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Food security, food safety still remain a major challenge

FOOD security — which entails the adequacy of food, equitable distribution, confirmed supply, fair access and sustained sources, among other issues — and food safety — which entails safe sources of all food, freedom from avoidable chemical and microbial contamination, safe storage, preparation and processing, among other issues — have remained inadequately attended to, as the ruling Awami League, which promised, in its manifesto before the 2008 and the 2014 general elections, national food security, people's right to food and nutrition for 85 per cent of the population by 2021, has done little in this direction in its two consecutive tenures since 2009. Food safety and food security, which are interrelated, have thus remained largely ignored although Bangladesh in recent years has been able to increase food grain production substantially, yet not enough to meet the nutrition requirement of the nation. In a situation like this, an agriculture economist says that although no one now dies from hunger, there has been a hidden hunger. This warrants that the authorities should change their definition of food security, which also entails people's access to enough and safe food at affordable prices to meet their daily nutrition requirement.

The Awami League in its manifesto also promised the population the minimum energy requirement for a healthy person, at least 2,122kcal a day, by 2021, yet the International Food Policy Research Institute, as New Age reported on Wednesday, says that about 28 million people of Bangladesh cannot buy enough rice to meet their hunger. A study that BRAC University and the Leveraging Agriculture for Nutrition in South Asia released in 2017, says that a third of the people face food deprivation and they could consume less than 1,800kcal a day. The World Food Programme, in October 2016, says that a fourth of the 160 million people are food-insecure and hungry. Nutritionists blame micronutrient deficiencies, mostly in women and children, on the lack of availability and access to non-cereal nutrient-rich food. This seems to be worrying when viewed in the context that one in every three children suffers from stunting. Although a decline to 36 per cent from more than 50 per cent, as recorded in 2004, seems to be an improvement, yet this remains a challenge as the rate of stunting in many Asian countries is very low. Coupled with this are the problems of open market sales which has failed to leave any considerable impact on the food supply scene, especially for the poor, and the corruption in the supply chain as OMS rice is often reported to have been stolen and found selling on the market.

Issues of safe food have also remained a worry as the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority, set up in 2013, could hardly leave any impact on safe food situation. The government has so far largely failed to create an environment where the food safety authorities could meaningfully work. The authorities are also mired in technical incapacities, which hold their officials in the field from taking any action against businesspeople in the food industry. The government, presided over by the Awami League, therefore, must understand that without adequate measures taken at the earliest, the nation would hurtle to a disaster.

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