the form of overdosing or underdosing is another key concern. A study in rural Bangladesh found that 48 percent of antibiotics purchased were for less than one day's dosage.

World Health Organization data suggest that almost 90 percent of patients in Bangladesh are resistant to ciprofloxacin (one of the leading antibiotics), compared to only 11.5 percent of patients in the UK. Even worse, a professor from Bangabandhu

pharmacies do so either through self-referral or without a prescription. The thriving drug industry and aggressive marketing often push such exploitation. The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) reveals that pharmaceutical companies employ 65 percent of their manpower to influence doctors (and pharmacy owners) to generate prescriptions.

In 2021, the WHO declared AMR as a major public health threat. But it is also highlighted as the overlooked pandemic. Substantial data gap is a major obstacle to global health governance. Most of the studies on AMR rely on a single data source (IQVIA MIDAS) that mostly covers

a decrease in antibiotic utilisation. But this effort must be accompanied by a nationwide awareness-building campaign involving doctors, community influencers, and the media to change the social norm.

The Bangladesh AMR Response Alliance (BARA) was launched in partnership with FAO in 2016 with a similar objective, but their outreach remains very limited. For a broader approach, the Antibiotic Awareness Day in Europe can be a good model. But any further disregard will force vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, and low-income populations to bear the greatest brunt of increasing AMR.

AL's counter-programmes reveal its own insecurities



THE STREET VIEW

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

In a democracy, it is important for a political party to tolerate and respect other parties. When we see that the ruling Awami League lacks such qualities, it becomes evident that Bangladesh's oldest political party is going through a critical phase. One might wonder why I am saying "critical" when the party has been in power for the third consecutive term.

When the BNP started holding divisional rallies protesting against the hike in prices of fuel and daily essentials, the murder of its leaders, and demanding the release of Khaleda Zia, the party received a warm response at the grassroots level. Then, the ruling party showed up with counter-programmes. Consequently, tensions intensified, verging on panic. Although ruling party leaders claimed that the BNP took to the streets with the intention of committing arson and violence, the rallies were found to be largely peaceful. The ruling party's apprehension, however, could not be brushed aside because of the BNP's role in widespread violence and arson preceding the 2014 elections, for which it was roundly criticised at home and

abroad. But this time, the BNP seemed desperate to shake off that stigma by holding peaceful rallies.

Unfortunately, whenever the BNP announced a programme, the AL countered it with their own. Announcing counter-programmes on the same day as the BNP, and often at a venue close to the BNP's, raises the possibility of tension at best and outright violence at worst. The phenomenon remains commonplace till date.

Although the BNP repeatedly asked the Awami League not to announce counter-programmes, the ruling party did not listen. But when Awami League general secretary Obaidul Quader requested the BNP to withdraw its mass procession scheduled on December 24 in Dhaka, the BNP did defer it to December 30. Where are such good gestures from the ruling party?

Awami League and its leading front organisations said they announced the counter-programmes for the sake of public safety and to resist the "terror and anarchy of BNP." One wonders, if the ruling party men must take to the streets to ensure public safety,

what is the role of the government, administration, or law enforcement agencies?

Such statements from party leaders not only go against the rule of law but also betray a lack of confidence in the very government they currently run. Does the ruling party think that responsible wings of the government are not capable of ensuring public safety or reining in the BNP (should it turn violent)?

Holding rallies and processions is a constitutional right of a political party. But countering a political event with another, and thus potentially impinging on it, is not. The ruling party can take to the streets with its own political programmes. But when it announces counter-programmes, what it demonstrates is nothing short of political bankruptcy.

The party has been in office for around 14 years now and has done substantial development work which has benefited the people. As such, it should be confident about itself. But a knee-jerk reaction in the form of counter-programmes in response to street mobilisations by the opposition is hardly demonstrative of any confidence it may have.

So why does the ruling party still feel compelled to employ such tactics? There could be several reasons. First, the ruling party takes to the streets to send the message that the opposition will never enjoy a walkover. Second, the counter-programme announcements boost the morale of the party's rank and file, which is perhaps

necessary at AL's grassroots, as BNP rallies themselves have been hugely successful in that respect. Third, and most dangerous, is that they believe a counter-programme would be an effective tool to obstruct and hinder the BNP's programme. Whenever two major political parties announce programmes on the same day and in nearby areas, it creates panic among the people, and leads to more suffering on the streets. Inconveniencing the people in this manner should be unacceptable, but the ruling party pays little heed to such "trivialities."

As the next general election is just a year away, we know that the political parties will take to the streets more often and campaign harder to get their respective messages across. The ruling party will beat its drums, harping on its development activities. The opposition will campaign against the misuse and misdeeds of the AL-led government.

So far, it must be admitted, the BNP has acted mostly maturely. We expect that the party that has been in office for 14 years will learn to reciprocate. If the AL fails to do so, it will be the one to pay the price. Today's voters are more politically conscious and unlikely to repeat past mistakes come elections.

The ruling Awami League appears to be in a bind. Neither does it have the confidence to be gracious to an all but annihilated opposition camp that refuses to collapse, nor can it be confident of a recurrence of either of the previous two elections (held in 2014 and 2018).