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73% rise in tobacco production!

Is the govt truly serious about its vision to be tobacco-free by 2040?

Bangladesh may aspire to be tobacco-free by 2040, but the government's commitment to implementing stricter tobacco control laws seems at odds with the consistent surge in tobacco production: a nearly 73 percent increase in per-hectare yield over the last 14 years. Tobacco farming now accounts for over 30 percent of annual deforestation, placing the country third globally in this regard. The University of Bath ranks Bangladesh as the 12th largest tobacco grower as of 2020. This growth is alarming given the well-documented health and environmental hazards associated with tobacco cultivation, to say nothing of the dangers associated with its consumption.

The introduction of high-yielding varieties by tobacco companies, coupled with aggressive promotion of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, has enticed farmers with promises of higher profits. However, numerous studies highlight that excessive use of such chemicals depletes soil fertility, contaminates water sources, and disrupts ecosystems. A 2015 study in Kushtia found alarming levels of toxic residues in soil and water samples collected near tobacco farms. This contamination not only harms aquatic life, but also poses a health risk to humans who rely on these water sources. The World Health Organization (WHO) notes that each cigarette emits about 14 grams of CO₂ over its lifecycle, and producing 300 cigarettes requires one tree for paper and drying leaves. Water pollution is another grave concern, with a single cigarette requiring about 3.7 litres of water over its lifecycle. Tobacco cultivation demands up to eight times more water than crops like tomatoes or potatoes, leading to significant water usage and pollution.

Despite these grave environmental and health risks, farmers are drawn to tobacco farming due to its profitability. But the real beneficiaries of this growth are the big tobacco companies. In 2022, Euromonitor International estimated the value of Bangladeshi tobacco market at Tk 42,000 crore. British American Tobacco (BAT), with an 85 percent market share, saw its profit after tax rise nearly twofold from Tk 925 crore in 2019 to Tk 1,788 crore in 2023. Meanwhile, the tobacco industry, a top taxpayer, generated over Tk 32,502 crore in revenue from domestic cigarette sales alone last fiscal year, an eight percent increase from the previous year. We cannot help but wonder: is the government, which owns 10 percent share in BAT, truly genuine about its resolve to discourage tobacco farming?

Surely, the government recognises that public health and safeguarding the environment must be prioritised over short-term economic gains. It must strengthen its resolve to discourage tobacco farming by providing alternative crops with comparable profitability and technical support to farmers. We also need stricter regulations as well as public awareness campaigns to control the marketing of high-yielding tobacco varieties and the excessive use of harmful chemicals. The government's vision for a tobacco-free nation by 2040 must account for something.

Malaysian labour market freezes again

Why can't the govt address the recurring irregularities?

On Friday, Malaysia once again closed its doors to aspiring Bangladeshi migrants—along with workers from 13 other countries—because of anomalies in the worker recruitment process. Since the Southeast Asian country first started taking workers from Bangladesh, the labour market has been frozen several times, reportedly due to corruption and irregularities in the recruitment process at the expense of workers' exploitation and criminalisation. It is frustrating that in all these years, neither the Bangladeshi government nor its Malaysian counterpart took any effective steps to address the widely reported irregularities and bring to book the syndicates involved in the recruitment process.

The last MoU signed by the two countries in 2021 capped the cost of recruitment for each worker at \$720, but in reality workers ended up paying as much as \$5,000, the highest price globally, according to a report in our daily. Meanwhile, workers kept on being deceived by ghost recruiters, then jailed and detained in Malaysia for no fault of their own. In the meantime, the syndicates, including 100 Bangladeshi recruiting agencies, some of which are owned by Bangladeshi lawmakers and their families, kept on making money at the workers' expense. A portion of this money is also being laundered to Malaysia as bribes for Malaysian recruitment firms.

In a recent letter to both governments, four UN experts talked about exploitation noting that "certain high-level officials in both governments are involved in this business or condoning it." Yet, the Malaysian high commissioner to Bangladesh would have us believe that the syndicates recruiting Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia are "beyond the control of the two governments." After decades of worker exploitation right under their noses, can the two governments absolve themselves of their responsibilities, particularly when they are yet to acknowledge—much less take action against—high-level officials involved in the corrupt process?

They must bring the perpetrators to book, no matter how powerful the syndicates are. The irregularities in migrant worker recruitment need to be resolved once and for all, so that our workers do not return as dead bodies or financially and emotionally broken individuals.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Indonesian President Sukarno delivers speech on Pancasila

On this day in 1945, in a speech, Indonesian nationalist leader Sukarno articulated the Pancasila—the Five Principles—that became the founding philosophy of the independent Indonesian state.

LOW VOTER TURNOUT IN UPAZILA ELECTION

Time for some soul-searching for the Awami League

Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee is planning editor at The Daily Star.



PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

In an ominous sign for democracy, voter turnout in Bangladesh's elections has been decreasing significantly in recent years, exhibiting voters' apathy towards this important process by staying away from casting votes. After the first phase of the ongoing upazila election, which saw 36 percent voter turnout, the ruling Awami League's General Secretary Obaidul Quader explained the poor turnout by saying that the paddy harvesting season as well as storms and rain in different districts were to blame. Nevertheless, he labelled the turnout "satisfactory."

Harvesting was over in almost all the places in the country before the second phase of election, held on May 21, and there was no rain on that day. Yet, the situation did not improve as the second phase saw only 37.57 percent voter turnout—second lowest since 2009.

Although there was not much difference in the voter turnout between the first phase and the second phase, the AL spokesperson came up with a different explanation this time, saying BNP, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and some "anti-state" intellectuals were spreading falsehoods to discourage people from casting their votes.

The AL second-in-command, however, again termed the turnout "quite satisfactory."

In the third phase of the election, which was held on Wednesday, the polls saw 36.24 percent voter turnout—lower than the second phase. This time, Quader reiterated that the voter turnout was satisfactory, despite a natural disaster in the same week.

Now, one may ask whether the Awami League, one of the oldest political parties in the country, which has always claimed to have guaranteed people's right to food and franchise,

is satisfied with 36-37 percent voter turnout. AL, which has been in power since 2009, always claimed to have 40 percent of the vote bank. If that is true, then judging by the voter turnout in recent elections, one can either assume that not all pro-AL voters are exercising their franchise, or only its own voters are turning up at the polling booths.

There are several reasons behind the voters' apathy that keeps them from exercising their franchise, including the absence of major political parties in the polls, the Election Commission's failure to ensure free and impartial elections, and the ruling party establishing a trend of being elected unopposed.

If people's apathy towards casting votes gradually turns into apathy for the democratic process, it may be dangerous for all political camps in the country, including the Awami League.

It also seems that a new voting system has been developed in the country over the past decade. Winning by all means and keeping opposition parties off the ballot has become the new voting system.

Take the last three national elections in 2014, 2018 and 2024, for example. Of them, the 2014 and 2024 elections were largely one-sided with most political parties boycotting them, while the 2018 election was questionable as opposition parties alleged that ballot stuffing took place on the night before the voting day.

In the 2014 election, 153 candidates of AL got elected without a single vote being cast, which was enough to form the government.

The total number of voters in the 2014 election for all 300 seats was 9.19 crore, while the total number of voters for the 147 seats in which the election was held was 4.31 crore. A total of 4.88

crore voters, 53 percent of the total voters, were unable to cast their votes and their mandate was not required to form the government in 2014.

In such a situation, it seems the ruling camp is not taking any election—national or local government—seriously, and an attitude may have developed within the party that "whoever wins has to be one of ours."

This time, however, the ruling party changed its strategy and decided not to give party nominations and not to allow the party electoral symbol to be used in the local body polls, aiming to make the election participatory, increase voter turnout, and turn the election festive. But this strategy has so far fallen flat as it has failed to encourage voters to turn up at the



With no voters in the vicinity, security personnel sit idle at the Dashgaon Noagaon High School polling centre in Sylhet's Gowainghat upazila during the second phase of the upazila election on May 21, 2024. FILE PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

This situation has also left voters with limited options: they can either cast their votes for the ruling party candidates or its dissidents. With the absence of major political parties in recent elections, the polls appear to be a fight between Awami League and Awami League. So, before any election, Awami League aspirants put in their best efforts to get the party ticket instead of wooing voters, seemingly believing that getting the party ticket is enough for them to get elected.

Like the electoral system, a new approach has been adopted by the Awami Leaguers, and most of them have become desperate to cling to power and get elected unopposed for that. The party men don't want any competition on their way to power. In the absence of the opposition parties, the AL candidates can't even tolerate their own party colleagues on their way to win.

polling booths. Is it realistic to change the electoral culture that developed over a decade simply by changing strategy?

The time has come for the Awami League to realise why voters are turning away from casting votes. Will the ruling camp finally do some soul searching? The chances are slim.

The Awami League, which has led all democratic movements before and after the birth of Bangladesh, is now busier with government affairs than its own organisation. It is busier bashing opponents and holding programmes to counter opposition parties, than finding out organisational weaknesses in its own ranks.

As the party prepares for a grand platinum jubilee celebration next month, it is high time for the party to do some soul-searching instead of focusing on countering its political arch-rival.

How we can protect the best interests of children during divorce

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LAILA KHONDKAR

"The worst thing for the children when their parents divorce is to do 'middle-manning.' You have to tell your mother about your father and vice versa," shared a young university student who had to go through this experience during her parents' divorce a few years ago.

The Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2023 (BSVS 2023), a nationwide survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) on 308,032 families, revealed that out of every 10,000 individuals in the country, 11 were divorced. There is a slight decline in divorce from the previous year, when the rate had increased sharply after the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, divorce is on the rise in society, and this trend is expected to continue.

There are many reasons why people may choose to separate from their partners, from a lack of mutual understanding to violence against women. Moreover, economic empowerment of women gives them the capacity to leave unhappy and abusive marriages. This article, however, is not about analysing the socioeconomic and cultural reasons for divorce. Rather, I would like to focus on the impact children suffer when their parents divorce.

Parental separation can affect children's lives in many ways, including changes in eating habits, behaviour, and exam results. Children may feel depressed and anxious, and there is also the risk of other mental health problems. Most studies on divorce

show that the first one to three years are somewhat more difficult for children to adjust to the situation. Also, not all children are equally affected by parental separation. Those who have witnessed very high levels of conflict and bitterness between parents find some relief in separation.

Post-divorce complications can often become very bitter. There are disputes between parents over who will have custody of the child. A judgement is obtained if legal recourse is taken. However, the tension throughout the whole process can negatively impact the child.

The parents of a Swedish friend of mine divorced when he was 16 years old. He said, "Since I was seven or eight years old, I have seen a dysfunctional relationship between my parents. I myself asked them to get divorced when I reached adolescence. During my school final exams, the situation at home was insufferable because of their conflicts. A social worker arranged for me to be placed with another family. So, when my parents finally

got divorced, I was relieved." My friend maintained a good relationship with both parents after the divorce. He is now a university teacher and a father of two children. There are countless examples of children succeeding in education, career and life after parental divorce.

Some teenagers in Bangladesh feel like my Swedish friend because the intense strife between their parents is unbearable for them. Many have witnessed physical and emotional abuse taking place in the relationship between their parents. According to child protection experts, if children witness abuse happening in front of them, it is also a form of child abuse. Children need to be protected from this form of abuse as well.

Divorce is still a taboo subject and considered unacceptable by many in Bangladesh. The attitude is changing slowly, but the dominant social tendency is to protect the institution of marriage at any cost, even when it is no longer meaningful for the couple concerned. Therefore, children are under additional mental stress when parents are separated. Many are bullied at school and are subjected to harsh comments from neighbours and relatives. These discriminatory social attitudes need to change. People should stop making judgemental remarks about matters of others' lives without having the slightest idea about their realities.

Post-divorce complications can often become very bitter. There are disputes between parents over who will have custody of the child. A judgement is obtained if legal recourse is taken. However, the tension throughout the whole process can negatively impact the child. Some parents also prevent the child from seeing another parent, which is not acceptable from a legal point of view and a violation of children's rights. Except for a few extreme cases when a parent is a risk to the child, every parent has a right to interact with the child and perform

their responsibilities. Having both parents in life is positive for the child's holistic development.

Some parents involve their children in discussions about alimony, division of property, etc, or try to sway them to their side. When parents fight or blame each other in front of their children, it leads the child to believe they must take sides, which is harmful for them. A parent's responsibility is to protect the child's best interests under all circumstances, but many fail to do so post-separation. Their anger and frustration are reflected in their behaviour towards their children.

Parents should consider the situation from their children's perspectives. It is beneficial for children to grow up in a peaceful environment with their parents. But if that cannot be ensured and separation becomes inevitable, the matter should be explained to the children as clearly as possible. Parents should listen carefully if their children express their feelings about the separation. Every child is different. Their reactions will also vary. It is important to let them know that feelings of anxiety, anger, and sadness are normal.

Parents have to learn how to manage the process in a mature way so that it does not affect children negatively. They are responsible for not involving children in the bitterness following separation. It is important for children to have reassurance that despite the separation, both parents will love them unconditionally. Children should be informed that even if the relationship between their parents changes, they can still love both of them.

Relatives, neighbours, and colleagues need to be sensitive to the people going through a divorce as well as their children. Teachers should also ensure that no student is discriminated against because of their parents' divorce. These will make it relatively easier for children to cope with the situation.