

Flood victims need urgent support

Govt must ensure adequate food and shelter for them

It is worrying to see the flood situation in northern districts, especially in Kurigram, worsen due to continuous rainfall and onrush of water from upstream. According to a report by this daily, vast low-lying areas have been inundated due to the rise in the water levels of Teesta, Brahmaputra, Dharla, and Duhdkumar rivers. In Kurigram, along the Brahmaputra, some 450 chars and low-lying areas have been flooded, leaving an estimated 50,000 stranded. This is a fluid situation as the water level is projected to continue rising before it recedes. What this means for the affected and at risk populations is that they have a dual crisis in hand—flooding and erosion—which demands proper attention from the authorities.

The evolving situation with the simultaneous rise and fall in water levels at different river points, and consequent erosion along their coast, is something that the authorities should be observing closely, considering the intensity of such events in recent years. But the immediate priority, of course, is to ensure proper relief efforts. Reports indicate a significant gap between the needs of the affected and available aid. Many flood victims are struggling without adequate relief supplies. Lack of shelter is another major issue, especially in parts of Lalmonirhat and Kurigram where floodwater is showing a falling trend. According to a report, erosion is active at 20 points in five upazilas of the two districts. As a result, many villagers there are taking shelter on government khas lands, roads, boats, or embankments. Ensuring that relief materials, including food, clean water, and medical supplies, promptly reach them all is imperative.

The increasingly frequent cycle of flooding and erosion in Bangladesh also demands a proper response from the higher authorities. There is a clear need for more resilient infrastructure in flood-prone areas that doesn't make people so helpless, or destitute overnight. While erosions occur every year, its growing trend, especially along the Ganges, Jamuna, Padma, and Lower Meghna rivers, highlights the urgency of more comprehensive and long-term interventions, such as enhancing drainage systems, constructing sufficient flood shelters, reinforcing embankments with durable materials, and regulating river flows.

In short, the government's approach needs to be twofold: immediate stabilisation of the most critical areas and the development of a comprehensive, sustainable plan to mitigate the impacts of future floods. For now, it must direct local authorities to improve their response to the evolving situation in northern districts. Besides ensuring sufficient relief materials in flood hit villages, particularly those in remote locations, they should also consider deploying additional resources and personnel to manage the crisis more effectively.

We must stop abuse of public offices

Expedite justice process, apply strict measures to root out corruption

The narratives of corruption coming out of public offices nowadays will defeat any movie script. The slyness of tactics that corrupt officials often use to misappropriate public funds and then exempt themselves from legal consequences would shock anyone. The alleged shenanigans of Cox's Bazar's former deputy commissioner Ruhul Amin to exonerate himself from corruption charges is a case in point.

According to a *Prothom Alo* report, in 2014, Amin, along with 27 others, had been charged for misappropriating approximately Tk 20 crore in the land acquisition process of a power plant project in Matarbari of Maheshkhali. Taking the case into cognisance, the court ordered the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to investigate it. But several court officials, including the then District and Sessions Judge Sadiqul Islam Talukdar, allegedly colluded with Amin to delete his name from the list of accused in case documents and forged the plaintiff's signature before sending the documents to the ACC. When the plaintiff learned about the alleged forgery, he filed another case against Amin and seven others, including the judge and his own lawyer. The ACC found proof of forgery subsequently and filed the investigation report with the court on Monday—10 years after the case was filed.

In 2017, Ruhul Amin, suspended from office by then, was sentenced to jail in another corruption case in relation to land acquisition for the Matarbari power plant. The case was about misappropriation of compensation funds allocated for shrimp farms affected by the acquisition, which was apparently done by showing 25 non-existent shrimp farms on paper. Amin and several others were accused but they are all currently on bail in that case.

The extent of the abuse of office in Amin's story starts from the land acquisition process and climbs all the way up to the court, the ultimate place of trust for ordinary citizens. But if a DC can use his power to influence even a judge and forge case documents, who would the public turn to for justice? This fits with the ongoing trends of lack of accountability mechanisms in public institutions, lenient and protective provisions for government employees, collusion among public officers to cover up each other's wrongdoings, lengthy judicial processes, etc.—which are all equally troubling as they make a mockery of rule of law. We must break these trends. Abuse of public offices for any personal gain, legal or financial, must be prevented at any cost.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Israel's Law of Return passed



Passed this day in 1950 by the Knesset, the Law of Return granted Jews the freedom to immigrate to Israel and receive immediate citizenship, but it proved controversial when the question "Who is a Jew?" raised other issues.

'Govt should not be swayed by the opinion of an extremist minority'

In light of the recent removal of 'Sharifa's Tale' from the seventh-grade textbook, Maheen Sultan, senior fellow of Practice, Gender and Social Transformation at BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), shares her insights with Tamanna Khan of The Daily Star on an ongoing study on the backlash against promoting comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in Bangladesh.

What led you to explore the resistance against comprehensive sexuality education?

All over the world, we have been noticing a backlash against the progress made by the women's movement to ensure women's rights and gender equality, and measures taken by the government to protect and promote them. Our research team is part of a regional programme which includes four South Asian countries—India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. In each country, we have chosen different case studies in areas where we think there has been very strong opposition to what women's movements are trying to achieve. For example, we looked at the case of rape law reform, child marriage, struggle for decent wages in the RMG sector and CSE as well.

The latest controversy with the Sharif Sharifa text shows that teaching CSE is still a sensitive matter. Opposition to CSE is always not as visible or outspoken as it was in this case. However, it is very evident that teachers do not want to teach the curriculum, parents are often resistant, and people sometimes stigmatise teachers who teach these courses. There is a collective reluctance to talk about issues which go beyond health. Most people do not want to talk about issues surrounding sexual health, sexuality or access to contraception. They keep the discussions limited to reproductive health instead of talking about sexual and reproductive health and rights.

What's your reaction to the removal of "Sharifa's Tale" from the national curriculum?

Including Sharifa's story in the curriculum, I think, was a very positive step to try and introduce the concepts surrounding gender diversity. It was a well-researched piece of text. The idea was that students should be aware of the various gender identities and be more open to others who find themselves unable to fit into the binary identities of "boy" or "girl". The hope was that teachers would introduce the topic sympathetically and sensitively.

The government in its policies is very open to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and is committed to including CSE in the curriculum. However, it is sometimes scared of the reaction of people that it considers extremists. And often, it is

only the most conservative people who have been loud enough for the authorities to hear them, but they might still be a minority in this matter. Most people might not have any issues with the text. So, the question remains whether the government should be swayed by the opinions of a small extremist minority. People who have been opposing the text have said that it promotes homosexuality. This is a clear misrepresentation of the message of the story. Unfortunately, the government was influenced by this kind of reaction. I believe that the committee which took the final decision in this matter did not include a wide range of people with a diverse set of opinions. If more people had been consulted,

their outreach programmes, they talk about reproductive health education and topics like menstrual health regulation, and access to services. They don't go around talking about sexual orientation and gender identity. Those topics are avoided because they know that they might face very strong reactions from the community, the authorities and the schools.

However, organisations that are more explicitly dealing with sexual orientation and gender identity have to be very careful. A lot of misinformation was spread on social media following the Sharif Sharifa debacle. Both individuals and organisations were labelled and threatened for their work on sexual orientation and gender identity.

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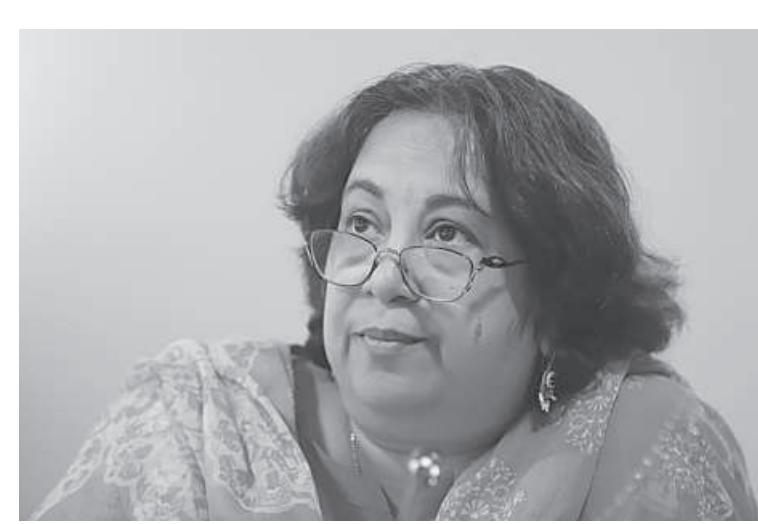
their sexuality and reproductive health. They need to know how to protect themselves. They need to understand the concept of consent and their rights to decide with whom, if and when to have a relationship, as well as the kind of relationship to have.

Another reason why CSE is so important and urgent is that we still have very high rates of child marriage. Early marriages lead to early pregnancies because young women don't have access to birth control and are discouraged from using it. Oftentimes, these pregnancies are unwanted and they resort to unsafe abortions.

When they cannot get abortions, they have to go through the process of childbirth when their bodies and minds are not ready for it. This leads to increased rates of maternal and child mortality. So, there are severe health-related consequences as well of ignoring CSE.

What is the way out?
Parents have to be involved in the process, so that they do not resist when their children receive CSE. If they understand what it is about, they are more likely to want schools to teach it. This would also lead to the eventual phasing out of the stigma surrounding the issue.

It is also important that youth leaders and volunteers with correct information and proper knowledge reach out to other young people. I think the youth are more likely to talk and listen to others in their age group. They will face fewer barriers there. Youth volunteers can also educate adults in their community to destigmatise the issue of CSE.



MAHEEN SULTAN STAR FILE PHOTO

perhaps the committee wouldn't have recommended removing the story from the curriculum.

Do organisations working to promote CSE receive threats of violence?

BRAC, Naripokkho, and Nagorik Uddog are all part of the Right Here Right Now coalition that promotes CSE in schools and increased access to adolescent health services. The coalition also contributes to changing social and gender norms by developing influencers and mobilising the youth to interact with the local government authorities, teachers and schools to promote CSE. It has been very careful in not exposing the youth volunteers to any kind of risks. In

Unfortunately, there's not much legal recourse available for such hate crimes and cyber harassment, which have detrimental effects on activists' physical and mental well-being. Citizens don't usually file cases under the Cyber Security Act for fear of not protecting their privacy and personal data.

Why is it important to talk about CSE?

It is important because there is so much misinformation surrounding the issue. Adolescence is a period of life when young people are curious about their bodies. It is a period when they are discovering themselves and others, and they need to have access to the right kind of information regarding

Can we teachers use respect as a substitute for money?



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"You are teachers. Shouldn't you be satisfied with the respect you get from students in classrooms? Why are you on the streets, running after money?" This is a common statement we are being bombarded with from people of other professions following the teachers' strike, which makes us uncomfortable and surprised at the same time.

Coming from a family where my father is a retired administrative officer of a public university, and my brother is an assistant professor at a college, my one and only dream was to be a teacher. I never sat for the BCS exams or worked in any sector except education, because all I wanted to do was spread the little knowledge I acquired from my teachers, and to learn more from my students.

I remember my father and my brother whom I never saw leading a

enough to maintain a family of two. In fact, I had to ask for money from my family, even though I was living alone. That is when I realised how necessities most often become luxuries to the family of a teacher.

Many teachers from different public universities, including my friends and colleagues, are pursuing



DU teachers' sit-in programme at the Arts Building as part of the protest.

PHOTO: PROTHOM ALO

luxurious life, driving a fancy car, or living in a bungalow; and that, I knew from childhood, is the way of life of a middle-class family. As a teacher, I started in the ninth grade, and the salary I received was barely

higher degrees abroad, which is needed for further promotions at their workplaces. The financial struggle a lecturer or assistant professor faces even after getting fully funded scholarships—from

applying to different international universities to buying plane tickets—is almost never understood by others because, according to many, the passion for learning should be paying the bills!

The questions that come to mind are, why should we feel embarrassed for wanting a secure financial future? Why are we being trolled for asking for a salary without any deduction? Why are we being mocked for supporting the existing pension scheme?

Yes, we have already accepted that our policymakers assume that we do not need a fancy car or a bungalow with numerous domestic help. All we want is to be financially secure after our retirement and for our nominees to feel safe when the pensioner is no more. Isn't that the bare minimum we are asking for?

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the respect we receive does not pay our bills, nor does it allow us to bargain a lower fare with a CNG driver. The admiration and nobility of this profession alone cannot ensure a secure future for our next generation. And, sure, it does not suit "honourable" teachers to be on the streets month after month to regain the minimum rights they had. If it is too difficult to grant us what we deserve, may we use our "passion for learning," "respect for teaching," and "our dignity" as a substitute payment method, please?

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