

Why is Chattogram drowning?

Address port city's chronic waterlogging issues

It is unacceptable that despite spending huge amounts of money and making many lofty promises over the years, the government has failed to address Chattogram's waterlogging problem. The situation this year has been so bad, in fact, that the port city has gone under water 10 times in the past seven months. Following the latest heavy rainfall, at least 40 percent of the city's area has gone under water, affecting at least 15 lakh people. Aside from causing immense suffering for ordinary people, this flooding has also caused massive losses for businesses and farmers.

According to a 2021 study, Tk 463 crore losses were incurred in one year alone around Khatungonj and its nearby areas in Chattogram due to waterlogging. Most recently, unloading of goods from larger vessels at the outer anchorage of Chattogram Port had to be suspended due to rough seas since Friday, while trade at the Khatungonj Chaktai wholesale hub has dropped significantly. As unloading of goods from bulk carriers at the jetties and delivery of goods have considerably slowed down, at least 25 cargo vessels carrying over 800,000 tonnes of goods have been stranded at the outer anchorage. These vessels are carrying very important goods including wheat, raw sugar, soybean oil, fertilisers, as well as industrial raw materials – a lot of which might get damaged unless they are brought back to land fast. Additionally, importers are having to pay huge sums of money to shipping companies for the use of vessels beyond schedule. And all of these losses might soon get transferred to the consumers, leading to yet another round of price surges.

Over the past six years, the government has spent Tk 5,790 crore to address Chattogram's waterlogging problem, but to no avail. Out of the 40 sluice gates it was supposed to construct during this period, only five have so far been completed. The Chattogram Development Authority (CDA), which is implementing a Tk 11,344 crore mega project to mitigate waterlogging, had said before the monsoon that this year's inundation would be less than that of previous years, due to the digging of many canals to address the problem. Blaming the Chattogram City Corporation (CCC), its chief engineer said that the city's drainage system has become ineffective because the CCC has not been cleaning the drains properly. An official from the CCC, meanwhile, has blamed the CDA's failure to complete and hand over the canals for the waterlogging problem.

While the same blame-game that we have seen previously is again being played out, it is the people and businesses that are ultimately losing out. And the fault must fall squarely on the shoulders of the authorities, who have failed to properly coordinate and take responsibility for addressing Chattogram's waterlogging problem over the span of many years. This needs to change. We call upon the government to hold the different organisations entrusted with this responsibility to account, and urgently implement the necessary projects to alleviate the sufferings of the people.

Lacklustre attitude of govt as deadly as dengue itself

Form a centralised response committee to avoid further catastrophe

The dengue outbreak this year has been the deadliest in our history, accompanied by the same tragic story of authorities not taking the issue as seriously as they should. Despite repeated warnings from experts, the health ministry as well as the city corporations have utterly failed to take timely and adequate action, which has proved to be as deadly as the disease itself. The death toll this year has now exceeded 300, and nearly 66,732 people have been infected. Hospitals in the capital have been overwhelmed for weeks, and Shishu Hospital is now turning away children with dengue due to shortage of hospital beds to accommodate the high number of patients. Essential Drugs, the state-owned pharmaceutical company, is rationing supply to public hospitals, unable to meet the high demand for necessary saline due to the unyielding surge in dengue patients, according to a report by this daily.

Earlier in May, experts had warned that Bangladesh will witness a worse dengue outbreak this year and advised city corporations, municipalities, and union parishads to take preventative measures. Almost a month back, when the death toll was 106, we had urged authorities to declare a health emergency over the dengue surge. Yet, even as late as July 22, the Health Minister undermined the necessity of a public health emergency, stating that, "Such a situation has not happened yet that we are not able to give beds to the patients in the hospital, [that] we are not able to give medicines." How much worse does the situation have to get – and how many more children must die – for the authorities to treat the dengue situation with the urgency that it demands?

It is high time for the government to form an emergency response committee to combat further disastrous consequences. We urge the authorities concerned to create a centralised command chain with city corporations, the DGHS, and hospital authorities to coordinate their efforts, prioritising hospital management, curbing further spread of the disease through vector-borne disease prevention work, increasing the mobilisation of resources, and increasing the capacity of testing and treatment in all hospitals. We also back experts' recommendations to collaborate with the World Health Organization – which has been monitoring the situation worldwide – to learn from neighbouring nations which have successfully controlled the outbreak.

Whither Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami?

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In June, a new party, the Bangladesh Development Party, applied for registration with the Election Commission of Bangladesh. It has been known for some time that the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami – which was deregistered as a political party in 2013 since its constitution contradicts the Bangladesh Constitution – has been contemplating its political future by forming a new party. There has been a debate since 2016 regarding whether the party should reincarnate itself as a new party since all its top leaders had been convicted of war crimes. In 2018, the EC decided not to ban the party, but to cancel their registration following a 2013 High Court order that declared the party's registration illegal. The party would have probably preferred a ban so as to justify the formation of a new party, and also because, if Jamaat is dissolved without a ban, it would essentially be confirming its negative role in the Liberation War.

The War Crimes Tribunal and the hanging of several top leaders of Jamaat after they were convicted has been contested by the party. After 2008, it decided not to participate in the 2014 election following the decision of its alliance partner, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). It participated in the 2018 election under the BNP symbol, as part of the 20-party alliance. Though there was reluctance to include Jamaat in the electoral alliance, given its role in the Liberation War, political expediency prevailed in the end.

Jamaat and BNP: Tactical separation?

Prior to the 2018 election, several leaders within BNP had urged the party to end its alliance with Jamaat. This call for separation was also made by the European Union in 2015, as it was widely believed that Jamaat cadres were involved in widespread violence that had resulted in more than 100 people being killed. Though there was some debate within BNP about its association with Jamaat, in the end it was decided it would not to cut off ties.

Jamaat-e-Islami head Dr Shafiqur Rahman, in a meeting held in August 2022, said, "The alliance has become ineffective." In January this year, BNP and Jamaat held separate programmes. Though some leaders within the BNP attributed Jamaat's decision to go separate ways as "good riddance," the fact remains that the BNP did not have the political courage to de-link with Jamaat. Therefore, this separation

appears to be tactical.

After a decade, Jamaat was allowed to hold a rally in Dhaka on June 10. The permission to hold the rally at the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh (IEB) was granted by overriding another request made by Jatiya Party's youth wing, Jatiyo Jubo Sanghati. Some even speculate a possible understanding between Jamaat and the Awami League, as it has been stated from the government's end that the permission was granted due to "a political decision."

As of now, the two erstwhile allies are holding rallies separately while keeping their options open. Jamaat has always been close to BNP, but seems to have realised that a tactical separation would help it to survive the political turmoil, as Awami League remains focused on discrediting BNP.



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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Jamaat and the West:

Jamaat-e-Islami remains the largest Islamic fundamentalist party in Bangladesh. But it shares an interesting relationship with the Western countries, especially with the US and those in the European Union. At one point of time, Jamaat was even promoted as a moderate Islamic party. Yet, the US Department of State Country Report on Terrorism 2006 had indicted the Islamic Bank, which had several board members belonging to Jamaat, for funding the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen (JMB), a terrorist organisation. Similarly, it is also known that one of the former JMB leaders, previously Habiganj district head of Jamaat-e-Islami, Saidur Rahman was a *rokan* of Jamaat. However, Jamaat immediately distanced itself from him and argued that Saidur did not belong to the party and had left it a long time back. In 2014, its student organisation was involved

more Islamic state." On July 24, the US ambassador met with the main party functionaries of Jamaat. Meanwhile, the European Union Parliament, following the 2007 violence, had urged the BNP to unequivocally distance itself from Jamaat-e-Islami and Hafezat-e-Islam, which are regarded as the main instigators of the violence, stressing that parties which turn to terrorist acts should be banned.

Jamaat-e-Islami as a party insists on Islamic values and maintenance of purdah. Some of the writings that appear in the newspaper that is controlled by the party discourages mingling between opposite sexes, discourages women from working with men as it would lead to *fitna*, and argues that the prime responsibilities of women are taking care of their husbands, children, and doing household chores.

a reformist party that does not want to burden itself with the history that Jamaat inherited due to their role in supporting the Pakistan Army during the Liberation War. In 2019, Barrister Abdur Razzak resigned from Jamaat, citing the party's role in 1971. Such reformist moves within Jamaat are not new. The party has so far dodged this issue by expelling those who have raised such questions and has survived as a prominent Islamist political party with ideological and monetary strength. Not surprisingly, Jamaat has managed to surface, with its cadres intact, to take the opportunity that the upcoming national election provides. For now, it does not seem in a hurry to implement its larger Islamisation project. But in its hurry to have a multiparty election minus BNP, the AL's flirtation with Jamaat may have serious implications for Bangladeshi society and politics.

Are we underutilising the potential of our youth?



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According to the most recent census, Bangladesh now has the highest youth population that it has ever had. With individuals aged 15 to 29 years accounting for approximately 28 percent of the total population, the country is on the verge of an exceptional opportunity to boost its economic growth.

However, the road towards this is not without challenges. According to the Labour Force Survey 2016-17, a staggering 79.7 percent of the unemployed population is young people, and perhaps even more concerning is that 89.2 percent of youth employment is in the informal sector. This status quo paints a stark picture of a country falling short of capitalising on its most potent asset: its youth.

On the demand side, structural changes and technological advancement in Bangladesh's economy have driven a need for certain sets of new hard and soft skills. Professional skills like networking, critical thinking, numeracy, and English language proficiency have now emerged as lucrative commodities. Add to this

the escalating flow of fresh graduates entering the labour market, and the situation seems decidedly competitive. Unfortunately, this influx has not been met with an equivalent increase in job creation – mostly due to limited private-sector investment, minimal diversification in manufacturing, and barriers to foreign direct investment.

The obstacles to youth economic engagement are as multifaceted as they are complex. At the core of this issue lies a profound skills gap – a disconnect between the skills our education system offers and those demanded by employers in the labour market. This is evident from the 11.2 percent unemployment rate among youth with tertiary education, compared to the national unemployment rate of 3.6 percent according to the IFS 2022. Vocational and technical training have been found to be inadequate, with low contact hours and equipment shortages impeding skills development.

The disparities extend to internet access, which is an indispensable tool in modern knowledge-based economies. As per the Youth Survey 2018 conducted by BRAC Institute of

Governance and Development (BIGD), a mere 40 percent of young people had access to the internet, with an even lower rate among young women. This digital divide is increasing the education and employment gap between urban and rural youth, effectively creating two distinct classes with varied development opportunities.

Gender disparity is another issue that cannot be ignored in this discourse. With the substantial constraints of social stigma and cultural norms, 92 percent of female youth in Bangladesh fall under the category of NEET (not in education, employment or training). This is particularly alarming since the 2022 Population and Housing Census revealed that females comprise 50.5 percent of the total population and 53.7 percent of the 15-to-29-year cohort. According to a 2018 report by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), on average, each additional hour spent doing household tasks increases the chances of entering NEET status by 0.16 percent for female youth.

On top of all these, the Covid-19 pandemic intensified the state of inequity and access, causing unprecedented learning losses and creating a misaligned labour market environment.

The Bangladesh government has a pivotal role to play in leading the nation towards correcting the mismatch between skills demanded and supplied. Prioritising investment in quality education, and vocational, and technical training will facilitate a much-needed structural transformation towards a more

productive youth labour force for highly productive sectors. Meanwhile, providing the youth with easy access to funding and information to start their businesses can boost employment.

On the other hand, youth must proactively align their skills with the ever-evolving labour market and learn to market themselves professionally and utilise digital platforms like LinkedIn. Moreover, they must adopt a positive attitude towards vocational and technical training and labour-intensive jobs, which have more demand than supply in the market.

The community has a crucial role to play as well. By encouraging the completion of education and ensuring access to employment opportunities for disengaged or left-behind youth, the community can be a crucial catalyst for socio-economic upliftment. Furthermore, altering the deep-rooted social norms that inhibit women's workforce participation is a collective responsibility we must shoulder. Through collective action, we can dismantle the social barriers that prevent females from participating in the workforce and ensure that no one is left behind.

To say that the stakes are high would be an understatement. With a booming youth population, Bangladesh now has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to leapfrog into a higher growth trajectory. This responsibility is on us all – the government, the youth, and the community collectively should surmount these challenges and realise our demographic dividend's full potential.