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## Let the census be a harbinger of change

But authorities should address loopholes first

The sixth population census of Bangladesh, and the first to be done digitally, is finally out. It's a huge undertaking no doubt, covering a lot of components, but here are the major findings from the preliminary report unveiled on Wednesday: Bangladesh, at least officially, now has a population of 16.51 crore (excluding expatriates). The population growth rate has come down to 1.22 percent from 1.46 percent in 2011, when the last census was conducted. This is a major victory for family planning campaigners who noted the slow growth trend over the past decades and the prospect of reaching "population stabilisation" with zero growth by 2050.

Division-wise, the highest growth rate has been recorded in Dhaka, unsurprisingly, and the lowest in Barishal. There were also three notable demographic shifts: Females outnumbering males for the first time (by 1,634,382); the increase of the urban population size (with 31.51 percent of the total population living in urban areas compared to 23.30 percent in 2011); and the decline in the population ratios of religious minorities. Overall, the country's population density has increased to 1,119 people per square kilometre, which was 976 in 2011.

The latest census, delayed by a year because of the pandemic, will influence major socioeconomic policies in the coming days. It also offers a window into the demographic changes taking place silently and over time. Thus, it is disturbing to see the decline in the population ratios of all religious minorities. The ratio of Hindus, for example, stands at 7.95 percent of the total population, while it was 8.54 percent in 2011 and 13.5 percent in 1974. Their ratio has declined consistently since the Partition, when the subcontinent was divided along religious lines. The same happening today, in a secular country no less, cannot be explained by lower fertility alone. We need to critically examine this.

Another disconcerting feature of the census is the size of the "transgender" population – a mere 12,629 – who were officially counted for the first time. The number is hard to believe, however, and it's likely that many members of the community were not counted. The same goes for the people in flood-hit areas who were fighting for their lives, many cut off from the mainland, when the census was conducted. Its timing – in June and in the middle of monsoon – not only marked a departure from census traditions, but also cost enumerators the chance to include everyone. What about the slum dwellers? What about the homeless and landless people? What about the ethnic minorities? Have they been counted properly?

We hope the authorities will address these issues before the population data is finalised through Post-Enumeration Check (PEC), which will reportedly take a few months to complete. The government must ensure no one is left out of the data, and consequently its benefits. Only then will the census be truly meaningful.

## Ensure equal inheritance for all women

Gendered discrimination violates the spirit of our constitution

IT is extremely disappointing that women in Bangladesh continue to be doubly deprived in terms of inheriting (or getting access to) property and wealth. On the one hand, they still do not get paternal property in the majority of cases; on the other hand, they are being deprived of, or facing challenges in accessing, mahr (denmohor) or dower which is allowed in the Islamic family law. Despite mahr being legally required for all Islamic marriages, women are facing layers of obstacles in actually getting it. And since Bangladesh's family laws do not ensure equal rights for women in inheritance and family property, often they are being put into extremely difficult positions.

These same difficulties are affecting women of other religions too. For example, despite India amending its Hindu Inheritance Act in 2018 to ensure that women have equal property rights as men, Bangladesh is yet to take any such measures. Clearly, gender disparity in our country transcends religious boundaries, as experts have also noted in a recent seminar. As such, what we desperately need is a uniform family law for all religions covering men and women that governs marital and inheritance rights as well as rights that ensure self-governance and autonomy for every individual.

The present situation is not only discriminatory, in a way it is also denying women of their basic human rights, in violation of our constitution which states that all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law. And such discriminatory practices are further hindering the economic, social, and political progress of our nation.

Admittedly, this is not the only discrimination that women face in our country; they face it almost in every sphere of life, in terms of education, social safety, career, family affairs, etc. This culture of discrimination has to change first if we are to ensure that women get their rightful access to inheritance and property. And as much as that is the responsibility of the whole society, the government also has a big role to play here.

To tackle the crippling effect of gender inequality, women's economic status must be strengthened as a priority. Thus, the government should empower the courts and arbitration councils so that women can quickly and fairly access their rightful share of property, following separations from husbands or deaths of parents. Additionally, in keeping with the spirit of the constitution, it is high time the government amended the existing family laws in Bangladesh to ensure equal rights for all women to inheritance and family property.

# CEC hits the wrong nail on the head



THE THIRD VIEW  
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"DEMOCRACY will die if people don't vote." This is a very powerful statement from Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibur Awal. He further said, "If democracy and its spirit are to be kept alive, voters will have to come to the polling stations. If they refuse to come to the polling stations and vote, it will be understood that the country's democracy is sick and will have an unnatural death." The CEC has hit the nail on the head. The hitting is okay. But it is the wrong nail.

The CEC appears to put the onus of protecting democracy only on the voters, and the message is that if voters don't vote, then our democracy will have, in his words, "an unnatural death." What is the CEC's warning based on? Why does he fear that voters may shun the coming election? Is it voters' apathy – of which there was some evidence in the UP elections – or something else? Could it be the role of the Election Commission (EC) itself?

National elections' voter turnout records prove that our people have always been aware of their duties and turned out in significant numbers to exercise their franchise. Not counting the ones under the military regimes – where the turnouts were nearly 60 percent – in the elections held after the fall of Gen Ershad, meaning from 1991 onwards, the turnouts were more impressive. From 2001 onwards, it reached 75 percent and above, with the election of 2008 – which brought the present ruling party and the present prime minister to power – reaching the highest ever turnout of 87.13 percent.

So why is the CEC worried about voter turnout in the national election due in 2023 when, as records show, our voters are always eager and willing to go to polls? The answer lies in the workings of the last two elections – in 2014 and 2018 – and the way public trust has all but disappeared from the process, thanks to the role of the last two ECs and their respective heads (CECs).

In the 2014 election, candidates in 153 constituencies were declared "elected" without a single vote cast. The reason given was that there was only one candidate per constituency, and, as such, there was no reason to hold an election. As for the 2018 election, the popular belief is that voting took place the night before.

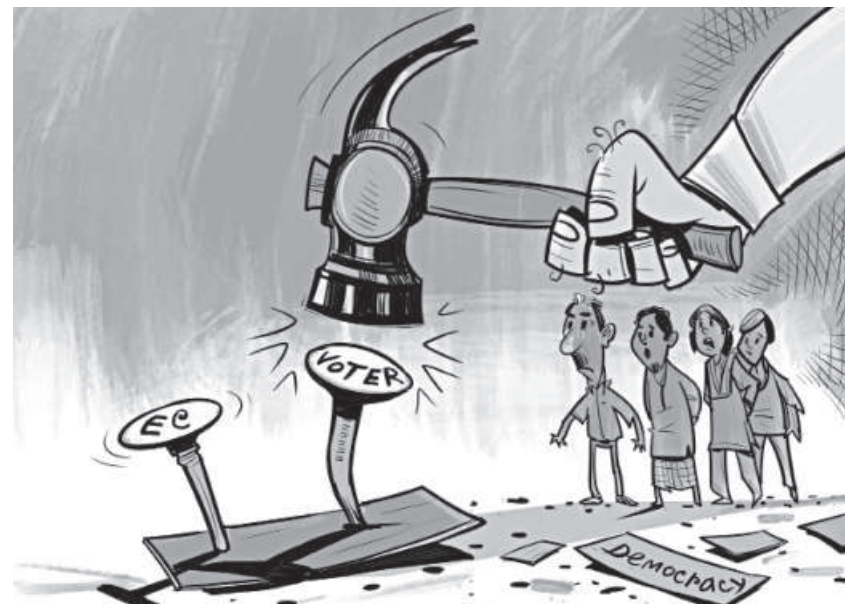


ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

Let us examine these two cases. In 2014, as stated earlier, out of a total of 300 constituencies (not counting the reserved seats for women, which are elected indirectly), 153 MPs were declared "elected" uncontested by the EC.

Only one candidate per constituency is unprecedented and totally contrary to the election tradition in Bangladesh. Even candidates who have no chance to win contest in the polls because, through the process, they gain social recognition and some importance.

Why didn't this statistically impossible and historically improbable figure not trigger any question in the minds of the EC? Did they ask whether candidates were compelled to withdraw from the race or whether any force was used to make this happen? A cursory examination would have revealed that there was a sudden flood of nomination withdrawal at the last moment.

Didn't the EC realise that 153 MPs so "elected" constituted a majority in a parliament of 300 seats, and, as such, this group, in support of whom not a single vote was cast, had the majority of forming the government? By certifying this group, didn't the EC encourage similar forcible withdrawal of candidature to ensure uncontested wins in the future? We are seeing the evidence of it in many UP chairmen elections.

The 153 uncontested winners in 2014 was in stark contrast to the fact that

in 1991, 1996 (June), 2001 and 2008 elections, there was NOT A SINGLE uncontested "winner," according to the EC's own reports. From zero seats to 153 seats, and the EC did not blink an eye in certifying it.

Then there is the election of 2018, where there were clear indications that the whole phenomenon was usurped and the voting process totally subverted.

best of elections.

But the crucial question is: Can you fix the institution that you head? Regrettably, your predecessors – I am leaving out those who operated under caretaker governments – have not left you any legacy of dignity and honour. Theirs is a legacy of constant genuflecting before power.

The CEC, along with other members of the EC, is now conducting dialogues with political parties on how to hold a free and fair election, to which the CEC has pledged his total commitment. The first question that people are asking is: How much power and willingness does the EC have to implement these recommendations – even a few select ones? The general impression is none, and hence the whole dialogue process takes the hue of a farce.

How empowered is the Election Commission? Much depends on how the commission sees its own mandate. The constitution envisages the "people" as the "source of all power," and the expression of people's "will" as the only legitimate process of governance. Free and fair elections are the best process of expressing that "will," and the EC is fully and primarily responsible for ensuring that. Thus, the EC's role touches the very core of our existence as a democratic entity.

The EC's constitutional, legal and moral mandate is to ensure a free and fair election.

The Appellate Division has indicated the inherent power of the EC to ensure it. According to "Constitutional Law of Bangladesh" by Mahmudul Islam, the book considered to be the most authoritative on the subject, "The constitution does not envisage anything else than a free and fair election and any law that will stifle the hands of the Commission in ensuring free and fair election will not pass the test of constitutionality... The Commission has to supervise, control and direct each and every step of the process to ensure free and fair election and the Commission must deem to have all the power and discretion to ensure free and fair election as that is the manifest intent of the Constitution in providing for the Commission." (Third edition, Pages 970-974). Nothing could be clearer about the constitutional mandate of the EC to deliver a free and fair election. What more power does the EC need to discharge its obligation?

The ultimate question is: Will the CEC and his EC serve to express the WILL of the people or that of the powers that be? The former will lead to the strengthening of democracy, and the latter will lead to, in his own words, its "unnatural death."

More starkly put, will the EC be an "event manager" or a "democracy strengthener"?

The ruling party MPs lamented in private – especially those who performed well, had a long tradition of service, and felt confident to carry their constituencies – about the way the process was taken over by "institutions." When asked by the MPs confident of winning, "Sir, we cannot take any chance" was the usual reply.

Then there were numerous by-elections where the EC was publicly seen to overlook blatant violations of the electoral rules by the ruling party candidates and their supporters. We saw some recent instances, too, which significantly maligned the image of the current EC.

Starting from 2014, over the years, and especially following the 2018 elections and several by-elections, the EC has lost its credibility and public confidence.

If voters refrain from going to the next polls, scheduled for late 2023 or early 2024, it will not be because they lack the interest, knowledge and understanding of the importance of exercising their franchise, but because of the lack of confidence in the central body that conducts the whole process – the Election Commission.

Our clear message to the CEC is: You restore public faith in the institution you lead, and voters will flock to the polls on their own. Your worry need not be focused on the voters, but your own institution. Fix it, and we will have the

## A holistic approach towards climate change



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IN the context of climate change, buzzwords like sustainable development, adaptation, resilience, vulnerabilities, and green skills always remain on top of our discourse. While the concepts are separate – addressing different, sometimes overlapping agendas – all of these can be grouped under a single agenda of achieving human and environmental welfare. Although there is still much to do, Bangladesh is making steady progress. That being said, working for the well-being of climate vulnerable communities has never been easy as their problems are multifaceted and complex. The vulnerabilities of these communities are not limited to their exposure to climate change only, but further constrained by the dire lack of basic needs. For an exposition, let's look into Gabura, a hotspot for climate change research and interventions.

Gabura is a remote union of Shyamnagar upazila in the Satkhira district located on the southern coast of Bangladesh. It is widely known to both national and international stakeholders for its exposure to frequent cyclones, storm surges, floods, erosion, and salinity intrusion. Such extreme events severely affect the social-ecological systems of the communities, resulting in huge losses and damages. Moreover, the stressors that further intensify their existing problems of basic facilities – such as

lack of freshwater, adequate healthcare and hygienic sanitation, and limited livelihood opportunities – are the key challenge that needs to be addressed.

Several factors must be taken into consideration while developing a sustainable model for providing solutions to communities. They include: interconnectedness of issues; people's overdependence on natural resources; unpredictable nature of disasters; lack of technological innovations and skilled human resources; lack of community awareness; and remote geographic locations. They all contribute to the complexities and challenges of working in Gabura and similar places across the country. So, what are the present approaches to address the issues, and what outcomes do they bring?

It is perhaps because of the complexities of the problems that, so far, most intervention approaches have been segregated in nature, targeting segregated problems of the vulnerable communities. Again, if we look at the case of Gabura, we see that plenty of interventions are ongoing to support its communities. There are at least 10 NGOs operating in Gabura for the welfare of its people and the environment. NGO programmes in this region focus on specific beneficiary groups, with specific intervention needs such as freshwater accessibility,

healthcare, livestock rearing, livelihood, and others.

Though some programmes are developing a particular aspect of a beneficiary group, such as livelihood training, in most cases the beneficiary groups miss other intervention facilities (from the same or any other NGOs) needed to ensure their overall well-being. Moreover, because the issues are interconnected, these drawbacks also challenge the sustainability of the particular interventions they receive. For example, a beneficiary group that has received rainwater harvesting tanks is likely to lose the credibility of maintaining it if their need for income opportunities remains unaddressed.

Overall, such drawbacks elucidate good reasons as to why development projects in Gabura have not yielded significant progress yet. In 2022, a baseline survey conducted by the SAJIDA Foundation found that 89 percent out of 313 people surveyed in Gabura consider available healthcare facilities inadequate, and 59 percent depend on rainwater as a primary source of drinking water, while also reporting that they were not able to meet their economic needs with their present limited livelihood options.

However, Gabura is not the only such vulnerable place; there are many other places facing distress from climate risk. Nevertheless, Gabura's dire situation, even after numerous ongoing interventions, is enough to induce the scale of distress faced by other vulnerable locations across the country that remain out of focus. Since our present segregated approaches, to some extent, lack efficiency to achieve long-lasting transformational change, a unique holistic approach should be our way forward to work in the vulnerable regions of the country.

A holistic approach should address

all the necessities of a region in an integrated manner, so that the target population becomes more resilient and self-sufficient in respect to their social, economic and environmental domains – the three pillars of sustainability. A successful intervention should work in alignment with: 1) The social pillar (by ensuring well-being through physical and mental healthcare, and access to freshwater sources); 2) The environmental pillar (by training people on nature-based solutions and green skills); and 3) The economic pillar (focusing on livelihood and skills development programmes in climate vulnerable communities). It should ensure community well-being and play an important role in addressing climate change with its interventions like nature-based solutions (NBS), green skills and livelihoods. The long-term viability of the programme and the overall community welfare and resilience would improve because their interconnected problems would be addressed parallelly.

Working for community development is a dynamic and evolving process. As we advance and gain deeper understanding from our development and intervention strategies, we should also stay open to adopting and trying new approaches as needed.

Through productive discussions, we should build on our existing knowledge and experience, and identify leverage points to work efficiently. At this point, as a way forward to achieve our well-being, we should become innovative and follow more comprehensive and integrated strategies while working for the betterment of the vulnerable communities in Bangladesh.

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