

POPULATION CONTROL

Is Bangladesh headed in the right direction?



Tashfia Rawnak Anika is a development professional.

TASHFIA RAWNAK ANIKA

Bangladesh, after 1971, had to address the problem of uncontrolled population growth, and one of the key solutions was to look into the issue of women's reproductive rights and introduce the idea of family planning. Contraceptive prevalence rate during the mid-1970s was around eight percent, leaving the majority of women unable to access vital services for the well-being of their families. On average, a woman had more than six children in the early 1970s. Without the availability of family planning resources, women lived uncertain lives, unable to gain necessary foresight about their future.

With the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Bangladesh has steadily decreased the maternal mortality ratio from 441 per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 123 per 100,000 live births in 2020. The reduction in mortality rate through better access to healthcare was also accompanied by a better contraceptive prevalence rate, which, according to Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2022, is 64 percent among married women of child-bearing age. Family planning campaigns and rising education rates among young girls have also acted as catalyst in this regard. Such milestones have been lauded globally in terms of population control as well as in terms of ensuring women's reproductive rights, thus partially achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5.6, which advocates for universal access to contraceptives.

Fast forward to 2011, the total fertility rate (TFR) in Bangladesh came down to and remained stagnant at 2.3 children per woman. Usually, a TFR of 2.1 is accepted as the ideal replacement level whereby the population of a country becomes stable. This principle of bringing down population growth by lowering the TFR can be traced to the principles of Malthusianism that revolves around the ideas of Thomas Malthus, who purported that a growing population puts pressure on the country's existing resources, resulting in fewer resources being available for

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each person, consequently putting strain on the existing infrastructure, healthcare and education system. Neighbouring India, which has surpassed China in terms of population size and now is the most



Population control has now evidently become a double-edged sword.

PHOTO: AFP

populated country in the world, has been aiming to bring down its TFR to the replacement level. Maintaining its growing population remains an ongoing challenge for one of the fastest growing economies in the world. However, in about 40 years' time, India's population is expected to stabilise as its replacement level has already fallen below the 2.1 threshold. Economists are becoming wary about the likelihood of a shrinking population as fertility rates are naturally coming down.

On the flip side, as countries reach the desired replacement level, the fear of an older demography and a high dependency ratio looms over. Certainly, a growing population isn't all doom and gloom; in fact, turning a young demographic into a demographic dividend remains a long-sought-after goal for countries. A younger population means a lower

dependency ratio as, on average, a smaller dependent population needs to be supported. According to the Population and Housing Census 2022, Bangladesh's national dependency ratio is 52.68. Thanks to the 68 percent of our population who are in the age range of 15-64 years. Not only does youthful demography bring about enthusiasm and a fresh mindset to the workforce, it also helps to sustain the elderly and the underaged dependent population. A higher dependency ratio in the future would likely mean higher taxes for those with income to support the pension funds and the welfare economy.

Other than a higher dependency ratio, one does not have to look far to find what other roadblocks face a declining population. Superpower China with its One Child Policy from 1980 to 2015 has now adopted policies to encourage couples to have more

children. However, policies like lower tax rates, cash incentives and other measures have all proven fruitless, because none of these addresses the problem of gender inequality faced by women when rearing a child. On top of that, due to the higher financial strain on the household, women and couples have become reluctant to have more children and are altogether unable to find ways to survive in a competitive economic landscape while also raising a family.

On average, the world population is shrinking as the global TFR seems to be following a downward trend, inevitably reaching replacement level fertility with a possibility of falling even further. At the replacement level, the minimum fertility rate needed to replace one generation with the next one is reached and the population comes to a likely equilibrium. As Bangladesh has also reached a near replacement level TFR of 2.3, and this

number might go down in the coming decades or sooner, the question arises: how well will the country be able to handle a demographic shift from a majorly young vibrant generation, to an older, matured one?

In other words, what can Bangladesh learn from China and India, and what measures can it take today to ensure it sustains a minimum fertility rate so that the demography is just the right combination of youth and maturity? Given that the country's life expectancy has gradually increased from 50 years in 1971 to over 70 years in 2021, it is looking into supporting an elderly population with better healthcare and retirement facilities. Of course, once Bangladesh achieves universal coverage of contraceptive prevalence, quality education and gender equality, it can look into ways to maintain a minimum fertility rate all the while ensuring women's reproductive rights. However, the key would be in ensuring gender equality not only at the workforce but at the household level, whereby unpaid domestic workload is shared among the partners in a way that can ensure a smooth work-life blending for encouraging better birth rates to sustain future generations.

Population control has now evidently become a double-edged sword. Rising powers like China and India are aiming for two different results to manage their population: one addressing the decline while the other addressing its rise, both with the same target, to boost their economies and ensure a better standard of living for their people. Either way, whether a country is looking into ways to maximise its demographic dividend or aiming to minimise its demographic burden, it seems that population control in the near future would turn into population management. Against this backdrop, where Bangladesh's population policy should stand is a question that needs to be answered sooner rather than later.

The tail of tolerance



BLOWN IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The lizard is one of 200 species capable of separating its tail from its body. Known as autotomy, this self-amputation is a defence mechanism that lizards use to deflect an attacker's attention. In response to any reflex spasm, the lizard can detach its limb located in the fracture plane.

For us humans, the fracture plane is sociopolitical. Often, we notice many tail-wagging incidents that bring our primal reactions to the fore. The debate over the inclusion of gender identity in a national curriculum textbook for Class VII is a case in point. The severed tail is twitching and turning in all directions, keeping the audience engaged in a discussion on the "third gender" (as stated by the law of the land). The body politic seems to be enjoying the performance of one of its organs from a safe distance.

The hullabaloo entailed a case study on an imaginary boy who preferred to identify as a female. He eventually sought refuge in the community known as the "hijra." The concept of being born in the "wrong" body—that is, transgender—has generated this controversy.

A private university teacher tore out two chapters from a copy of the textbook in public to protest the issue. His performative stunt during a national teachers' convention caught the attention of many who are not willing to make room for the other beyond their traditional shells. The incident led his employer to remove him from his institutional body, but the tail-losing dance drew more people to the university's gate.

The national textbook writers probably did not give it enough thought, which is why the government's admirable objective of giving voice to the marginalised has unexpectedly backfired. This debate revolves around the conflation of intersex and transgender people. The original goal of encouraging tolerance has thus become counterproductive. Questions are also being asked about whether it is appropriate to expose schoolchildren to such complex issues at such an early stage. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) selected Class VII for the

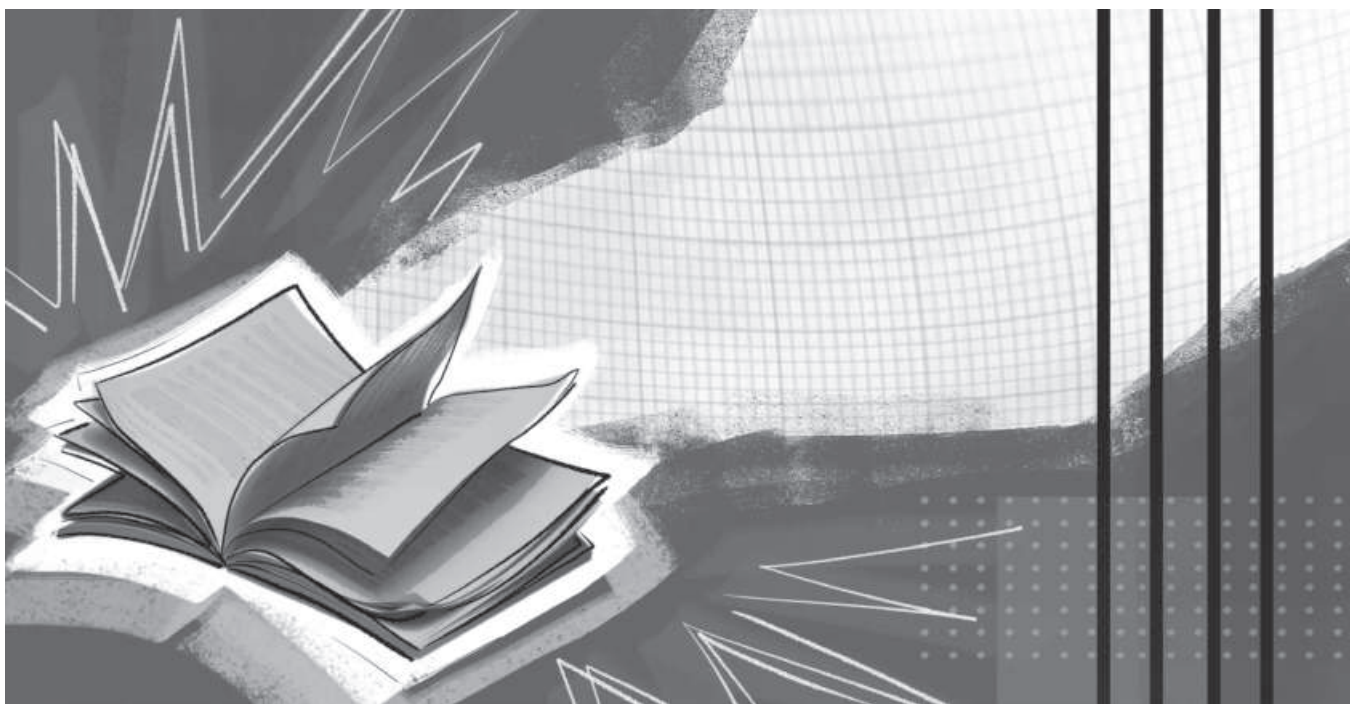


ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

case study, thinking adolescence to be a suitable time to address gender identity. There are others who think that these issues should have been addressed at the higher secondary or university levels.

The government has already established a five-person committee to review the content. Three of the members represent religious institutions, while the other two are from the NCTB and Dhaka University's Institute of Education and Research, respectively. The intricacy of the subject, however, demanded the presence of at least one sociologist or gender expert.

Let us now shift our focus to the teacher who launched this book-tearing campaign. The irony is that an educator should be the last person to advocate tearing pages out of books. His knee-jerk reaction will send the incorrect message to our students and their parents. Since the issue is one of academia, he should have asked his colleagues in academia to come up with a solution. I can see how

the text's ambiguity has given rise to such reactionary responses. Indeed, a textbook's message must be carefully chosen, as it has a lasting impact on a student's intellectual aptitude and social awareness.

But when the dancing tail becomes an incredulous needle in our moral compass, there are reasons to be worried. How can we promote tolerance when we ourselves are intolerant? How can we champion democracy when we do not accept

Before the election, there was immediate concern that this kind of gathering would turn into a forum for bitter criticism of the administration.

The focus on the tree has missed the forest, involving the future of our posterity. The textual content can make or break a generation. Any compromise in text-making and its reception can seriously hamper the intellectual growth of our learners.

plurality? The level of insensitivity shows a lack of democratic principles all around. Children will not learn inclusivity and tolerance if we adults do not practise such behaviours in our everyday lives.

Our democratic behaviour is characterised by a strange mix of selectivity and opportunism. It beats anybody's imagination when concerns such as price increases, money laundering, inflation, freedom of speech or mass murder in Gaza appear to receive less attention than the desire for an individual's identity change. The interest generated by the case study makes us alert to certain dos and don'ts.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, the textbook author should have been thoroughly reviewed during its pilot phase. A trial through a robust democracy would have given the material its validity. Regrettably, when some teachers at Dhaka University attempted to organise a debate about these textbooks shortly after their release, the meeting had to be postponed.

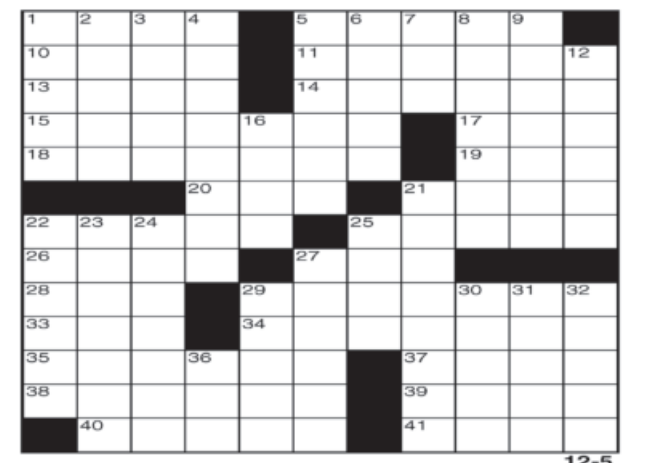
Our education must be a site for critical thinking and creative expression. We need to understand what type of education has perpetuated harmful stereotypes and caused misconceptions. The hostility against giving space to the marginalised can be addressed by highlighting the status of the hijra community, while adhering to the national laws and norms regarding hijra. This could also entail thinking about anti-discrimination legislation, freedom of speech, bullying, and how schools influence public opinion and democracy.

It is easy to be distracted by the seductive tail tale, but we need to revert our attention to the main body, i.e. the body politic, a polity involving the state. We need to understand its weakness—the fracture plane where our democracy operates. We need to understand why the severance of limb tolerance is symptomatic of a systemic weakness. Only then will we understand why the tail wags, and what wags the tail.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Curving paths
 - 5 Second U.S. president
 - 10 Homer and Marge's boy
 - 11 Flower parts
 - 13 Smell
 - 14 Like vistas
 - 15 Baseball team leader
 - 17 Spring mo.
 - 18 Ale producer
 - 19 Long-running CBS drama
 - 20 Got together
 - 21 Deep purple
 - 22 New parents' choices
 - 25 Sheds tears
 - 26 Broadway's "Dear — Hansen"
 - 27 Spoil
 - 28 Come in first
 - 29 Butler or maid
 - 33 Goat sound
 - 34 Central American capital
 - 35 Reach
 - 37 Grime
 - 38 Compass part
 - 39 Different
 - 40 Passover meal
 - 41 Woodland grazer
 - 5 state as true
 - 6 Condemn openly
 - 7 King Kong, for one
 - 8 Shackle
 - 9 Goo's
 - 12 Theater drops
 - 16 Turns right
 - 21 Spread throughout
 - 22 Film great
 - Paul
 - 23 Flies
 - 24 Sea cow
 - 25 Tip off
 - 27 Less civil
 - 29 Mona Lisa feature
 - 30 Sprightly
 - 31 Hospital worker
 - 32 Spud
 - 36 Find a sum



FRIDAY'S ANSWERS

P	A	S	T	O	R	S	H	U	T
A	L	L	U	R	E	P	A	S	O
R	O	A	R	E	D	E	Y	E	S
C	H	I	N	S	H	E	R	D	S
H	A	N	K	B	O	D	I	C	E
E	A	R	S	D	A	D			
W	H	Y	B	O	T	H	E	R	
C	O	O	B	A	S	E			
U	N	U	S	E	D	L	A	T	E
T	O	D	A	Y	L	I	B	E	L
E	V	I	L	R	E	P	U	T	E
S	E	N	T	I	N	A	S	E	C
T	R	I	S	M	O	D	E	S	T

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