



Our water development efforts lack an understanding of local cultural and indigenous practices related to flood and land use in the river delta. PHOTO: MARUF AREFIN MIM

Living with the river or fighting against it?



Dr Mohammad Zaman has carried out extensive ethnographic research on flood, erosion disasters, and displacement in the Brahmaputra-Jamuna floodplain. His recently edited book (co-edited by Mustajab Alam) is titled 'Living on the Edge: Char Dwellers in Bangladesh.'

MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

As recent reports and editorials in this newspaper have conveyed, the scale of river erosion in eight northwestern districts, particularly Kurigram and Lalmonirhat, is very alarming. The heart-breaking stories of people losing their homes and hearth, their sources of livelihood, and all their belongings, are all too common in Bangladesh. As a result, close to one million people are internally displaced annually due to river erosion in the country.

As a delta country, Bangladesh is largely formed by river deposition, erosion, and redeposition. Major river systems such as the Teesta, Brahmaputra-Jamuna, Padma, and Meghna, together with their larger tributaries, are continually eating up land from one bank and depositing silt to the other. As Kazi Nazrul Islam's verse goes, "E kul bhang, o kul gorey, eito nodir khela" ("Here a bank breaks, there another emerges. Such is the play of rivers"). In the process, alluvial chars of various sizes also emerge as agricultural frontiers, which are populated and often whither away again. This erosion and accretion of land is a characteristic feature of the active river systems of Bangladesh.

The annual flooding and the massive flow of water from upstream Himalayas cause extensive bankline erosion and channel migration, associated with the siltation of river beds as chars, further amplifying flood risks and erosion. This also has macro and micro impacts on the rural population and land-based economy of the country. The earliest response by the government to this "twin" problem of flooding and erosion can be traced back to the measures recommended by the United Nations Krug Mission in 1956, following the massive floods in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1954. The Krug Mission Report stressed the need for the construction of high embankments to confine the waters of major rivers within their main channels and to cordon off large areas from flooding.

A long-term master plan was also prepared by the East Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority (EPWAPDA) – the predecessor of the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) – focusing on large-scale engineering construction and interventions for flood control and bank protection efforts such as building embankments, groins, dams, and polders to provide protection and minimise human and material losses.

Many experts now believe that the Krug Mission set off the process of water development in a wrong direction. There was little attention to environmental and ecological aspects and to the need

to understand local cultural and indigenous practices related to flood, land use, land rights, and socioeconomic processes in the river delta. In fact, it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate flooding completely, for floods are intricately linked to the very survival of people in this delta country. Rice and fish – staples in Bangladeshi diet – require a tremendous amount of floodwater to grow and flourish.

Even today, the BWDB approach to river management tends to remain totally monistic, with a single-minded preference for protective

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efforts. The multi-channel Jamuna River stabilisation programme is one example of this, which seeks to narrow down the width into a single- or double-channel planform, combined with dredging for a navigational channel, protection of the existing bankline against erosion, and boost of economic growth, as envisioned in the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100. If the corridors of major rivers were to be converted into a single channel, an estimated 50,000 hectares of new land would be reclaimed for potential use for various development interventions, including for the establishment of river ports and industrial/trade centres such as economic processing zones (EPZs).

Long-term river stabilisation is an ambitious yet uncertain course of action. Such a plan should be based on a broader and clearer understanding of the vital physical, ecological, economic, social, and environmental vulnerabilities of floodplain users, particularly keeping in mind the rights of char inhabitants over the newly reclaimed land, their livelihoods,

kinship, residence patterns, and resettlement. Currently, there are an estimated six million char dwellers, with or without land rights, living on the chars from Chilmari to Sirajganj. Therefore, a more holistic approach to the issues of flooding and erosion is necessary – one that would take cognisance of the complex interactions of all aspects of how people have traditionally organised, produced, and survived within physical constraints. Each of these aspects is critical to understanding the river management problem from a "hydrosociality" perspective, and not just an engineering perspective.

In the past, the BWDB has taken many structural measures to control and/or regulate the Jamuna River. But the mighty Jamuna and the sheer magnitude of the monsoon floods preclude almost all types of engineering work as a means to halt erosion and prevent flooding. The short-lived and limited utility of some of the physical infrastructures built so far have led to widespread doubts about the wisdom of this approach. Experts are also concerned regarding the long-term impacts of river stabilisation if implemented without careful consideration of the transboundary nature of the country's river systems, given that Bangladesh is located at the lower reaches. If the width of the lower stream of the Jamuna and other rivers – which originate upstream in Tibet, China, and India – are narrowed down to one or two channels, it could spell disaster for the normal flow of water and seriously harm the rich local biodiversity.

Any river stabilisation programme of a large scale must be based on national dialogues and engagements with stakeholders in char areas. Since there appear to be no practical means of stopping erosion (despite existing embankments and protective efforts), the solution lies in developing socioeconomic measures (such as improving warning systems, increasing preparedness for loss reduction, recovery, resettlement, livelihoods, formulation of new land laws for char use and ownership, etc) to mitigate the impacts of erosion events, rather than preventing erosion itself. In other words, it is necessary to live with the river rather than fight against it.

Of course, some interventions and limited protection work for major towns, ports and other important establishments will always be necessary, along with some form of stabilisation in selected sections of major rivers. However, a full scale programme for the stabilisation of these rivers may be unnecessary, as they would affect human populations and their agricultural needs, besides impacting essential ecological processes and biological diversity. It is possible to plan alternatives and create adaptive pathways to manage the rivers in Bangladesh, which would also be in line with the Delta Plan 2100. There is a greater need for understanding life in the delta before we transform it. Unfortunately, this seems to be lacking in Bangladesh as of now.

Combatting colourism in Bangladesh



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In Bangladesh, colourism subtly yet firmly grips society, particularly affecting young girls with darker complexions who often endure colour-based discrimination. Flourishing within a patriarchal framework, colourism perpetuates a deep-seated racial discourse, causing long-lasting psychological distress for families with darker-skinned members.

What is colourism, you ask? Colourism persists under the shadow of racism, delicately infiltrating society. Racism and colourism, while interconnected, are not identical. Racism is systematic, underpinned by prejudice against a minority based on their ethnic heritage. For example, discriminatory attitudes or institutional practices against the Indigenous communities in Bangladesh, such as those living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, based purely on their ethnic heritage, could be classified as racism.

Conversely, colourism operates on preferential treatment within a minority group, based on skin tones. The occurrence of this bias within a single racial or ethnic group demonstrates its complex character. In the Indian subcontinent, the prevalence of Fair & Lovely, a skin-lightening cream that was marketed for decades, is widely recognised. The marketing strategies associated with Fair & Lovely and similar products have perpetuated the notion that having lighter skin can enhance a woman's prospects for marriage, employment opportunities, and social status. This not only demonstrates the prevalence of colourism, but also reinforces the normalisation of such beliefs, thus embedding it into societal norms and expectations.

Colourism can be traced back to the era of slavery in the United States, where skin colour was a deciding factor in the allocation of duties and privileges among the enslaved. This entrenched hierarchy based on skin colour has lingered, influencing social, educational, and economic opportunities and creating a damaging legacy.

For instance, a bastion of public influence, Hollywood has a contentious history of depicting skin colour in a manner that perpetuates colourism. This manifests in the casting of lighter-skinned or "White-passing" actors in leading roles. Such an industry trend, whether intentional or inadvertent, frames perceptions of beauty, value, and worth, setting an unspoken standard that infiltrates the mindsets of audiences globally.

In communities of colour, colourism stirs discord, creating a "hierarchy" based on skin tones. The notion of "validity" or "worth" is attached to skin colour, a toxic legacy of oppressive histories that were internalised by oppressed communities and then reproduced within these communities. During the colonial era, British colonists

imposed Eurocentric beauty standards that favoured lighter skin as a symbol of superiority, beauty, and purity. This notion was fortified through various means, including discriminatory practices, social rankings, and the promotion of Western beauty ideals.

The preference for lighter skin and the marginalisation of darker-skinned individuals became ingrained in Bangalee society during

conveniently veiling their original intent.

An inevitable question surfaces: how do we tackle colourism? As with most societal problems, the initial step lies in education. One such initiative is the All Shades are Beautiful project. This initiative aims to raise public awareness of the harmful physical and psychological effects of colourism in Bangladesh. Its work has helped people understand the complexities of colourism and brought attention to hidden societal problems – problems that are frequently disregarded, normalised, and accepted as a part of routine life.

Projects like this can lay the groundwork for these conversations to take place publicly, and challenge the biases associated with skin colour and foster acceptance of all skin tones. Personal stories shared



SOURCE: FREEPIK

the British Raj and have endured long past the end of colonial rule. The internalisation of these beliefs has led to the reproduction of colourist attitudes within the same communities, where lighter skin is seen as being more desirable, attractive, and socially acceptable.

Take Bangladesh as a case in point. Here, in the marriage process, a disconcerting scene often unfolds where panic is triggered by the "darkness" of an individual's skin. One's skin tone alone prompts the misguided assumption that darker-skinned individuals are somehow "inferior" to their lighter-skinned counterparts.

Beyond beliefs, the far-reaching influence of colourism infiltrates various sectors, including the entertainment industry and the job market. A testament to this is the booming global market of skin-lightening products. This trend underlines a deeply-rooted bias that associates lighter skin with privilege, success, desirability, and intelligence.

Even though several corporations have vowed to discontinue the sale of products blatantly marketed as "skin-whitening," these products are likely to remain accessible under subtler aliases. By employing euphemisms like "glowing," "radiant," "bright" or "clear," these products may be repackaged as wellness commodities,

through such platforms can highlight the experiences of individuals facing taunts or discrimination based on their skin colour.

To facilitate open discussions and interactions, All Shades are Beautiful organises "Talk About It Tuesdays," providing participants with a platform to share their personal experiences and thoughts on colourism, among other social issues. The discussions held thus far have touched on various aspects, such as the young age at which individuals first encounter comments about their skin tones and their experiences with skin treatments aimed at achieving fairer skin. The series "Shades of Bias: Unravelling Colourism" educates viewers about the definition, historical background, and present-day effects of skin colour discrimination in Bangladesh. And lastly, "True to Complexion," an upcoming series, aims to showcase and inspire women to employ make-up techniques that enhance rather than alter their natural skin tone, challenging the prevailing cultural norm in Bangladesh.

Initiatives like these shed light on a deeply overlooked but highly prevalent form of prejudice, sparking essential conversations about the hidden concept of colourism. One hopes that such projects can be emulated. It is time for us to be better and brighter, beyond one's skin colour.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Party VIPs
- 6 Parade sight
- 11 Impromptu
- 12 Jeweler's aid
- 13 Davis of "Thelma & Louise"
- 14 Took steps
- 15 Yummy, informally
- 17 Yoga need
- 19 Squid's squirt
- 20 Pet perch
- 23 Globe features
- 25 Really large
- 26 Shift
- 28 Grazing group
- 29 Runner, for example
- 30 Billboards, e.g.
- 31 "– a deal!"
- 32 Pro vote

- 33 Sneaker part
- 35 Run up
- 38 Small bottles
- 41 Stately
- 42 Film's Flynn
- 43 Online message
- 44 Mean-spirited

DOWN

- 1 Crone
- 2 Praiseful poem
- 3 Cry
- 4 Muscle quality
- 5 Climbing
- 6 Snort source
- 7 Ness, for one
- 8 Ump's call
- 9 Subject for Jane Goodall
- 10 Slagger
- 11 Williams
- 16 Entomology

- 17 Coffee bar order
- 18 Was sore
- 20 1776 and 1812, for two
- 21 Concur
- 22 Elbows on the table
- 24 Linking word
- 25 Sea, to Simone
- 27 Kitchen appliance
- 31 Detail map
- 33 Land in the sea
- 34 Old Italian coin
- 35 Leaf lifter
- 36 Do a yard job
- 37 Penny prez
- 39 Fate
- 40 Shrewd



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