

The Daily Star

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Sundarbans again comes to our rescue

But it needs help to regain health after taking a hit from cyclone

As water begins to recede after about two days of mayhem caused by Cyclone Remal, the vast scale of the devastation and suffering left in its wake is slowly becoming clearer. While more time is required for a comprehensive assessment of the cyclone's impact, what statistics are presently available read more like a doomsday chronicle: Death toll rising to 14; 1.5 lakh homes destroyed or damaged; over 37 lakh people seriously affected; 2.7 crore people left without power; 15,000 mobile towers offline—the list goes on. And these are just the highlights. The emotional or financial toll from the destruction of homes, properties, livestock, crops or fish farms is unaccountable at this stage.

But beyond these devastations or the sufferings that followed heavy rain and winds across the country lies a story of resilience as exemplified by the Sundarbans. Bruised and battered after the cyclone's landfall, the forest stands as a reminder that without it we would be in a much worse condition. Experts say Bangladesh was on the east side of the cyclone's eye—a position that comes with a greater risk of damage in the subcontinent. This means that despite Bangladesh taking the main blow of Cyclone Remal, Sundarbans stood in the way, acting as a buffer against tidal surges and reducing wind speeds.

The Bay of Bengal is notorious for generating devastating tropical cyclones. But Sundarbans, a green shield on Bangladesh's south-western coast, has cushioned us from such calamities time and again, and it was no different this time around. According to a report, the impact of Cyclone Remal left the entire forest inundated for about 30 hours due to tidal surges. As a result, saltwater from the sea contaminated freshwater ponds meant for wildlife and forest dwellers. Deer carcasses have been found, and various structures, including the forest department's offices, staff quarters, and jetties, have been damaged. Although forest officials have not yet been able to estimate the full impact, they fear many wild animals may have perished. A large number of trees have been uprooted as well.

Considering the hit that it took since Sunday, it is vital that the government takes steps to protect and preserve the mangrove forest. While helping affected coastal communities with food and medicine and in rebuilding their lives is the priority now, we must not forget the critical role of the Sundarbans in our survival, and we must not take it for granted. Both short-term and long-term measures are needed. In the short term, we should launch measures to help replenish the forest, and ensure that the wildlife is left alone to recuperate. In the long term, we must stop the kind of development projects that are compromising the integrity of the forest.

Maternal mortality still a red flag

Prevent early pregnancies, address healthcare manpower shortage

There is no doubt that maternal mortality has reduced considerably over the years, but 531 deaths out of 98,000 pregnancy-related surgeries in just 14 hospitals in one year is still too high a number. As per a report by this daily, high-risk pregnancies are increasing in the country, while another report by Prothom Alo noted the high number of home births. How can these realities be acceptable in a country that is on track to become a middle-income one soon?

Early pregnancy—a product of child marriage—is one of the main causes of high-risk pregnancies. While we have failed to check the prevalence of this social evil, we are also not doing a good job of raising awareness about prenatal care and the risks involved in home deliveries. Lack of access to proper medical interventions is another factor that is putting many pregnant women, especially in rural areas, at risk. There is also a shortage of doctors specialised in foeto-maternal medicine, which focuses on high-risk pregnancies, with more than 3,000 health facilities in rural Bangladesh said to have not even an obstetrician and anaesthesiologist.

On the Safe Motherhood Day yesterday, the government sent out mobile phone messages asking women to have their deliveries at hospitals and thus save infants' lives. If there are no trained physicians at the union health complexes or other care facilities, why would pregnant women even come to these centres? This type of mobile messaging will be fruitless if the shortage of skilled professionals is not resolved. Besides, just a slogan sent over a text message is not enough to make women and families aware of the risk of early pregnancies and the need for prenatal and postnatal care.

We also must get to the root of early pregnancy—child marriage—and nip it in the bud. As long as this practice continues, we cannot save our girls from the cycle of ill health including pregnancy-related complications. We must remember that the life of every pregnant woman counts, and do whatever necessary to ensure it.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reach Mount Everest peak
Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first climbers to surmount Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world in 1953.

Cyclone survivors are not just numbers



Tamanna Khan is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

TAMANNA KHAN

On Sunday, as the news ticker kept on updating about Cyclone Remal, a few colleagues of mine expressed concern about coming to work the next day, dreading the deluge from the resulting rain in Dhaka. Being a Dhakaite myself, I understood their concern as an hour of rain can paralyse parts of the city with waterlogging and the consequent traffic congestion, but at that moment, it felt like a peevish complaint. My thoughts, instead, travelled about 320 kilometres south to Shyamnagar, Satkhira. Two years ago, I visited several unions of the area as part of an unfinished thesis. Lined along the northern edge of the Sundarbans, these unions are home to several thousand people who experience the harsh reality of cyclones first-hand almost every year.

Increasing water salinity due to climate change and profuse shrimp farming have turned the land in this region almost uncultivable for crops. Most men in the region thus get involved in fishing or migrate to other places to work as daily labourers. The majority of women, meanwhile, work for the shrimp industry, collecting fry dawn to dusk from the saline waters of the Sundarbans delta. It is these women—Aasia, Masura, Reshma, Tushi, Karuna, to name a few—that I was thinking about as Remal hit Bangladesh.

These women shared with me their stories of all the cyclones they had witnessed in their lifetimes. All those weather events that destroyed or damaged their houses, belongings and at times took away their loved ones, including domestic animals; the hours, days and nights they could not sleep either in crowded cyclone shelters or standing on dykes under the open sky. I



A house in Bhola's Doulatkhan upazila is destroyed by trees uprooted by Cyclone Remal.

PHOTO: MONIR UDDIN ANIK

wondered where they were, at that very moment, hours before Remal hit the Bangladeshi coast. Were they able to make it to the cyclone shelters in time? Many of them spoke about the lack of security in the cyclone shelters where people from different neighbourhoods gather and the sexual harassment they face. I recalled Reshma telling me how she had chosen to send her teenage daughter to a relative's house after getting the warning about Cyclone Sitrang in 2022, instead of taking her to the shelter. What did Reshma do this time, I wondered.

Thankfully, a colleague who works in Satkhira informed me that the condition of the cyclone shelters he visited in Shyamnagar appeared better this time. The ones he visited

only had women, children and senior citizens; most of the men, he guessed, stayed back home to guard and take care of their belongings. While many of us fail to see the rationale behind such behaviour—people choosing to stay back and not going to the cyclone shelters—how can we grasp the emotional and financial stress attached to losing everything you have

When we report about natural disasters, these individual people and their stories often become statistics. Their everyday struggle is lost in the larger picture. We read about the loss of lives and property, we talk about the impacts of climate change, frequent cyclones, their intensities and then move on with our lives. I know Reshma, Aasia, Masura will too. They will return to their damaged homes and belongings and start rebuilding their lives from scratch, knowing that Remal will not be the last cyclone they will experience in their lives.

In fact, many of these women could not name all the cyclones they had witnessed, or the exact dates of each, when I asked them two years ago. I wonder if their minds trick them into forgetting the trauma of these disasters so as to prepare them for the next ones. Perhaps this is the very resilience that brings them international praise, which, though nice, does not change anything for these people.

These coastal women are familiar with climate change and the concept of climate justice, thanks to the many NGOs working in the area. They inquire about their share of the climate fund, which I doubt would ever be delivered in their lifetimes, based on the current attitude of the global powerhouses. Direct financial compensation to climate change victims appears far-fetched.

I don't know if Reshma, Masura, Aasia or Karuna count on this fund or plan their lives hoping for it, but one thing is for sure: they don't want to become climate migrants, not unless they have to. While many of their friends and relatives migrated to the urban areas as climate refugees, Reshma, Masura and Aasia's families stayed behind. Remal and the other cyclones may uproot them from their homes for a day or a few months. When the cyclone's fury ends, they return home, repair their broken houses, or build new ones, or break their back working from dawn to dusk in the increasing saline waters of the coastal rivers to collect shrimp fry and save up for a stronger home, and a difficult yet hopeful future.

How to bridge the rural-urban education divide in Bangladesh

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DR MOHAMMAD TAREQUE AND TASFIA TASNEEM AHMED

The rural-urban education divide is evidently increasing in Bangladesh. Combating this inequality demands comprehensive initiatives that must be launched with proper planning and monitoring. To solve the problem and find the root cause, we need data and research.

The education ministry must build and demonstrate strong policy leadership to reduce the rural-urban divide. Currently, most activities are designed by the central authorities. According to 2022 data, of the total 21,003 institutions in Bangladesh, 19,424 schools and colleges are located outside city corporation areas. It is tough to monitor such a huge number of schools by the central authority. Power devolution to district and upazila levels with strong central monitoring, evaluation, and policy reformulation is advised. The task can be delegated to the existing institutions or bodies such as any government institution, local government, or head of another department in the upazila or district.

The education ministry and/or Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) should release performance and enrolment data disaggregated based on rural/urban location, broken down by upazilas and districts so that researchers and policymakers can better analyse the disparity and suggest a way out. They need to identify problems such as the poor performance of rural students, conduct research on how to tackle these challenges, and take necessary actions urgently.

The new curriculum is aimed at fostering curiosity, critical thinking,

and a growth mindset among students. However, rapid changes of curriculum disproportionately affects rural students, whose education base is already weak. Whatever change we introduce, we have to ensure that it does not negatively affect any group. In this situation, there needs to be annual evaluation and evidence-based research by third parties so that the shortcomings of the curriculum can be overcome.

There needs to be synchronisation among alternative education systems, such as madrasa and English medium education, so that there is equal employability and no cultural de-alienation.

Teacher recruitment in schools needs to be competitive. A lucrative package for teachers is essential so that qualified candidates are attracted to school teaching. Singapore is often cited as one of the best places for teachers in Asia, in terms of high salaries, excellent working conditions, and supportive policies. The benefits of these are evident. They consistently rank at the top in international assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). If we want to see good students and build a smart and developed Bangladesh, we have to recruit and retain good teachers and compensate them properly.

Teacher training needs to be strengthened. Some visionary teachers in rural areas teach beyond their teaching levels and create an everlasting impact in the minds of their students. Local governments or local administrations can organise subject-wise peer training programmes by these teachers. Presently, teachers mostly go to urban facilities to attend training sessions. Contrary to this conventional approach, organising training in the respective rural institutions can enhance quality standards while concurrently mitigating expenses.

Distance learning programmes can be implemented to provide access to transformative education to students in rural areas. Winter workshops can be arranged to harbour maths and English skills. Proficient educators from both rural and urban areas can go to rural schools and equip the students with subject-specific knowledge and practical skills. These are excellent and proven mechanisms to help rural students.

Community engagement and partnerships between schools, local communities, and businesses to support educational initiatives in rural areas are conducive. This could include establishing mentorship programmes, organising community events, and providing extracurricular activities to enrich the educational experience of rural students. There needs to be synchronisation among alternative education systems, such as madrasa and English medium education, so that there is equal employability and no cultural de-alienation.

In the educational landscape, three primary stakeholders play pivotal roles: teachers, parents, and students. Alongside policy initiatives, these groups have to shoulder significant responsibility in mitigating the rural-urban education divide.

Teachers should instil in students a variety of qualities and skills such as a love for learning, critical thinking, and communication skills. Teachers are not just teachers; they are also

leaders. They must develop versatile pedagogical approaches that cater to diverse learning styles and needs. They can leverage online platforms, educational apps, and digital content to enrich their teaching materials and facilitate interactive learning experiences.

Parents and guardians must play a crucial role in monitoring and guiding their children. Awareness-building workshops for parents are advised so that they are aware enough to nurture every aspect of their child's development. Parents must actively participate in their child's education by motivating their children to be self-sufficient and responsible. They should also oversee their children's online activities and help to create a healthy balance between screen time and other recreational and educational pursuits.

Rural students should be guided to identify the boundaries in their knowledge and skills and work on them accordingly. They need to be shepherded to dream big and be taught that actively participating in the learning process and demonstrating self-discipline, resilience, and a willingness to explore and learn will take them closer to that dream. We need to develop proactive students who take ownership of their education and help their peers with academic enhancement as well.

The major resource of Bangladesh is human resources, and we need to fully utilise them to navigate the challenges of the next hundred years. According to the 2022 census, 68.34 percent of our population resides in rural areas. If we cannot develop human capital from this huge population, we will lag in skills, technology, innovation, and productivity. Closing the rural-urban disparity in education will improve the overall skill level of the population, contributing to economic growth and inclusive development. Above all, we have to create citizens who will not only be properly educated in science, skills and culture, but also have high morals, values and a strong sense of patriotism.