From ash to toothpaste: Bangladesh's oral care shift

Nearly 94% households in Bangladesh now use toothpaste, compared to datun, charcoal and ash in the 70s

SUKANTA HALDER

In her childhood, Anwara Akhter would begin the day by collecting mango leaves or cutting a neem twig. She would chew one end until it frayed into bristles, then use the fibrous tip to scrub her teeth.

In the 70s, that was a common practice. Many families relied on charcoal. Others used ash from burnt wood. Toothpaste was largely unknown outside a small urban elite. Akhter says she had never even heard of it until the 80s, when she moved to Netrokona city for college.

Until the 80s, charcoal, ash and toothpowder remained the norm for much of Bangladesh. Today, that world has all but vanished.

About 94 percent of households now use a toothbrush and toothpaste each morning, according to the latest industry estimates, as affordable local brands, rising incomes and greater awareness of dental health resulted in the toothpaste transformation.

Over the past decade alone, household toothpaste penetration has increased to 94 percent from 84 percent. Manufacturers say the market has moved from early expansion to a mature but still growing phase.

Syed Abdul Hamid, a professor at the Institute of Health Economics at Dhaka University, said commercial toothpaste first appeared globally around 1880. It reached this region between 1940 and 1950, during British rule and later the Pakistan period.

In those years, toothpaste use was basically limited to towns and cities. Rural communities continued to use datun or miswak. Many switched after moving to urban centres for study or work and encountering toothpaste in hostels or shared housing.

After independence, toothpaste gradually spread into rural areas, but the market began to gather pace in the 1990s. Advertising campaigns, expanding education and growing health awareness all played their part in changing habits, said Hamid.

Today, the market features a mix of multinational companies and domestic brands, with more than 14 players competing for share.

According to industry insiders, the current size of the oral care market stands at around Tk 2,000 crore, of which toothpaste accounts for roughly Tk 1,500 crore. Rural consumers generate nearly 65 percent of sales, while urban areas account for the rest.

Shamima Akhter, director (Corporate Affairs, Partnerships, and Communications) at Unilever Bangladesh Limited, which owns Closeup and Pepsodent brands, said toothpaste demand continues to rise due to demographic trends and improved awareness.

She said market growth has moderated, however, as penetration approaches saturation.

According to Akhter, urban areas once dominated demand, but rural Bangladesh now plays an equally important role. City dwellers adopted toothpaste earlier and tend to brush more regularly, while rural uptake lagged before accelerating sharply.

Jesmin Zaman, head of marketing at Square Toiletries Limited, which owns White Plus and Magic brands, said that the local oral care market has experienced steady growth over the past 15-20 years.

She said consumer interest in natural and herbal formulations is also rising strongly.

A senior official at Kohinoor Chemicals, which owns the AM PM Herbal Toothpaste brand, said their herbal segment is expanding steadily, though it still represents only about 5 percent of the local toothpaste market.

"Growth broadly mirrors the overall market rather than outpacing it. In neighbouring India, herbal toothpaste has gained far greater popularity and produced several strong brands," said the executive.

A PRICE SENSITIVE SEGMENT

Unilever Bangladesh Director Akhter said a large chunk of local consumers are highly sensitive to price. Rural and low-income households often choose toothpowder because it costs less.

Regular brushing has yet to become firmly embedded in daily culture, especially outside cities, she said.

According to local manufacturers, toothpaste production depends heavily on imported raw materials. Fluoride compounds, sorbitol, flavour oils and much of the packaging are not produced locally in adequate quality and must be sourced abroad.

High inflation, such as in 2022 and 2023, pushed up input costs while eroding purchasing power. Although basic demand for toothpaste tends to hold up, companies saw volumes dip when prices surged, suggesting some households cut back under financial strain.

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Square's Head of Marketing Zaman said the market is moving beyond the traditional emphasis on freshness. Consumers increasingly seek specific benefits, from whitening and sensitivity relief to longer-lasting freshness and herbal gum care.

She said children's oral care has emerged as a particularly promising segment. For those under five, fluoride-free toothpaste is essential because of the risk of swallowing.

Zaman said children aged six and above, however, require fluoride as their diets evolve. These specialised products are expanding quickly as parents become better informed and more families consult dentists.

ORAL HYGIENE NEEDS FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

ANM Nazmul Hoque, director (dental) at the Directorate General of Health Services, said charcoal and ash are highly abrasive and gradually erode enamel, the protective outer layer of the tooth. Once enamel wears away, teeth become sensitive to heat and cold.

Hoque said poor oral hygiene can also lead to gum diseases such as gingivitis and periodontitis, causing tooth loss and infection.

If left untreated, infections may enter the bloodstream and contribute to serious conditions, including endocarditis. People with diabetes are especially vulnerable because the disease severely affects gum health, he said.

Hoque added that oral cancer is now the second most common cancer in the country, often linked to poor oral hygiene, tobacco use and untreated gum injuries.

Ruman Banik, assistant professor of the oral and maxillofacial surgery department at Bangladesh Medical University, explained that in Bangladesh, most patients seek dental care only after experiencing pain.

"Untreated decay often leads to broken teeth, gum infections, and, in severe cases, significant tooth loss. Patients frequently complain of gum bleeding, sensitivity, halitosis, and, less commonly, cysts and tumours," he added.

He attributed these conditions mainly to poor oral hygiene practices, including improper brushing techniques, irregular brushing habits and neglecting nighttime brushing, when bacterial activity is highest.

For individuals with limited resources, Banik suggested maintaining oral cleanliness through accessible methods such as miswak.

"Regular toothpaste is sufficient for daily use," Banik assured.

Overall, he stressed consistent oral hygiene practices and routine dental checkups every three to six months as essential preventive measures.

Industrial solar could shield us from global energy shocks

ASHRAFUL ISLAM RAANA

Bangladesh is not directly involved in the Iran conflict, but its effects are already visible from Dhaka's upscale areas to rural petrol pumps. Anxiety over energy supply is spreading fast, especially among export-driven industries where uncertainty is turning into a serious concern.

This is not new. The 2022 Russia-Ukraine war drove global energy prices up, swelling Bangladesh's import bill and draining foreign reserves. Inflation surged, and its impact still lingers.

The US-Israeli war on Iran has again exposed Bangladesh's dependence on imported fossil fuels, mainly from the Middle East. Crude oil prices have risen 23-25 percent, while spot LNG costs have spiked. Since energy fuels every sector, ranging from factories to food, higher costs inevitably push up the price of everything else.

The question, therefore, is unavoidable: how long can Bangladesh afford to rely so heavily on imported energy?

Geopolitical crises in Kuwait, Iraq, and other parts of the Middle East have repeatedly exposed this structural weakness. Yet fundamental reforms in Bangladesh's energy strategy have remained slow. The country continues to expand fossil-fuel infrastructure while renewable energy still occupies only a marginal place in the power mix.

In this context, expanding locally available renewable energy is no longer just an environmental aspiration – it is an urgent economic necessity. Renewable energy sources are largely immune to geopolitical volatility, making them a strategic shield for import-dependent economies like Bangladesh.

There are already examples within South Asia. Pakistan has significantly expanded its renewable energy capacity in recent years.

By 2025, more than 46 percent of its electricity generation capacity is expected to come from renewable sources. As a result, global fuel price volatility is having a comparatively smaller impact on its energy system.

For Bangladesh, the most immediate opportunity lies not in distant deserts or offshore wind farms — but right above our heads.

By 2025, over 46 percent of Bangladesh's electricity is expected to come from renewables, cushioning the impact of global fuel price swings. The most immediate opportunity lies on factory rooftops.

Across industrial zones, more than 5,000 factories sit beneath vast concrete roofs. According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue, rooftop solar could generate 5,500 MW, equal to four large coal plants.

For entrepreneurs, the incentives are strong: solar could cut monthly energy costs by 15-20 percent, a major boost for the garment industry that drives over 80 percent of exports.

Net metering already allows users to feed surplus power into the grid, making investments more attractive. Still, progress is slow.

By late 2024, Bangladesh's solar capacity stood at 1,084 MW, with rooftop systems contributing just 190 MW. Installations have grown nearly 200 percent in a year, but the sector remains far short of its vast potential.

MAJOR BARRIERS

Since 2009, Bangladesh's power sector has attracted large private investments thanks to government-backed guarantees like capacity payments, which reassured lenders and fuelled fossil-fuel projects. Rooftop solar, however, receives no such support.

Fossil-fuel infrastructure also enjoys tax breaks: imports for coal plants face duties as low as five percent, while solar panels are taxed between 14 and 28 percent. This imbalance discourages renewable investment.

The upfront cost is another hurdle. A five-MW rooftop system can cost several crores of taka, leaving many factories hesitant without accessible financing. Banks remain cautious about smaller projects.

To bridge these gaps, new models are emerging. Under Capex, factory owners invest directly; under Opex, third-party investors install and operate systems, selling electricity at fixed rates.

The state-owned Infrastructure Development Company Limited (Idcol) – which finances renewable infrastructure projects– has already backed rooftop solar in over 150 factories, but scaling up requires far greater involvement from banks and private investors.

Progress is also slowed by bureaucracy. Entrepreneurs face lengthy net-metering approvals, and utilities often resist connecting solar projects.

Still, success stories prove the potential. Youngone Corporation in Chattogram's Korean Export Processing Zone has installed nearly 37MW of rooftop solar, enough to power 30,000–40,000 households daily. These examples show rooftop solar is not a dream but a practical solution.

Bangladesh now needs decisive policy action: tax breaks for solar equipment, faster net-metering approvals, accessible financing, and stronger private-sector support. Rooftop solar could quickly stabilize industrial power, cut import dependence, boost export competitiveness, and shield the economy from future energy shocks.

The writer is an independent journalist with eight years of experience covering the energy sector

Reliance buys 5m barrels of Iranian oil after US waiver

REUTERS, *New Delhi/Singapore*

India's Reliance Industries, operator of the world's biggest refining complex, has purchased 5 million barrels of Iranian crude, days after the US temporarily removed sanctions on the oil, three sources familiar with the matter said on Tuesday.

The Indian refiner bought the oil from the National Iranian Oil Co., two of the sources said.

One of them said the crude was priced at a premium of about $7 a barrel to ICE Brent futures. It was not immediately clear when the oil would be delivered.

Iranian oil, which in recent years has mainly been bought by Chinese independent refiners, is often rebranded as originating from another country.

Reliance did not respond to emails seeking comment. NIOC could not be reached for comment.

The Trump administration on Friday issued a 30-day sanctions waiver for the purchase of Iranian oil already at sea. The waiver applies to oil loaded on any vessel, including tankers under sanctions, on or before March 20 and discharged by April 19.

The deal marks India's first purchase of Iranian oil since the world's third-biggest oil importer and consumer halted imports from Iran in May 2019, months after Washington reimposed sanctions on Tehran.

The purchase comes after Indian refiners snapped up more than 40 million barrels of Russian crude after the US announced a temporary sanctions waiver this month to ease supply shortages.

Philippines declares 'national energy emergency'

AFP, *Manila*

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared a state of "national energy emergency" on Tuesday, citing risks to the domestic fuel supply and energy stability created by the Middle East war.

The state of emergency was declared just hours after the country's energy secretary said the Philippines planned to boost the output of its coal-fired power plants to keep electricity costs down as the war wreaks havoc with gas shipments.

"A state of national energy emergency is hereby declared in light of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, and the resulting imminent danger posed upon the availability and stability of the country's energy supply," the executive order released Tuesday evening said.

The order authorises the country's Department of Energy to make advance payments of 15 percent to secure fuel contracts while taking direct action against hoarding or profiteering.

"The declaration... will enable the government, through the (energy department) and other concerned agencies, to implement responsive and coordinated measures under existing laws to address the risks posed by disruptions in the global energy supply and the domestic economy," the order said.

The order also grants the transportation department the ability to direct public transportation fuel subsidies and reduce or suspend toll charges and aviation fees,

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Vietnam to cut domestic flights over jet fuel shortage

AFP, *Hanoi*

Vietnam's national air carrier will suspend nearly two dozen domestic flights a week starting next month because of limited fuel supplies caused by the Mideast war, the nation's aviation authority said.

The price of jet fuel has soared since the start of the conflict more than three weeks ago, which has sent oil prices surging and sparked fears of fuel shortages.

"Vietnam Airlines plans to temporarily suspend operations on several routes from April 1," totalling 23 flights a week, the country's civil aviation authority said in a statement late Monday.

"The limited supply of aviation fuel (Jet A-1) due to the conflict in the Middle East has put domestic airlines at risk of fuel shortages," prompting the flight cuts, the authority said.

Major domestic routes and international flights are being maintained, it said.

Airlines in Vietnam were working on adding fuel surcharges on international routes that may be applied in April, it added.

Vietnam has recently asked for fuel support from several countries, including Qatar, Kuwait, Algeria and Japan, and on Monday signed a deal with Russia on oil and gas production in both countries.

The price of 95-octane petrol and diesel in the manufacturing hub has soared by 50 percent and 70 percent, respectively, since the war began in late February.

US seeks to ease oil fears but industry is wary

AFP, *Houston*

A top US official in President Donald Trump's government sought to reassure fears about the oil market Monday as war raged on in the Middle East, but industry leaders remain wary.

US Energy Secretary Chris Wright told the annual CERAWeek conference in Houston that disruption to global energy flows is "temporary," as costs surged after US-Israeli strikes on Iran prompted Tehran's retaliation that virtually blocked the Strait of Hormuz.

Wright said Washington has adopted "pragmatic solutions" such as by helping oil flow to Asian refineries. The United States also started releasing oil from its strategic reserves on Friday.

"But these are mitigants of a situation that's temporary," he stressed to a packed ballroom.

His comments came as energy industry leaders converge in Texas this week under the cloud of oil and gas supply disruptions from the war launched by the United States and Israel against Iran in late February.

More than 10,000 attendees are expected for CERAWeek, the spring gathering that has taken on unexpected importance as fuel prices rocketed after the war began. Wright said the United States would be able to release up to 1.5 million barrels of oil a day, and this could get close to three million barrels.

Attacks on critical energy facilities in Iran, Qatar and other Gulf countries have exacerbated global supply problems.

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