

Market Flooded with Adulterated Cosmetics, Consumers in Peril

Jasim Uddin, Dhaka Post, June 30, 2022

Ashrafunnahar Amy often buys cosmetic products from the capital's Chawkbazar. Besides selling them in a market in Dhanmondi, she also runs a parlour. On December 9, she bought brand soap, lotion, cream, shampoo and some cosmetics for the parlour from Chawkbazar. She thought she bought 100 per cent authentic products. But after bringing them to her parlour, she found out that along with the original products, adulterated products worth around Tk 20 thousand were handed over to her.

Amy says, 'I bought the products without checking as I know the sellers and trust them. But I was given adulterated products. This is awful. I am an entrepreneur. If this can happen to me, where would the ordinary consumers go?'

Businessmen, cosmetics manufacturers and experts say that millions of consumers in the country directly buy all types of cosmetics from various small and big stores. Many of them are buying fake and substandard products without knowing. In the absence of proper monitoring in this large consumer-related sector, some corrupt traders are churning huge sums of money by producing and marketing these products which are seriously harmful to human health.

What the law enforcement data suggests

In 2021, 2,509 operations were conducted by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) against adulterated cosmetic products. At the end of the operation, 13,057 cases were registered. The mobile court conducted in the campaign collected a fine of Tk 455.5 million 96 thousand and 924. After the operation, 982 people were directly sent to jail.

In one such raid by RAB, fake Johnson's Baby Lotion was seized from a factory manufacturing adulterated products. 'MANUFACTURED BY JOHNSON'S & JOHNSON'S LIMITED' was written on each of the bottles. Along with these, eight cartons of 'Lucy Oliva' olive oil (100 ml bottles) worth Tk 138 thousand were seized. Each glass bottle was labelled with 'Products of Spain' in English.

Besides, RAB conducted 131 raids till April 7 this year (2022). 507 cases were filed. The fine was Tk 30.5 million 32 thousand and 800. 44 people were sent to prison. According to RAB, 56 operations were conducted related to the production of adulterated products. 14 of these were related to cosmetics.

Public health experts say these adulterated cosmetics are very harmful to the health and skin of the user. The overabundance of adulterated cosmetics cannot be stopped by carrying out raids

and fines or even by creating awareness. Buyers are being cheated; genuine manufacturers are losing money.

Serious physical complications can occur besides cancer

Chief Consultant of Dhaka Dermatology Institute and Laser Treat, Dr Sarkar Mahbub Ahmed Shamim told Dhaka Post, 'Many people are suffering from chronic skin diseases due to the use of adulterated cosmetics. Such patients are visiting our chambers. Fake cosmetics contain excessive amounts of steroids, mercury and hydroquinone that can cause permanent skin thinning. The skin becomes incurably sensitive. Many suffer from chronic redness of the skin. Lately, many parlours are using adulterated cosmetics. They ask for a very high price. People with skin sensitivity should use cosmetics under the advice of a specialist doctor.'

Director of the Biomedical Research Center of Dhaka University and Professor of the Department of Pharmaceutical Technology ABM Farooq told Dhaka Post that not only cancer but neurological weakness also can be caused by the use of harmful chemical-rich and substandard cosmetics. Even kidneys can get damaged. It is important to develop a quality control and adulteration-free market system for cosmetics.

He added, 'During our research, we have seen fake cosmetics being marketed as brand products with similar names or spellings. Various harmful chemicals, leather and industrial dyes are being used. As a result, consumers are suffering from diseases such as cancer, skin infection, and allergies. The scary thing is that these adulterated cosmetics manufacturing factories are located in Dhaka and its surrounding areas. The manufacturing is now an open secret. Even the locals know about it but the law enforcement can't see! This cannot be acceptable. Consumers need to be more aware of this. Traders also need to step up. Otherwise, it will not be possible to stop them.'

Huge difference between genuine and fake products

Several fake products were seized in an operation conducted by the Metropolitan Police (DB) on March 13. Two samples of the seized adulterated cosmetics were tested at the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) lab on court orders. The BSTI report showed that the quality of ingredients used in the seized products was much lower than the specified standard.

Dhaka Post received two copies of the report collected from BSTI. The report showed that the total fatty matter found in the baby soap sample was 66.68 per cent. The standard is a minimum of 78 per cent. Moisture and Volatile Matter had an additional 2.91 per cent where it should have been at 15.0.

On the other hand, the BSTI lab test report of baby skin lotion showed that the water content of that cream was higher than the Bangladesh standard (BDS 1382:2019). 10 gm of Staphylococcus Aureus should be present but the test showed no presence of the material at all. Similarly, there was no sign of Pseudomonas Aeruginosa.

The President of the Cosmetics and Related Products Branch of BSTI's Standardization Committee and Professor of the Department of Applied Chemistry and Chemical Engineering of the University of Dhaka Dr. Md. Noor Nabi told Dhaka Post, 'Fatty matter is the main ingredient

of any baby soap. A quality soap should have at least 78 per cent fatty matter. There was 66 per cent in that adulterated soap. It did not pass the quality standard’.

He added, ‘Secondly, the standard amount for moisture and volatile matter is fixed at 15 per cent maximum. The matters were three per cent higher in adulterated soaps. That means it also failed the quality test.

‘What they tried to do is balance the amount of less fatty matter with increasing moisture. Insoluble ethanol was found to be about four per cent instead of one and a half per cent. By using this ingredient more than the permitted amount the soap becomes firm and less slippery. As a result, the consumer can use it longer. But it is injurious to health. It can damage the skin and increase inflammation. For consumers who have allergies, this can lead to serious physical complications. The presence of higher amounts of insoluble ethanol means the soap is of poor quality. It is unhygienic.’

Referring to the baby skin lotion test report he said, ‘In the case of baby lotion, we have fixed the pH (Potential of Hydrogen) value at 5 to 10 per cent. The level was at 6.83 per cent in those fake lotions. It’s good. But to balance this, the adulterants put only four per cent of non-volatile matter instead of the recommended least amount of 10 per cent. They increased the water content. In other words, buyers will be losers in buying this kind of baby lotion. Because, by increasing the amount of water, the producers have reduced the cost.’

Dr Noor Nabi added, ‘Cosmetics are very popular consumer products. It is used by more or less all strata of people. We test samples from time to time. We also keep hearing that the cosmetics Market is being flooded with fake products. But, to control adulteration BSTI’s role is of a carpet knight. They are setting the standards, and approval of the products. But are unable to control the fake products. They do not have a strategy to stop this. They are a lifeless organization.