

Educating The Consumer

Cynics are ready to swear that Bangladesh is the largest low-cost laboratory on earth, and not without reason. All kinds of opportunists can test their wares on people here—from counterfeit consumer goods concocted by petty, home-grown traders to scientific experiments by well-heeled researchers from the global neighbourhood. One has only to have one's antenna up, so to say, to catch the culprits at work. Unfortunately the overwhelming majority of the population in Bangladesh haven't the foggiest notion that they have rights they can fight for.

Time to educate the Bangladesh public that they can demand honest information and internationally applicable ethical standards with respect not only to ordinary consumer goods but also drugs and vaccines that are dispensed in this country in the name of family planning and other "health" interventions. This may be a tall order, considering the poverty and backwardness of the general population. But there is no reason why the educated minority should not play a more responsible role by keeping themselves informed and active so that the interests of all are served.

The vigilance of the intelligentsia is crucial for people's protection in today's global village. Up to date information could at least fend off dubious experiments on innocent people like those that had happened with some questionable contraceptives. Even now, some drug companies are reported to be actively conducting vaccine tests on school children on the pretext of immunising them against Hepatitis B, a sexually transmitted disease, and this is being done, we are told, with the consent of the school authorities and parents. Bangladesh's civil society, the educated class at least, should have been curious about the programme and delved deep into the hidden agenda and the ethics of pushing experimental vaccines into our children. Unfortunately that has not been happening.

Product safety—be it ordinary edibles, drugs, pesticides or household goods—does not seem to bother anyone here, despite the fact that some half-hearted attempts were made years ago to start a consumer protection movement. Under these circumstances it is some comfort to learn that finally a move towards protecting the consumer from the hazards that come along with their daily transactions, has been made. After years of discussions and debates the Commerce Ministry is reported to have submitted a draft bill to the latest cabinet meeting for approval. If okayed, it would hopefully help conscientious citizens fight adulteration, fraud and other dishonest and illegal dealings with respect to the goods and services they buy.

How effective consumer protection laws would be in Bangladesh would of course depend on the tenacity of aggrieved consumers to go for litigation, which, to say the least, is not an attractive proposition under the country's flawed legal system. But with consumer protection laws in place there is at least a provision to go to court when wronged. And consumer groups could move in a body for public interest litigation, should the need arise. When powerful multinationals are the wrong doers, citizens would certainly need strong laws and groups to demand redress.

In developed countries producers of consumer goods are bound by law to inform the public what their products are made of and how safe or otherwise they may be. Not so in Bangladesh. Even reputed multinationals who are known to be law-abiding in the mother country, think nothing of keeping the Bangladeshi consumer in the dark regarding the ingredients of a given product, be it a pill or a bathroom cleaner. They can get away with it because the public at large is blissfully unaware of the hazards while the educated minority is mostly apathetic.

We have only to be a little alert to make these erratic companies rectify themselves. As for the petty, but no less hazardous, adulteration of everyday food items—DDT-laced or formalin-drenched fish, red-brick dust in chilli powder, flour in dried milk, urea in sugar, or more serious tampering with essential drugs like the paracetamol poisoning scandal years ago—the country's law enforcers could be made to bring them to book—if the citizens have the will

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