

Stop brick kilns from devouring farmlands

Govt must do more than just shutting the establishments

While the devastating impacts of brick kilns have long been known, newly released figures have brought focus to a particularly important aspect of this issue. On Tuesday, the environment minister said in parliament that 13 crore tonnes of agricultural soil are being destroyed annually because of these kilns. The question is, why hasn't the government—clearly informed about the danger—taken meaningful actions to save our farmlands?

While relaying this information, the minister touched on how brick kilns, 4,505 of which have no environmental clearance, are exasperating our food security issues. This cannot be emphasised enough. Last year, a report by this daily highlighted the unmitigated damage to cropland fertility and agricultural production caused by the rampant practice of extracting topsoil—the layer of soil dense with organic matter and minerals that plants need to grow—to make bricks. Using agricultural or hill soil for this purpose is a punishable offence, but the sheer frequency of this activity makes it seem like the relevant laws don't even exist.

The minister also made another point, that closing or demolishing brick kilns is not the only solution. We agree, but the government has little to show for it. Time and again, we have observed how closed or demolished kilns have resumed operation days after a government drive. Out of the nearly 1,000 shut kilns, 75 percent have resumed operation. Clearly, government measures are not bearing any fruit. While it's important to systematically close offending kilns to safeguard our future, we have to keep in mind that without reversing the economic incentives fuelling illegally run kilns, our actions will be in vain. The path to development requires countless building blocks, and some businessmen are taking advantage of this need.

In the last four years, almost 1,500 illegal brick kilns have been established, and if the government sits idle, the number will keep growing. Experts have suggested adopting alternatives, such as the environment-friendly "hollow blocks", that will greatly reduce our dependence on bricks. When the demand is down, these kilns will have little incentive to carry on with their devastating activity. Therefore, what the authorities must do is increase the production of eco-friendly blocks while improving vigilance to prevent brick kilns from ravaging our lands for topsoil. With the right measures and political will, the threat of these polluting establishments can be addressed.

JU has its job cut out for it: remove illegals

Why are so many non-students occupying its halls?

Saturday's rape of a woman at the Jahangirnagar University (JU) has brought to sharp focus, among other issues, the problem of the persisting presence of former students and outsiders in its dormitories. One of the prime accused in this case, a leader of the JU wing of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), was one such occupant. Known as the only full-fledged residential university in Bangladesh, the JU has, on paper, a strict policy for students completing their studies. They are required to vacate their hall seat within seven days of the completion of post-graduation final exams. The punishment for non-compliance is suspension of the publication of their results. However, rarely is this rule implemented, allowing politically-affiliated students to continue as usual.

This has resulted not just in various crimes and disruptions to university/hall activities, but also an artificial accommodation crisis for genuine students, even after the opening of new dormitories in recent months. According to an estimate by *Prothom Alo*, about 1,000 former students, mostly tied with the BCL, are currently occupying rooms in various halls. Prominent among them are both the current president and general secretary of the JU BCL wing, as well as a former vice-president. It is partly because of such powerful figures that the university administration has had little success in enforcing its accommodation rules. On various occasions, students have staged protests demanding the removal of illegal residents, but to little avail. Even last year, after issuing a notice ordering all illegal residents to leave halls within seven days, the administration failed to exercise its authority to drive them out.

On Monday, amid widespread criticism, it again issued a notice asking non-student residents to leave within five days. The vice-chancellor has vowed to make this work this time, but students are sceptical, and they are right to be so, given the history. But this illegal practice must stop. Students cannot continue to live in fear or be deprived of their right to accommodation because of illegals, however powerful they might be. The administration, therefore, must remove them and secure their seats for genuine students.

New Message

To: _____

Subject: _____

Facing issues in your area? Want your opinions about events around you to be published in *The Daily Star*? Send us a short letter with your name and city!

Write to us: letters@thedailystar.net

Election violence, minorities, and erasure of data



Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His X handle is @ahmedka

KAMAL AHMED

The life of Barun Kumar Ghosh, a supporter of Awami League, met a tragic end on January 9 near his residence in Hamdo Ghoshpara, Jhenaidah. The assailants attacked the 35-year-old, dragging him outside a local shop, where they amputated one of his legs. Despite being rushed to Jhenaidah Sadar Hospital by locals, doctors pronounced him dead. Barun was identified as a supporter of Tahjeeb Alam Siddiqui, the official AL nominee for the Jhenaidah-2 parliamentary seat. Barun's killing has been cited in discussions on electoral violence against minorities.

Reports of violence against minorities during and after the boycott-ridden, controversial election have raised questions against Awami League's claimed commitment to protecting the minorities. At a seminar organised by Arpita Sampati Pratyaran Ain Bastobayan Jatiyo Nagorik Samonway Cell on February 2, it was said that at least 13 incidents of torture and attacks on minorities—all election-centric—occurred between January 4 and 13, leaving one person dead and 37 injured. An earlier report by Human Rights Support Society (HRSS) said that there were election-focused attacks on minorities in 12 districts.

The scale and spread of electoral violence against members of minority communities were particularly noticeable in areas where the contest was a factional fight within the ruling party—better described as a competition between official nominees and dummy candidates. Civil society leaders, in unison, have expressed their frustration and anger over the government and the ruling party's failure to prevent such attacks. Media reports have quoted them saying that "it cannot be said that BNP-Jamaat is responsible for these attacks. Awami League cannot avoid their responsibility in minority torture incidents."

The BNP, accused of widespread violence minorities after their



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

2001 election victory, is seizing the opportunity to address the damages, albeit for political gain. Nitai Roy Chowdhury, a BNP vice chairman, has led a fact-finding mission to violence-affected areas and alleged that, "Awami League considers the minority community as their vote bank. Minorities cannot even express their opinions freely. As soon as they withdrew their support for the boat symbol, they were attacked and tortured." Questioning the reasons for the latest incidents of electoral violence, he added, "BNP-Jamaat did not come to the polls this time, yet the minorities were not spared from torture."

Surprisingly, the response from the government and the ruling party has been dismissive. According to *Prothom Alo*, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan thinks that the statements of minority torture are not

ministry's deletion of all data relating to 1,524 complaints of electoral violence and breach of electoral code of conduct received between December 19, 2023 and January 10 this year. Reporting this unusual step on the part of the government, *New Age* quoted Md Abul Fazal Mir, joint secretary at the Public Security Division of the ministry as saying that, "We have stored the data until January 10 and then all the data were removed from the system." His explanation for such a questionable move was that the officials did not think that data needed to be stored.

These 1,524 complaints were received via the 999 emergency reporting system. There must be hundreds more which came in through other modes—ones directly registered with police stations or Election Commission offices. A recent report compiled by the HRSS

and leaders of the ruling party, that there were no major violations of electoral norms, to counter independent analysts' and observers' evaluation that the election was essentially a staged affair raises suspicions about the motive of the home ministry's wholesale deletion of complaints. Before the timeframe of any potential legal challenges of election results was over, how could the government make all the allegations of violations traceless?

The home minister's dismissal of allegations regarding attacks on minorities within the party's electoral contest appears to be a strategic move to avoid future scrutiny of the 2024 election. Unfortunately, this means that justice remains elusive for the victims of violence, regardless of their background, as they become sacrificial lambs to give off the appearance of a competitive election.

How my village has changed over a decade



Shahadat Hossain is a research scholar in the Department of International Relations at South Asian University, New Delhi, India.

SHAHADAT HOSSAIN

I left my hometown around 2010. In March 2020, I shifted back to my village. The memories I had of the place had been shaped by the experiences I'd had before 2010. When I returned to my village after 10 years, equipped with a degree in Anthropology and an academic understanding of societies, I noticed that my village had undergone a remarkable transformation in my time away.

An anthropological observation of Bangladesh's rural areas is nothing new. *Changing Agrarian Structure in Bangladesh: Shimulia, a Study of a Periurban Village* by Helaluddin KS Arefeen is a unique anthropological document that provides insight into understanding the changes in the agricultural structure of rural Bangladesh. Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir also examined rural areas and class struggle in the country, while Eirik G Jansen published a study in 1990 titled *Rural Bangladesh: Competition for Scarce Resources*.

But after the 1990s, there has been a profound transformation in the contemporary village system. During my year-long stay in my own village, I saw how socioeconomic progress, technological advancement, and population growth have collectively altered our rural landscape.

In my childhood, there were numerous natural sources of fish around my village, such as rivers, canals, and reservoirs. Throughout the year, people used to catch fish from these water bodies and

depended solely on this for their income. During the rainy season, their earnings would increase significantly as more waterways and bodies became visible. Also, whenever any family found itself without food, members of that family would go to a reservoir or canal to catch fish. This was the primary source of protein for many. However, after 10 years, I observed that all the water bodies and natural fish sources had been destroyed due to various reasons. Commercial fish production is seen in some areas, but free fishing opportunities are totally absent in the village. Nowadays, everyone relies on fish sold in the markets, while *pangas* and *Tilapia* fish dominate. As natural sources of fish have disappeared, fish have also become excluded from the diets of the rural poor. Those who used to depend on catching fish have now shifted to driving rickshaws or working as labourers.

In the traditional village house, the yard served as the source of various vegetables. However, many people no longer have open yards due to the construction of new family homes. Cultivating winter vegetables, including potatoes and various types of pulses, for personal needs was a common practice in at least half of the houses. These were stored for year-round use. But these practices have largely disappeared now.

Furthermore, the dependency on the market for every meal has

resulted in a reduction in variety. Apart from radishes, eggplants, potatoes, *pangas* fish, or poultry, the diversity of available food has significantly diminished. Some local vegetables, which are not available in the market, are entirely absent from the villagers' diet due to the lack of stored grain seeds.

Previously, people used to visit the market twice a week, but now they go there daily. Not only fish and vegetables, but fruits such as mangoes, jackfruits, and palms—which were commonly found in village households—are now being bought from the market.

The concept of joblessness itself did not exist in my village a decade ago, since there was no structured job market or an income-dependent economy. But now, household work such as fishing or growing vegetables in one's backyard are no longer considered jobs. So, the term "jobless" has gained popularity.

Back in the day, there were no constructed borders separating yards between neighbours. Homes could be distinguished from one another by the trees positioned in the middle of their yards. Consequently, children in the village also had spacious yards to play in. However, a decade on, I noticed that most houses have erected brick or bamboo walls in the middle of their yards, resulting in the disappearance of open spaces.

Not only did these spaces provide recreation to children, they were also functional. The largest of the yards used to be utilised for holding village gatherings, such as marriages or meetings to resolve local conflicts through the traditional judiciary.

Recently, I was surprised to discover that the influence of traditional gatherings, like *majlis* or *panchayat*, on social justice has significantly diminished. Nowadays, villagers directly approach the police

station or court in the event of a crime or conflict. Sometimes, the local leaders of political parties exert their influence, overshadowing the traditional court. Rural social events have also undergone transformation. Previously, marriages used to be organised by the *panchayat* or *majlis* with the assistance of villagers. Nowadays, these events are managed by event management authorities, and villagers are simply invited to partake in the festivities.

Technological advancements have also altered the village landscape. I personally observed a decline in casual evening gatherings at the village tea stall, with villagers now spending their leisure time on their phones. Their primary internet usage consists of watching YouTube and Facebook videos. Often, they subscribe to pages or channels that do not always offer reliable information.

But one thing that remains unchanged is women's participation in the social structure. Even a decade later, women are scarcely visible in public spaces within the village or on public transport. There is an increase in the number of women visiting the market, but solely as customers. I personally have not observed women engaging in any commercial activities within the local market, except for some nurses working in the hospital.

The transformation of rural Bangladesh is fostering an increased reliance on the market and formal transactions. These shifts are diminishing our emotional connection with one another, emphasising commercialisation across all sectors. Such a trend does not always equate to a healthy and happy society. Today's average Bangladeshi village cannot be described as being self-dependent. Rather, it has changed into a formal money transaction society.