

## Dried-up Teesta continues to haunt farmers

Bangladesh needs to find a realistic solution

We are concerned for the thousands of farmers who depend on the flow of water in the Teesta River for their livelihoods. Only a couple of weeks ago, farmers could rely on the Teesta's water flow for their farming activities. Now, however, as this newspaper reported on Friday, the mighty waterbody has completely dried up in many places of Lalmonirhat. As a consequence, many farmers in different char areas of the district, who cultivate various crops on the sandy char lands, are being compelled to use diesel-run shallow machines to irrigate their croplands. This, of course, is pushing up the production costs of farmers who can afford to set up such machines, while others do not even have that luxury, making farming impossible for them.

According to the Lalmonirhat Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) deputy director, about 20,000 farmers in different upazilas are growing various crops on vast char areas along the Teesta and Dharla rivers. These farmers have managed to change their fates by growing potatoes, maize, pumpkins, and other crops on sandy land. This crop production would cost little if there was enough water flow in the Teesta river. The flow, however, is not enough because the riverbed is full of silt, and it seems the river has been divided into five or six narrow channels.

Lalmonirhat's Patgram Upazilla is the entry point of the Teesta into Bangladesh. But India has built an irrigation barrage at the Indian side of the Teesta, specifically the Malbazar Town in Jalpaiguri. The Teesta Barrage, unfortunately, is working as a blockade and diverting the water. As a result, the Bangladeshi portion of the river tends to dry up. Authorities from India and Bangladesh have held talks about the river situation with practically no results. The drying up has been so severe that farmers are cultivating pumpkins in the dried-up land. As an additional concern, the natural biodiversity and the ecosystem of the area are also at risk.

Given the circumstances, it cannot be emphasised enough how important it is for Bangladesh to find a sustainable solution to the long-drawn-out Teesta water sharing saga with India. Despite decades of negotiations and numerous promises from our Indian partners, the Teesta water sharing agreement between Bangladesh and India is nowhere near being settled. We understand the primary reason for this has been the complex domestic politics in India. However, Bangladesh cannot be its victim forever and watch its farmers continue to lose their livelihoods because of it for decades on end.

## Higher fertility rate in urban areas concerning

Take urgent measures to prevent child marriage, school dropouts

We are worried about the increase in fertility rates in urban areas of the country, as highlighted in a recent survey by the National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT). According to the survey, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), or the number of births per woman, in urban areas increased from 2.01 percent in 2013 to 2.14 percent in 2021, and in non-slum areas, from 1.74 to 1.91 during the same period. Semi-urban areas also saw an increase from 1.93 in 2013 to 2.22 in 2021.

Such findings should worry us because, up until now, we had no clue about such a scenario in the urban areas. In fact, the Population and Housing Census 2022 found that our population growth rate had actually slowed over the past four decades. Our health experts had even praised the government's rigorous family planning campaigns for such improvement. But the increasing TFR in urban areas indicates a grimmer picture of our population growth, if the current trend continues.

The question that naturally arises is: what has contributed to this situation in our urban areas? Health and population experts have identified a number of reasons, such as the rising rates of child marriage, teen pregnancy, and low use of contraceptives for the rising trend in birth rates. Several other government and private surveys done in the past two years have also found an alarming increase in child marriage rates, particularly during the first two years of the pandemic. For instance, a report by the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, based on information provided by 11,769 secondary schools – almost half of all such schools in the country – found that around 50,000 female students became victims of child marriage in 2021. From this data, we can easily gauge the real number of child marriage victims in 2021 alone.

As child marriage rates increased, so did teen pregnancy rates. The NIPORT survey has found that the rate of teenage pregnancy has increased from 13 percent in 2013 to 20 percent in 2021 in non-slum areas, while in slum areas, the rate increased from 21 percent in 2013 to 22 percent in 2021. The survey has also found that the use of contraceptives is low among teenagers and in non-slum areas.

Now that the problems have been identified, it is time for the authorities concerned to plan proper interventions to reduce the TFR rate in urban areas. As a first step, the government must go all-out to prevent child marriages across the country and provide families of adolescent girls with incentives, including stipends, to bring them back to school. It must also strengthen its family planning programmes in urban areas by creating awareness among the targeted populations, particularly adolescents. Only combined efforts from all the government agencies concerned can reverse the current scenario.

# The non-mystery behind Khulna city's declining population



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Khulna, the third largest city of Bangladesh, with a current population of approximately 950,000 and land area spanning 40.8 square kilometres, is the only city in the country which has been experiencing a negative population growth over the last two decades.

Between 2002 and 2021, the city had a negative annual average population growth of -1.38 percent. In 2002, Khulna, for the first time, registered a negative population growth of -1.51 percent over its population in 2001. In the previous 50 years, between 1950 and 2001, the city had experienced a substantial increase in population with an average annual growth of 6.26 percent. The city population reached its peak of 1,255,000 in 2001.

The urbanisation process in Khulna city began as early as in the 1830s due to the growth of commerce and manufacturing sectors. The city was declared as a municipality in 1884. Khulna was upgraded to a City Corporation in 1990. The city has a linear development along Rupsha and Bhairab rivers and has a natural transportation advantage which enabled rapid industrialisation of the area in the 1950s and 1960s. The city's population continued to grow as a result of both natural increase and positive net in-migration.

However, since 2002, the natural increase continued but the negative net in-migration got to the extent that overall population growth became negative. The decline in economic activities in Khulna city over the last two decades, resulting from the closure of state-run jute and textile mills, newsprint mills, match factories, jute baling presses, hardboard mills, etc, and consequently, a rise in migration from the city to adjacent suburbs and other towns has resulted in the depopulation of Khulna city.

Although the overall urban population has grown at a rate of 3.8 percent in Bangladesh during the last two decades, the closure of many state-run jute and textile mills has rendered thousands of workers unemployed in the formal sector. Khulna city is thus facing an economic downturn.

In recent years, some private investment has come to Khulna city mostly in the service sector such as for hotels, hospitals, tourism, and



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education. But these employ fewer people than the shuttered industries used to do.

There are several factors, however, besides the closure of industries that contribute to the net migration of Khulna city's population. These are: rise in land prices, increase in the housing prices, shortage of serviced land for building construction, poor public services, a paucity of city buses, and faster growth of other cities in the south-west (like Jashore, Satkhira, Bagerhat, and Mongla port) where new private sector industries are developing.

One other important factor that explains the negative urbanisation rate in Khulna is a shift of the city's land use, caused by two factors: 1) the development of a major transportation route, that is, the Khulna-Jashore bypass road; and 2) the establishment of institutions for higher education such as Khulna University, Khulna University of Engineering and Technology, Khulna Agricultural University and Sheikh Hasina Medical University.

These have shifted human expansion along the Khulna-Jashore bypass road and around the university areas.

Khulna city experienced growth towards its south-eastern, south-

cheaper land.

Overall, Bangladesh has undergone significant economic transformation in the last four decades and the industrial sector now constitutes 34 percent of our GDP. Thus, the decline of industrialisation in Khulna city should be taken seriously so that this trend can be reversed and the city can contribute significantly to the GDP again.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) envisage that every part of the country should enjoy the fruits of development by ensuring sustained and inclusive economic growth, and decent work for all. In this context, Khulna City Corporation, Khulna Development Authority, Khulna Chamber of Commerce and Industries, and relevant line ministries must sit together to agree on suitable strategies to revive the economic importance of Khulna and encourage industrialisation of the area. Many national and regional policies that affect Khulna city's economy were employed without consulting these local bodies.

In the future, to ensure sustainable, steady, and healthy urbanisation of the country, urban local governments should be included in the decision-making process.

The Padma Multipurpose Bridge

result.

Khulna city can have vibrant economic activities once again, only if deliberate policy decisions are taken.

The two planned economic zones in Rupsha and Batiaghata areas close to Khulna city have potentials for reviving the economic importance of the city if industries are established there. With the construction of Padma Bridge, it is now possible to supply gas to Khulna area and this could ensure the establishment of various large- and medium-sized industries for jute, leather, salt, garments, cement, rods, agriculture, food, and fish processing.

The domination of informal sectors in Khulna city has encouraged the influx of thousands of poor families from the southern districts, who now form about one-third of the city's total population. This translates to almost 300,000 people who live in 1,100 low-income settlements, mostly along the two rivers. This trend needs to be reversed by investing in basic public services, and by industrialising and opening up opportunities for formal employment in the city, thereby reducing urban poverty.

A sustainable urban regeneration strategy along with the effective implementation of the Khulna Master Plan are required for building a vibrant city economy.

## Working with a broken mind

Making the workplace more accepting of people with mental illnesses



THE OUTSPOKEN ONE

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ANUPAM DEBASHIS ROY

Having a mental health issue is difficult. It is difficult to cope with it and even more difficult to function around it.

For someone with a serious mental health issue, getting up from bed every day is a great challenge. But the fact that a large number of people with mental health issues still wish to have gainful employment is very telling. It tells us that much of our self-worth is derived from employment and much of our self-preservation also relies on staying employed. Unfortunately, people with mental health conditions such as clinical depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia have to combat many internal difficulties to even get to work. Hence, the work they need to do should be as easy and acceptable as possible to them.

From my own personal experience, I can say that having a mental health condition hinders one's daily life to a great extent, and having a supportive work environment goes a long way in aiding an individual to function well in life.

The modern workplace has the commendable ability to adapt to the needs of employees, if employers and supervisors are supportive.

Workplaces around the world have responded to mental health crises in various fashions, including through laws. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the US and the Equality Act 2010 in the UK are examples of this. It is unfortunate that we do not have such laws in Bangladesh that can protect people with mental illnesses in the workplace. A piece of legislation called the Mental Health Act 2018 was passed recently, replacing a century-old law. But it fails to specifically address the issue of protection for people with mental health issues in the workplace.

Ideally, there should be a national-level policy on accommodating people with mental illnesses. There should be policies barring exclusion and discrimination based on one's mental health and compelling institutions to take necessary steps to create a safe space for those facing mental health challenges.

In the absence of such laws, people with mental health issues have to live a life of deception. Because of the stigma surrounding mental health in Bangladesh, people often do not disclose their mental health conditions during their selection process for a job.

There is a fear that they would not be hired if they disclose their conditions because of the societal misconceptions that dictate that people with mental health issues are unproductive. This is unfortunate. In the spirit of full disclosure, and because the office may need to make adjustments for the person, employees should be able to freely disclose their mental health condition if they choose to do so or keep it private if they so choose as well.

Employers should know that having a mental health condition does not mean that an employee will become a burden for the institution. In fact, people with mental health challenges often make great employees, as they have the drive to prove to themselves and others that they are able to overcome their mental health challenges. For example, people with bipolar disorder are likely to be more creative than others according to a study published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*.

Post the hiring process, there are a number of things that an employer can do to make life easier for an employee with mental illness. Initiatives like mental health days or weeks, where people are encouraged to discuss their mental health conditions with each other in the presence of a mental health professional, can be helpful. Employees should also be able to take days off for mental wellness, besides sick days for physical illnesses. This is important not only for people with diagnosed mental health issues, but for others as well. In the modern workplace, it is possible for anyone

to be stressed or be burnt out. Having the opportunity to rest and an avenue to vent and seek redress for their mental health issues may be exactly what employees need to cope with an exceedingly stressful work environment.

Modern workplaces have become a source of stress, depression, and anxiety for workers, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). The best way for workplaces to avoid this and ensure the productivity of their workers is by implementing policies that are cognisant of the mental health of employees. This will not be an expense in vain, but a step towards a more effective and productive workplace.

Making sure that a healthy work-life balance exists in the employee's life can go a long way in ensuring their mental well-being. Employers must reexamine their management style to make sure that nobody in the organisation is stretched too thin to achieve the desired outcomes. Overall, the employer needs to care about the employees. That is the only way that mindsets regarding mental health can change. Without a caring employer who is willing to make necessary accommodations to ensure the well-being of their employees, we cannot expect the situation to change for the better.

We need an overhaul of the system to ensure better care for workers. We need to make sure that nobody's mental health is ignored. That is the only way we can ensure better mental health for everyone in the workplace.