The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Can our crops survive erratic weather?

Take urgent stock of the impact of El Nino on cash crops

Like the rest of the world, Bangladesh is feeling the heat of extreme weather patterns, with meteorologists predicting lower rainfall and warmer temperatures as a result of El Nino in the region in the coming days. Heatwaves, which frequented the country in May and June, are likely to continue throughout the summer – and beyond. Meanwhile, rainfall has fallen 67 percent below the normal level, as per the Bangladesh Meteorological Department, raising serious concerns about crop production, food security and the fate of our farmers.

According to a report by this daily, heatwaves have impacted the cultivation of Aus crop and summer vegetables, including green chilli. The shortfall of rain will also affect the retting of jute, a cash crop. Rising temperatures and infrequent rain have resulted in prolonged droughts, reducing availability of water for irrigation and severely hampering crop production. Farmers state that their cost of Aus production has increased by 25 percent, and that croplands are drying out even after irrigation. Moreover, heat stress poses a direct threat to crops, especially heat-sensitive varieties. Production of chillies, for instance, has been gravely affected by the erratic temperatures. According to our correspondent, chilli growers in Bogura and Gaibandha districts would usually get 50-80 maunds of green chilli from one bigha of land, but this year, they are getting roughly seven to eight maunds per bigha. How are farmers supposed to survive if their cash crop fails them?

Given that countries from which we import food items are also reeling from similar erratic weather, we must now seriously confront the very real threat of food insecurity, particularly since we are navigating an already volatile international market held hostage by the Russia-Ukraine war. India, which accounts for 40 percent of world rice export, has already banned export of rice to other countries, including Bangladesh, fearing a production fall following a late start to seasonal monsoon rains. Our government must take urgent stock of the situation and take effective measures to ensure there is no disruption in the supply of essential food items in the coming days. Equally important is to ease farmers' concerns and sufferings at this time of great uncertainty by providing them with technical and financial support.

We also need to conduct reliable research on how El Nino and climate change will impact crop cycles in the future, and come up with heat-resistant varieties that can survive and thrive in erratic weather. As the world tumbles further down the hole of climate change, there can be no alternative to building our own capacities to sustain our crops and ensure food sovereignty for our population.

Taxpayers' money isn't for squandering

Poor planning and wasteful execution of projects must be stopped

The news of an escalator footbridge in Chattogram city being left inoperative for three years hardly comes as a surprise. According to a report in this daily, the Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) installed the escalator footbridge, the first of its kind in the port city, to aid the patients of Chittagong Diabetic General Hospital nearby. The footbridge, built at the cost of Tk 3.9 crore, was opened to the public in January 2020, but was shut down in less than two months when the country went into a lockdown at the onset of the Covid pandemic. Lockdowns came and went, but the escalator footbridge was never revived. When enquired about it, the CCC chief engineer said it was not financially viable due to high electricity consumption.

Did this fact not occur to anyone at the CCC when they were planning the project? Surely, those who greenlighted this project thoroughly considered its financial, technical, and environmental feasibility before deciding to invest taxpayers' money into building such a grandiose infrastructure? But it seems they did not. Furthermore, seeing as running the escalators is too expensive for the city, we don't understand why, in these three years, the authorities did not remodel the footbridge so that people could use it, rather than leaving it to rot.

Over the past several years, stories of such wasteful projects have become all too common. Whether it's huge hospital buildings that are built and then left without use for years, or roads that crack and collapse shortly after being built, or newly built bridges that tilt even before people get to use it, or excessive delays in projects – poorly planned and executed infrastructural projects are bleeding out hard-earned taxpayers' money. And this keeps happening because those who design and implement these projects always get away scot-free after every mishap, given the lack of good governance in this country. This gross mismanagement must stop immediately. We urge the government to take effective steps to stem this waste, and make an example out of those who are squandering public money with their negligent, corrupt activities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Alternative exam system for ill, late attendees

Students appearing in SSC, HSC and various other public exams are facing a difficult situation. If a student appears at the exam centre after it has started, they are not allowed to sit in the exam. Such a rule does not take into consideration the unpredictable situations on our roads, where no matter how early you start for your destination, you still run the risk of being late. Also, what if a student falls sick? It is time for the education ministry to seriously consider introducing an alternative examination system for the students who are unable to attend the exams on time.

Md Maruf Hassan Bhuiyan
Feni

Why is Gazprom drilling gas wells instead of Bapex?

Kallol Mustafa
is an engineer and writer who focuses on power, energy, environment and development economics.

KALLOL MUSTAFA

The expertise and competence of Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Limited (Bapex) in onshore gas exploration and drilling is well-established. The state-owned company has been successful in completing all the work necessary for onshore gas exploration and production, such as collection of geological and geophysical data, basin review, geochemical analysis, well drilling, workover, etc. Its success rate in gas exploration is quite high – globally, gas is found in one well against five wells, but Bapex has found gas in one well by drilling less than two wells.

Why, then, is the work of drilling gas wells on onshore sites being given to a foreign company like Gazprom, despite Bapex's proven capabilities in exploring onshore gas reserves with much less cost?

Gazprom, Russia's state-owned energy company, was first awarded the job of drilling onshore gas wells in Bangladesh in 2012. The company was tasked with drilling 10 wells in a fast-track solution to the gas crisis in the country, with the relevant officials saying Bapex did not have the capacity to work on several wells at a time. Gazprom was given the job at a higher cost than what Bapex would require, without tender, under the Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply (Special Provisions) Act, 2010 that indemnified the officials concerned against prosecution for making such decisions. Eleven years have passed since then, and Gazprom has drilled a total of 20 wells. Now, the company has been engaged to drill five more gas wells without tender, based on the same "logic" that Bapex does not have the sufficient capacity.

This raises the inevitable question: what have the authorities done in all these years to increase Bapex's capacity?

Considering Gazprom's track record in Bangladesh, there is no way to justify giving it more work over Bapex. First, Gazprom's drilling costs are much higher than Bapex's. While Bapex spent a maximum of Tk 80 crore on a well, Gazprom took more than Tk 180 crore. Second, Gazprom performs tasks mainly through third parties: for example, Gazprom engaged Eriell Oilfield Services for drilling at a lower cost and skimmed the rest of the money as commission. If any drilling consultant needs to be hired in Bangladesh, Bapex can do it too. It is not clear why a third party like Gazprom needs to be engaged to hire another third party.

Third, Gazprom's work is technically flawed: five of the 10 wells that Gazprom drilled in the first phase stopped producing gas shortly afterwards. Bapex later had to drill those five wells again to resume gas production, which cost an additional Tk 52 crore for each well.

Given these bad experiences, is it justified to engage Gazprom again? Is Bapex's lack of capacity an acceptable reason now, 11 years after Gazprom was first hired? Why has Bapex's capacity – i.e. number of drilling rigs and manpower – not been enhanced?

The biggest crisis in Bapex is the funding required for gas exploration. Since its establishment as a separate company, its financial aspects such as funding sources, fixed costs, exploration and drilling costs, etc have all been left to uncertainty. Bapex's work has become extremely slow as it has to go through long bureaucratic processes to get the necessary funds from the government for every project. Since 2012, Bapex has received some allocations for gas exploration from the Gas Development Fund (GDF) formed with customers' money, but the amount was not enough to enhance the existing capacity, so it has been able to do some exploration work only on a limited scale. Bapex's last exploratory drilling rig was purchased in 2012; since then, there has been no government funding for Bapex projects. As a result, while neighbouring India's state-owned company ONGC has 150 drilling rigs for gas exploration, Bapex has only six, of which two are dysfunctional and two can only be used for old well renovation, i.e. workover. So, in reality, Bapex has only two functional drilling rigs for gas exploration with which it can drill a maximum of three exploratory wells per year.

But in line with the country's gas crisis and the increase in gas demand, if there were regular investments to buy new drilling rigs and hire skilled manpower, would Bapex have the capacity crisis it has now? Even if proper initiatives were taken since Gazprom was given the first job in 2012, Bapex's capacity could have been enhanced. But no such initiative was taken on time; rather, the GDF funds were spent on LNG imports, and the finance ministry also took Tk 3,000 crore from the GDF as additional money from Petrobangla's bank account.

In 2012, drilling rigs cost Tk 250 crore apiece. Now, a rig costs Tk 350-400 crore. Though the government has not invested a few hundred crores over the last 11 years to buy new drilling rigs, it has spent Tk 85,000 crore to import liquefied natural gas (LNG) in just four years, between FY2018-19 and FY2021-22. If even a small part of this was regularly invested on increasing Bapex's capacity, a huge amount of foreign exchange could have been saved. Case in point: Bapex discovered 723 billion cubic feet of gas reserves in 2022, with an investment of Tk 812 crore after the gas crisis intensified, which would have cost Tk 96,000-100,000 crore in foreign exchange if imported in the form of LNG.

VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Citing lack of capital and technical expertise, a number of onshore gas blocks were handed over to foreign companies through production-sharing contracts (PSC) in the 1990s. As a result, a significant portion of the country's onshore gas is currently coming from wells operated by a foreign company. With Bapex's expertise in onshore gas exploration and examples of operating at significantly cheaper costs than foreign companies, it is difficult to establish the rationale for a new PSC with another foreign company. That is why foreign companies are now being given work through service contracts, where the ownership of the gas wells is with Bapex, but foreign companies like Gazprom can earn huge profits by drilling the wells at a higher cost. And it seems Bapex is being kept weak intentionally to justify this.

Not taking appropriate steps to solve a problem, even after knowing the cause of and the solution to that problem, indicates that some groups with vested interest are keen on taking advantage of that problem. Spending huge sums of money on drilling gas wells by Gazprom or importing LNG without investing in Bapex's capacity enhancement is an example of such opportunism.

Fuchsia feminism in a Barbiecore world

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TASNIM ODRIKA

When I saw the promotional poster for the new Barbie movie, my first thought was to dig out all my old Barbies. I learnt that they had all been thrown away – I only managed to find one doll. This one was never thrown away because I actually never played with it. This one did not have blonde hair or white skin. Instead, it had black hair and dark skin. I recalled how I had kept this doll away because the younger me thought it was not an original Barbie doll. Barbie dolls were blonde and white, according to me.

Although Barbie was an enormous part of my childhood, my adolescent self drifted apart from it significantly. None of the cool girls I watched on TV wore Malibu pink or liked dolls. Adopting so-called masculine hobbies was considered cool instead. But it was more than that. Barbie seemed misogynistic through my growing understanding of feminism, rudimentary as it was. Barbie only cared about fashion and dressing up. Barbie lived in a bright pink house. Now, I adored pink and had a genuine interest in fashion. But pink was negatively associated with being "girly," and society told me that aspiring for a career was feminist, not dressing up. So I gave up on both Barbie and pink.

Fast forward to recent times, my screen became splattered in pink from the Valentino Fall 2022 collection. Celebrities of all gender conformations adorned themselves with hot pink and fuchsia. At the same time, Barbie is once more the talk of the town. Every time I get on a social media platform, I am bombarded with campaigns from various brands that are now selling Barbie-themed clothing and accessories. This aesthetic of maximalist dressing and ultra-feminine clothing is now known as Barbiecore online. Femininity no longer has the same negative connotation.

So, how did Barbie undergo this remarkable transformation: from being criticised as a symbol of perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards and misogyny, to embracing inclusivity and evolving into a celebrated feminist icon for girls today?

If we go back to the start, Ruth Handler, co-founder of Mattel, was inspired by her daughter's love of paper dolls to create an adult-figured doll. This was back in 1959. At the time, most children's dolls were representations of infants. Handler's idea was groundbreaking as it challenged the traditional view of what a doll should be. With infant dolls, play was confined to girls assuming a nurturing figure. This changed with Barbie. A Barbie doll could be anything, and these dolls had careers ranging from that of astronauts to politicians to fashionistas.

From an external perspective, the concept appears to be feminist. But one look at the doll's general appearance tells a different story. Just like my younger self believed that Barbie was supposed to look a certain way, kids who grow up playing with Barbie but don't grow up looking like her (which is almost all girls) end up with body image issues. They end up questioning why they do not look a certain way.

This void was also bridged with Mattel's website now boasting 35 different skin tones, 97 different hairstyles, and nine different body types (and counting) for Barbie dolls. With this transformation of the brand's image, it's a seemingly happy ending and the end of the era of "not like other girls," because being "girly" and wearing pink is now celebrated.

Pink has long been associated with femininity, often used to stereotype and pigeonhole women. However, with the hype surrounding the *Barbie* movie, there is now a massive resurgence of "pink fashion," a trend that is largely led by the younger generation who are unafraid to embrace their girly side.

The colour pink has long been associated with femininity, and it has often been used to stereotype and pigeonhole women. However, with the hype surrounding the Barbie movie, there is now a massive resurgence of "pink fashion," a trend that is largely led by the younger generation, who are unafraid to embrace their girly side. This growing movement of reclaiming pink and "girliness" as a way to express personal style and empowerment is definitely a positive development for a world that has forever looked down on anything even remotely associated with femininity.

At the same time, Mattel's stock price has also increased by 15 percent in the past month, according to a recent Yahoo Finance report. The other companies banking on this hype, with their respective Barbie collections, are companies that are possibly not even paying their workers liveable wages.

So, did Barbie really undergo a massive transformation? Or has she just been repackaged to promote maximalism – another way to exploit consumers? I found myself asking these questions again. Capitalism has a long history of appropriating and commodifying social movements. Naturally, feminism is no exception. After all, the brands benefiting from "pink-washing" are not upholding feminist values.

When I go on any social media platform, I notice two things. First, the deluge of ads (perhaps because I am the exact target audience) consisting of every possible Barbie-themed thing you can imagine – from hairbrushes to furniture for your very own Dreamhouse. Second, an increase in the number of people who are confident in being their "girliest" self. Even the most masculine-presenting person seems interested in catching the new hot-pink-filled Barbie movie in theatres. This stands in stark contrast to how movies primarily targeting women were perceived by the general public even a decade ago.

Hence, for just an infinitesimal moment, I would like to rejoice in the acceptance and embracing of femininity before I go back to wondering who truly is capitalising off this trend and the consequences of this maximalist culture.

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