

## Editorial

# Adulteration of food

— Bangladesh perspective

The food safety situation in Bangladesh is at an alarming stage due to adulteration of food with toxic chemicals harmful to health has reached an epidemic proportion in Bangladesh. The newspapers have dubbed it as the 'silent killer'.

According to World Health Organization and Food and Agricultural Organization, food is considered safe if there is reasonable certainty that no harm will result from its consumption. Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

It is very difficult to find a sector of food industry which is free of adulteration. From raw vegetable and fruits to milk and milk products to fish, meat and processed food - every food item is contaminated. Almost every day in the newspapers, newer and newer methods of adulterating newer and newer types of foods are reported. Carbide, formalin, heavy metal, chemical, textile colors, artificial sweeteners, DDT, urea etc. are used rampantly for this purpose. Contamination of foods with toxic chemicals pose a serious threat to public health, especially in a country like Bangladesh due to the low level of education. Immediate effect of ingestion of such foods may be severe forms of diarrhoea (food poisoning) & in the long run, these chemicals in food adversely affect vital organs such as the liver and kidney resulting in organ failure and/or cancer and thus, untimely loss of life.

There is no database in the country for these, but the recent surge in liver and kidney failure patients in the hospitals is indicative of the deteriorating situation. In a

recent study, it has been found that though people are aware about the health hazards, they are nevertheless buying and consuming these adulterated foods. Several explanations are made for this paradox; absence or unavailability of non-adulterated food, failure of the regulatory agency to test and screen out adulterated food, adulterated foods are attractive in appearance and costs less, cultural factors and food habits etc. There is no paucity of laws and regulations to contain adulteration of food in Bangladesh such as Bangladesh Standard Testing Institute (BSTI)

A group of health experts and green activists demanded that authorities control the use of pesticide in food production to protect public health. The research report which suggests that about ten percent of fruits collected from different part of Dhaka city had high percentage of formalin. About 61 samples of fruits including mangoes, apples, dates, banana, malta, guava, pineapple, cucumber and a number of others were brought to it for formalin test. Another recent research report on examining food items for presence of poisonous elements conducted by Food Security Research (FSR) suggests about that 40 percent of food items carries more than 3-20 percent higher DDT, Aldrin, Chlordane, Heptachlor and other poisonous elements than permissible level. Of them 35 percents of fruits and 50 percents of vegetables had the presence of pesticides, there are 13 samples of rice which had the excessive amount of arsenic and about five rice items had chromium. Unchecked use of pesticide in agriculture is posing a threat to public health. A section of unscrupulous traders use these chemicals in fruits to keep them fresh for long, which adversely affects human health.

Some of the chemicals have even been classified as carcinogens or cancer causing substances. The food industry has grown by leaps and bounds in the past two decades, but food regulation has hardly kept pace.

The issue of coordination of food safety activities is prime factor to combat adulteration and bring back to track the whole process.

The question of identification of level of adulteration needs laboratory test, detection of contents of mixture, legal authority to prosecute the sources of supply and production, and legal agency to take the lead in nabbing the offenders. In fact, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Food, Ministry of Agriculture, Local Government Division, Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Industry and Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Information can play a very important role in food safety issues. Besides, Civil Society Organizations and mass media can also contribute much to generate awareness and resist its repetitions.

Food and Drug Administration was established in the USA and Food Safety and Standard Authority started functioning in India with trained personnel with the capability of enforcement of law and understanding of its complications from scientific knowledge and background. Almost all countries around the world are concerned about the coordination of such complicated issues. The question of human rights, detection of offence accurately and also extent of punishments are great concerns with food adulteration.

Bangladesh Standard and Testing Institute were established in 1985, Consumer Right Act, 2009 was approved by the parliament with the functioning of a department under the guidance of a council headed by the commerce minister. In fact, there are arrangements to detect the defaulters with the laboratory test and enforce the existing laws to combat the menace but concerted efforts are inadequate.

"Crimes go unabated for lax of government watch" was the observation of a seminar recently held on the food safety in Bangladesh. The major point raised during the

discussion was whether public are taking "food or poison". Comparable to international ones, there is very little activity at the ground level to monitor or detect adulterated foods in the market or punish the guilty.

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