

The Daily Star

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Save Sundarbans from plastic pollution

Microplastics ingested by fish and humans posing serious health risks

Amid concerns over the impact of what many have dubbed a "plastic pandemic" in Bangladesh, with tonnes of plastic waste ending up in our rivers every day, scientists have revealed how this is harming marine life in the Sundarbans. According to data collected by a research team, at least 17 species of fish and three species of shellfish from three rivers flowing through the Sundarbans have been found to be contaminated with microplastics. Microplastics are tiny pieces of plastic that, once swallowed by fish, can end up in the human food chain as well.

The study report, published in an environment journal, has also revealed varying amounts of harmful microplastics found in the muscles and gastrointestinal tracts of the fish analysed. It concluded saying that an adult individual consuming 300g of fish muscles per week will ingest 74,282 particles of microplastic annually. On the other hand, a child eating 50g of fish per week will end up consuming about 12,380 particles annually. This can result in various health complications. As an expert told *The Daily Star*, "If it [microplastic] continues to pile up in the stomach, the digestive system will gradually cease to function. If it enters the blood circulation system, the liver and kidney will bear the brunt."

Clearly, the risks are huge, even if their effects may not be felt immediately. The discovery about the presence of microplastics in fish and thereby in humans is nothing new, however, nor is the picture that has been given complete by any means, as only 141 specimens from 20 species were analysed (the Sundarbans is home to over 300 species of fish). But it does confirm doubts about the upward trend in plastic debris accumulation in rivers which has reached far-flung corners of the country. Reportedly, about 25,000 registered fishing boats harvest fish from the Sundarbans and the adjacent bay, with the annual catch from its water bodies estimated to be 3,000 tonnes of fish and 18,150 tonnes of crustacean. It's daunting to think how this huge pile, as well as those from other parts of the country, is impacting the health of consumers.

The time has come to take a critical look at why the authorities, despite a ban on single-use plastic, are failing to prevent its use or discharge into rivers. One may recall a 2020 court directive to the Department of Environment to stop use of single-use plastic in coastal areas by 2022. But as it transpires from the study cited above and various media reports, not only has the department failed to stop it, it has even failed to make any sort of progress in this regard. The lack of political will is largely to blame for that. But we must also address the lack of accountability for institutions in charge of preventing the use of plastics and their unsupervised disposal.

We urge the government to take immediate steps in this regard. As well as increasing supervision, raising awareness and undertaking more research on microplastics, it must hold to account those in charge of stopping river pollution. The plastic ban must be implemented urgently.

Bede girls robbed of their childhood

Govt must protect them from early marriage, early pregnancy

We are quite shocked to learn about the alarming rate of child marriage among the Bede people living on the bank of Savar's Bangshi river. According to a report by this daily, a majority of the girls from this community are married off before they can reach 15 years of age, and by 18 most have about two or three children. Life is hard for this community, especially girls who, robbed of their childhood, have to search for a livelihood at a young age but still cannot earn enough to ensure proper meals for their family. In the absence of any support or income-generating activities, they often resort to begging.

One such girl is 16-year-old Shohagi, who was married off at the age of 10 to a boy only two years her senior. By the time she has turned 16, she has become the mother of two children. Since her unemployed husband cannot support the family financially, Shohagi has to take care of their children and also earn to bear family expenses. Moreover, she has to take care of her elderly mother who has speech impairment. Reportedly, most of the girls in the community have to face similar struggles. Our reporter has interviewed at least 50 girls and found that almost all of them were married off before 15, some well before that even.

We must ask, why are the families marrying off their daughters at such a young age? How can these marriages take place right under the nose of the administration? Equally importantly, how can a community in modern-day Bangladesh still be so vulnerable?

Clearly, young children were deprived of a healthy childhood because the state failed to play its due role. Reportedly, the people of this community, settled in Savar municipality under ward 1, do not have any land or permanent source of income. In the past, they used to make a living through different kinds of activities such as snake charming, selling herbal medicines, etc. But due to rapid urbanisation, their traditional way of life has been challenged, making them more vulnerable. Sending children, particularly girls, to school is a distant dream for most.

The government needs to help this community urgently, especially by creating income-generating opportunities for them and ensuring education for their children. And the local administration must answer for such high rates of child marriage. It must also explain why it couldn't stop a single case of child marriage over the years. As far as we know, there is a committee under the local administration for creating awareness on child marriage and collecting information on the number of child marriages taking place, which, however, remains only on paper. We urge the authorities to make the committee effective so that it can do its job. Children of the Bede community must be protected from the curse of child marriage.

No justice in paying tea workers' arrears



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Foremost of the factors that determine the economic fate of tea workers in Bangladesh is the agreement that the Bangladesh Tea Association (BTA) and Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) sign every two years. While BTA represents owners of the tea gardens, BCSU is the only trade union for around 1,38,000 tea workers and their combined bargaining agent (or CBA).

However, this bi-annual agreement is never signed on time. For instance, the agreement effective for January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2020 was signed on February 25, 2021. The tea workers got their additional pay for 26 months in arrears in four instalments. Additional cash pay for these 26 months was Tk 18 per day.

More baffling is the fact that no agreement has yet been signed for the period from January 1, 2021 to December 31, 2022. Such payment of arrears has become part of the culture in Bangladesh's tea gardens.

Extremely dissatisfied with this delay and the stubbornness of BTA in

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not increasing wages, the tea workers went on an unprecedented strike from August 9 to 27 in 2022. Finally, the prime minister stepped in and fixed the daily cash pay at Tk 170, which is an increase of Tk 50 and Tk 130 less than what workers had demanded.

Still, they went back to work from August 28 in hopes that they would get the increased wage from January 2023. A registered worker who had worked all days during the 20-month arrear period would get Tk 30,000, a good sum for the impoverished tea workers.

Dr Kazi Muzafar Ahmed, secretary of the BTA, said in an interview with *The Business Post* last August, "The permanent workers will get arrears, and we will set the number of

instalments in a meeting with the BCSU. The association will not facilitate any arrears for casual workers, as they are out of our purview." Some gardens were preparing to roll such payment as well.

But the owners' fickleness about signing of the agreement has come as a big shock to tea garden workers.

The BTA and BCSU had already had 15 meetings before the August 2022 strike, to reach an agreement. After the strike ended, they held several meetings. The tea workers' representatives were shocked to find that owners were now reluctant to even pay part of the arrear, let alone the full. So, even though workers started receiving the daily cash pay of Tk 170 from August 28, 2022, there has been no headway for signing the January 1, 2021 to December 31, 2022 agreement. This situation contravenes the tradition regarding payment of arrears.

And common tea workers are reluctant to compromise: "The agreement between the owners and workers is signed late and we get the increased pay in arrears from the first day of the following agreement period," says Sreemati Bauri (40), a tea worker and vice president of BCSU's Juri Valley committee. "We want our full arrears at the rate of Tk 50 per day for the full agreement period."

"If the owners do not sign and

execute the agreement starting from January 1, 2021 and do not pay our arrears in full, we will go on strike again," said tealeaf picker Bisakha (40) of Madhobpur Tea Estate in Kamalganj upazila.

The leaders of BCSU are having a hard time negotiating with the owners. Helpless, they have sent an appeal to the PM dated November

current wage board, set up in October 2019, has not even published the gazette finalising the wage structure.

In any industry, the responsibility of fixing wages is bestowed upon the minimum wage board. However, the tea industry is entirely exceptional. The workers in this industry live within the boundaries of the tea gardens. They do not have homesteads of their own. The



PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUI

state owns the land of the tea gardens, excluding those in north Bengal.

Therefore, the current proposal of the BTA to the government to "let the minimum wage board fix the wage" is not acceptable without elaborate discussion with workers.

According to Rambhajan Kairi, the workers' representative, another BTA proposal is that the agreement between the BTA and BCSU be signed every three years. BTA also suggests if the agreement is signed every two years following the long tradition, it should deal with all other issues except wages. But Kairi's reasonable argument is that the owners, tea workers, and the state must have open and elaborate discussions before bringing any change to the current tradition. And the workers' interest must get the right consideration in such discussions.

For an exit out of the current stalemate, the BTA should immediately accept the legitimate demand of tea garden workers and sign the agreement for the period from January 1, 2021 to December 31, 2022. Then, the negotiation would be due for the following agreement period starting on January 1, 2023. On another note, if the minimum wage board is regularised in the tea industry, it must grant pragmatic consideration to the living costs of tea workers and other factors that section 141 of the labour laws mentions.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How not to fight inflation



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Despite favourable indices, it is too soon to tell whether inflation has been tamed. Nonetheless, two clear lessons have emerged from the recent price surge.

First, economists' standard models – especially the dominant one that assumes the economy always to be in equilibrium – were effectively useless. And, second, those who confidently asserted that it would take five years of pain to wring inflation out of the system have already been refuted. Inflation has fallen dramatically, with the December 2022 seasonally adjusted consumer price index coming in just one percent above that for June.

There is overwhelming evidence that the main source of inflation was pandemic-related supply shocks and shifts in the pattern of demand, not excess aggregate demand, and certainly not any additional demand created by pandemic spending. Anyone with any faith in the market

economy knew that the supply issues would be resolved eventually; but no one could possibly know when.

After all, we have never endured a pandemic-driven economic shutdown followed by a rapid reopening. That is why models based on past experience proved irrelevant.

Policymakers continue to balance the risk of doing too little versus too much. The risks of increasing interest rates are clear: a fragile global economy could be pushed into recession, precipitating more debt crises as many heavily indebted developing economies face the triple whammy of a strong dollar, lower export revenues, and higher interest rates. This would be a travesty.

The US has knowingly adopted a policy that will likely sink the world's most vulnerable economies. Worse, it is not even clear that there is any upside to this approach. In fact, raising interest rates could do more harm than good, by making it more expensive

for firms to invest in solutions to the current supply constraints.

In retail and other markets, higher interest rates can actually induce price increases as the higher interest rates induce businesses to write down the future value of lost customers relative to the benefits today of higher prices.

To be sure, a deep recession would tame inflation. But why would we

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invite that? Not only is inflation falling, but wages are increasing more slowly than prices (meaning no spiral), and expectations remain in check. The five-year, five-year forward expectation rate is hovering just above two percent – hardly unanchored.

Some also fear that we will not return quickly enough to the two percent target inflation rate. But remember, that number was pulled out of thin air. It has no economic significance, nor is there any evidence

to suggest that it would be costly to the economy if inflation were to vary between, say, two percent and four percent. On the contrary, given the need for structural changes in the economy and downward rigidities in prices, a slightly higher inflation target has much to recommend it.

Some will also say that inflation has remained tame precisely because central banks have signalled such resolve in fighting it. My dog Woofie might have drawn the same conclusion whenever he barked at planes flying over our house. He might have believed that he had scared them off, and that not barking would have increased the risk of the plane falling on him.

A careful look at what is going on, and at where prices have come down, supports the structuralist view that inflation was driven mainly by supply-side disruptions and shifts in the pattern of demand. As these issues are resolved, inflation is likely to continue to fall.

Yes, it is too soon to tell precisely when inflation will be fully tamed. And no one knows what new shocks await us. But I am still putting my money on "Team Temporary." Those arguing that inflation will be largely cured on its own still have a much stronger case than those advocating measures with obviously high and persistent costs but only dubious benefits.