

## Boon for a few, bane for the vast many

### Topsoil removal is hurting land fertility, food security prospects

It is disheartening to see how topsoil extraction continues unabated despite the threat it poses to the fertility of croplands and agricultural production. According to a recent report, like in many other parts of the country, the practice is rampant across 14 upazilas of Lalmonirhat and Kurigram districts, where about 180 brick kilns are involved in removing significant quantities of topsoil annually. The manner in which this is being done—openly and without any intervention from the authorities—makes one wonder about the government’s sincerity to stop this nuisance or mitigate its adverse effects.

Topsoil, as the name implies, is the very top layer of soil that is dense with organic matter and minerals that plants need to grow. Thus, it is essential to ensure the fertility of lands. To allow it to be used in brick production instead may support the ongoing drive for development, but it hardly compensates for the loss of organic richness so essential for our long-term food security. And at a time when the health of 76 percent of Bangladesh’s soil has already deteriorated—with an average of 27,000 hectares of land being degraded each year due to various factors—cultivating another layer of vulnerability through unchecked topsoil removal questions not just our approach to these concerns but also the country’s deeply-flawed development policy.

The fact is, extracting topsoil only benefits a few, those behind the brick kiln industry. But it has been a bane for all others. Farmers, in particular, stand to lose the most: Brick kiln owners usually purchase and extract a few bighas of topsoil at once, leaving nearby agricultural lands elevated. The disparity makes farming and irrigation challenging for other farmers, forcing many to also sell their topsoil to maintain even land levels. The bigger worry, according to an upazila agriculture officer, is the long time it takes (about 20 years) to recover land fertility afterwards, affecting their agricultural yields and livelihoods.

Using agricultural or hill soil for manufacturing bricks is a punishable offence. Unfortunately, despite such regulations and having alternative, safer methods of production, a vast majority of brick kilns continue to remove topsoil. Experts have often suggested moving away from conventional bricks to environment-friendly “hollow blocks”, which can eliminate the risk. It is high time the government properly enforced all regulations and long-overdue reforms to prevent the persistent onslaughts of brick kilns.

## Early action vital to check dengue in 2024

### Govt must undertake preventive measures without delay

Even after witnessing the worst dengue outbreak in Bangladesh’s history this year, the authorities seem nonchalant about taking preventive measures to stop another outbreak next year. This is deeply alarming considering the heavy casualties we’ve suffered—over 3,20,000 cases and around 1,700 deaths so far in 2023. What possible reason could there be for dillydallying on undertaking measures that can prevent another such scenario?

Reportedly, city corporations and other local government bodies have not started taking any preparation for the next monsoon. This can be dangerous. Over the past months, experts have repeatedly stressed the importance of early preventive action, especially during the lean period, to prevent the mosquito population from proliferating. Also, comprehensive data is essential to eliminate clusters of Aedes mosquitoes, but the information we have is extremely inadequate. While many countries record every dengue case, the DGHS still receives case data from only 138 hospitals out of the country’s 16,000 health facilities. Moreover, the administration has not yet procured necessary equipment for surveillance. How can it then expect to fight this crisis?

Out of the seven countries where the dengue situation worsened this year, Bangladesh ranks top, according to a report of the World Health Organization, which has pointed out 15 reasons for rising cases, including unplanned urbanisation, faltering health care, and lack of proper monitoring. For years, our entomologists have been saying the same, and yet, we have not addressed these issues. As a result, Aedes mosquitoes wreaked havoc as our hospitals filled up with patients.

Although infections have now gone down, there is no room for relief. We must prepare for the next potential outbreak by taking immediate measures. Comprehensive surveillance should start right away, complemented by awareness campaigns about the spread of dengue. Authorities must prepare a national plan to tackle Aedes mosquitoes, which should incorporate community measures led by local government bodies. Since dengue is a regional issue, Bangladesh should also collaborate with neighbouring nations to tackle this threat. We cannot, under any circumstances, let it claim or hurt so many lives again.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## No motorbikes on footpaths

Amid the already horrible condition of our footpaths, walking in Dhaka gets even tougher because of motorcycles taking over these walkways. Countless times, I’ve seen bikers obstructing pedestrian movement in an effort to bypass traffic jams. This is absolutely unacceptable and creates the risk of serious injury, not to mention how it damages walkways. Footpaths should be reserved for pedestrians only, and bikers should abide by traffic rules, no matter how congested the roads are. I urge authorities to ensure effective monitoring to stop this activity.

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# A Potemkin election in Bangladesh?



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The phrase “Potemkin village” refers to an elaborate facade designed to hide an undesirable reality. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the term comes from a popular myth where Grigory Potemkin, then governor of New Russia (modern Crimea), constructed fake villages to impress foreign dignitaries accompanied by Russian empress Catherine the Great in 1787. The legend goes that Potemkin would construct a pasteboard village—complete with waving, happy peasants—in advance of Catherine’s arrival and deconstruct it shortly after she left, repeating the same charade over and over.

While the authenticity of this story is disputed, the term stuck and is now used by many observers to describe fake elections under authoritarian regimes. For example, in *How to Rig an Election*, Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas describe Potemkin elections as elections where “the pageantry of campaigning, the parade of voting, the charade of counting, all are engineered with one simple goal – to fool the West into believing that all was conducted fairly in a shining model of democracy. But behind the facade, the actual democratic scaffolding is often rotten – if it exists at all.”

Alina Polyakova, in her article titled “Putin’s Potemkin Election,” vividly portrayed what they actually look like. Terming the Russian general election held on March 18, 2018 a “theatrical production,” she said it involved elaborate stage settings, set designs and a handpicked cast of actors. A well-funded promotional campaign—with posters plastered across the country, highly produced television ads, and constant announcements on public transit—ensured a packed house on the day of the premiere. The star of the day was Vladimir Putin, and the production was the Russian presidential election. While it had all the trappings of a normal democratic election, it offered citizens no real choice. The most interesting part of the so-called election was not the result, but the impressive mobilisation capacity displayed by the state to physically get people to the polls to cast a meaningless vote in an “election” where the outcome was already known.

One may say that the upcoming election in Bangladesh resembles the aforementioned Potemkin election format. The government, the Election Commission and its commissioners, law enforcement agencies, candidates,



Organising an electoral drama is not easy.

and voters all know what is actually going to happen on January 7, 2024. But even then, the government is trying to make the election process seem credible.

Elections in democracies are usually hotly contested. The fiercer the competition, the more uncertain the outcome. But authoritarian rulers are not comfortable dealing with these challenges, and want to remove all uncertainty—usually by force. One way to eliminate electoral uncertainty is to abolish the electoral system altogether. But this poses the risks of local and international condemnation, alongside economic sanctions. So, modern authoritarian rulers need a system in which there will be elections, but without electoral certainty. It is from this urge that an election is turned into a staged drama.

Organising electoral drama is not easy. In addition to the ruling party, “proper” opposition parties, election commissions, election officials, law enforcement agencies, bureaucracy, judiciary, domestic and foreign election observers, etc are needed to complete the cast for the drama. Of these, the trickiest to manage are “appropriate” opposition parties. Naturally, real opposition parties will be reluctant to participate in such an orchestration.

So, political, administrative, and/or legal pressures are created to force them to participate in the Potemkin polls, or favourable alternative opposition parties are created.

All active anti-government political parties in Bangladesh—including BNP, the major opposition party on the streets—are demanding the election to be held under a non-partisan,

election on January 7 in which the nominated candidates of the ruling AL will “compete” against its dummy candidates, while the main “opposition” party will be elected with the ruling party’s support. So, this election will likely be nothing but a friendly match between AL and its allies—the winner of which is already decided. Like Russia’s Potemkin

PHOTO: STAR

neutral government. They have refused to participate in the election under the ruling government, citing the experience of past questionable elections in 2014 and 2018. With BNP remaining rigid in its stance, thousands of the party’s leaders and activists, including its central leaders, have been arrested and jailed, while hundreds of activists have been sentenced in “ghost cases.” Attempts have also been made to lure BNP leaders into Trinamool BNP and Bangladesh Nationalist Movement (BNM), the two parties known as the “King’s parties”, to participate in the upcoming election. But with few exceptions, there has been little success on this front.

But an election without any competition will not be acceptable at home or abroad. To combat this, the ruling Awami League has encouraged its leaders to compete as independents or “dummy candidates” against its own nominated candidates. Although 27 out of 44 registered parties are participating in the election, none are strong enough to compete against AL. To keep the allies in its fold, AL decided to share six seats with the 14-party alliance and withdrew 25 of its own nominees from the race to allow Jatiya Party (JP) an easy win in those seats.

As a result, there will be an

election, the main challenge will be to ensure enough voter turnout so that it looks participatory enough. For this, AL has reportedly formed 42,000 committees for each polling centre whose task will be to bring recipients of government benefits to the polls on election day, besides AL’s own voters. To this end, the ruling party will conduct door-to-door campaigns and arrange transportation for the voters.

Competition among participating political parties is vital during elections. But if the competition is confined between the ruling party and its allies, then there is no risk of the former losing power. Hence, the election is robbed of its accountability mechanism.

In Bangladesh, even though elections are held every five years, the people are deprived of the accountability process that a genuine election would feature. Due to this unaccountable, monopolistic rule, the human rights situation, the state of the rule of law, and the economic crisis have seriously worsened in the country. Since the competition on January 7 will only be limited to the ruling party’s own circle, there is hardly any possibility of this election positively impacting our political and economic conditions.

# Talk about period poverty to eliminate it

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Menstrual health is usually defined as the state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being in relation to the menstrual cycle, rather than just the absence of disease or infirmity. To ensure this well-being, menstruating individuals (including women, girls, and others) need to have access to age-appropriate information and education about their menstrual cycle, alongside support during life-course changes.

Regarding the social aspect, creating a dignified and positive environment, free from stigma and mental distress, is crucial for people to be able to make informed decisions about their menstrual health. This includes being able to participate fully in civil, cultural, economic, social, and political spheres of life, such as attending work and school. One of the conditions where socioeconomic and cultural barriers prevent individuals from addressing menstrual health needs is called “period poverty.”

Period poverty is the lack of access to sanitary products due to financial as well as knowledge constraints, and is related to poor menstrual hygiene management (MHM). The World Health Organization and Unicef stress on MHM so that women and adolescent

girls are able to use clean materials to absorb or collect menstrual blood, and also change those out in privacy as often as necessary. MHM also includes having access to soap and water at restrooms, and safe facilities to dispose of the used materials. Additionally, it involves these groups having access to basic information about the menstrual cycle and how to manage it with dignity and without discomfort or fear.

According to the World Bank, while more than 300 million individuals experience menstruation on a given day globally, many cannot address their menstrual cycle with minimum health standards and dignity. In Bangladesh, most adolescent girls, especially in rural and marginal communities, have a lack of scientific and formal knowledge about menstrual hygiene. According to the National Hygiene Survey 2018, about 50 percent of adolescent girls aged between 10-19 years and 64 percent of women aged 20-49 years use old cloth during their period in Bangladesh. They do not know that the use of unhygienic products increases the possibility of infection.

Research shows that low income, lack of proper information about period, belief in taboos, widespread

stigmas, negligence of male members towards menstruation, and lack of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities at schools and workplaces are the key causes of period poverty in Bangladesh. While only 35 percent of primary and 73 percent of secondary schools have separate toilets for girls, only 24 percent of primary schools and 38 percent of secondary schools have both water and soap available at the toilets. As a result, even though many girls and women can afford menstrual products, they do not feel comfortable changing sanitary pads or clothes at schools or workplaces.

Period poverty has serious impacts on the overall socioeconomic well-being of girls and women. Numerous effects of period poverty on the physical as well as the psychological health of females resulting in absenteeism of girls at school, absenteeism of women at work, and social isolation have been identified in various research. Moreover, period poverty has been creating a new kind of social stratification and discrimination among Bangladeshi women. Girls and women who have proper access to information and menstrual hygiene products both at home and schools or workplaces do not need to give up school days or workdays. But where the lack of facilities is allowed to persist, period poverty affects the empowerment of women.

Research shows that period poverty can only be tackled by addressing both infrastructural and social issues

relating to it. On the one hand, ensuring the availability of hardware like separate toilets, soap, clean water, and sanitary pads is important in schools and workplaces. On the other hand, changing society’s perception of periods and making it comfortable as well as secure for menstruating individuals to avail and utilise the products is equally important.

If the male members of households and communities are more aware and respectful towards the menstrual health of female members, girls and women would feel more comfortable buying and using sanitary products whenever they need. Thus, there is a strong need for education as well as awareness programmes to improve people’s knowledge on menstrual hygiene by addressing social cultural stigmas and by providing accurate information about menstrual health. Additionally, the affordability of sanitary products is important to ensure as girls and women from low-income households, unable to afford them, will resort to cheaper and often unhealthier alternatives.

The issue of menstrual hygiene and period poverty should be addressed in a coordinated manner by government, non-government, and relevant international agencies. And lastly, conventional attitudes towards menstrual products should be changed, from being seen as a concession to a right of girls and women.