

# How Bangladeshi Migrants Are Cultivating Qatar's Agricultural Future



A vegetable farm subleased by a Bangladeshi entrepreneur in Al Khor, Qatar.

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MD. MAHDI HASAN

On the sun-scorched Arabian Peninsula lies Qatar—a nation of just over 11,500 square kilometres, where extreme temperatures, rocky terrain, and meagre annual rainfall make agriculture an improbable endeavour. For decades, this desert country relied almost entirely on imports to feed its population. But a sudden geopolitical crisis in 2017 forced Qatar to rethink its food systems—and in that recalibration, thousands of Bangladeshi workers and entrepreneurs found an unlikely but crucial role.

On 5 June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed diplomatic ties and imposed a land,

air, and sea embargo on Qatar, food shelves emptied and panic swept across the country. Although Qatar quickly secured temporary alternatives through Turkey and Iran, the crisis exposed the perils of relying heavily on imports.

In response to the embargo, the Qatar National Food Security Strategy (QNFS) 2018–2023 was launched with ambitious targets: 70% self-sufficiency in vegetable production and complete self-sufficiency in milk and poultry by 2023.

By 2023, Qatar met its milk and poultry targets and raised vegetable self-sufficiency to 46%, thanks largely to its 1,100 farms run mostly by migrant labour. Bangladeshi workers have been



The poultry section of an agricultural farm owned by Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalid Al Thani in Zubara, Al Shamal, Qatar.

key to this shift—not only as labourers but also as entrepreneurs leasing land and applying a mix of traditional farming and modern technology. Their presence is especially strong in areas like Al Rayyan, Al Khor, and Al Shamal.

Their farms produce everything from aubergines and gourds to carrots, okra, bitter gourd and snake beans.

Herbs like mint, parsley and coriander are cultivated for local markets, while some ventures focus on ornamental flowers. Recently, Bangladeshi entrepreneurs have also expanded into livestock, poultry, honey production, and even experimental fish farming.

Despite these vital contributions, many Bangladeshi workers face harsh conditions. Most entered Qatar on domestic worker visas, only to be transferred to farms where they toil in extreme heat, often seven days a week, without proper wages, overtime pay, or holidays. Many are confined to their farms, allowed to leave only in emergencies. Minimum salaries hover around 1,000 Qatari Riyals, and in some cases, food and housing allowances are non-existent.

While a few modern farms do offer better conditions—overtime pay, communal meals, or food stipends—these remain exceptions. Yet the labourers continue, driven by the promise of opportunity, even as they battle systemic exploitation.

workers in exploitative cycles.

Still, their perseverance is laying the foundation for something more enduring: a legacy of agricultural knowledge transfer. As these migrants master Qatar's farming innovations—hydroponics, aquaponics, and dry-climate techniques—they gain skills that could also prove invaluable back home, particularly as Bangladesh faces increasing climate challenges.

Qatar's newly launched QNFS 2030 sets even bolder goals: 55% self-sufficiency in vegetable production, 100% in dairy and poultry, and significant increases in red meat and fish production. Meeting these targets will require not just land and technology—but people.

This opens the door to a more structured and humane partnership between Qatar and Bangladesh. Research suggests Bangladeshi workers are a valuable asset in Qatar's food security efforts. Their role could be further strengthened through a government-to-government (G2G) agreement ensuring fair wages, benefits, and the migration of pre-trained agricultural workers and field technicians. Such an arrangement would boost Qatar's agricultural productivity while reducing exploitation and improving worker morale. It would also create a sustainable model of cooperation, allowing both nations to benefit—Qatar through food security, and Bangladesh through skill-building and economic advancement for its migrant workforce.

Moreover, the knowledge and skills acquired in Qatar would enable returning Bangladeshi workers and entrepreneurs to contribute meaningfully to agricultural development at home. Their exposure to specialist practices such as hydroponics, aquaponics, and other arid-climate farming methods—vital under the looming threats of climate change—would position them as key agents in advancing climate-resilient agriculture in Bangladesh.

**Md. Mahdi Hasan** is the Counselor at the Bangladesh Embassy in Doha, Qatar.

## A LEGACY FROM WORLD WAR II

### The Story of Bottomley Home

**From the wreckage of war and the sorrow of lost childhoods, Bottomley Home Girls' High School rose as a sanctuary of learning and love.**

SAUDIA AFRIN

In the middle of Farmgate's frantic rush, where buses roar and buildings crowd the sky, a quiet miracle unfolds each day. At Bottomley Home Girls' High School, the soft chirping of birds and the gentle rustle of leaves greet students as they step into a campus unlike any other in Dhaka.

The school's story stands out not just for academic excellence, but for its deep-rooted commitment to compassion. Since 1946, Bottomley has been more than a school—it has been a sanctuary. Born in the aftermath of the Second World War and amid the looming crisis of India's Partition, it began as

a haven for 10 to 15 war-affected girls. Famine, disease, and devastation had orphaned thousands across Bengal. In response, philanthropist R. P. Saha, the Holy Cross Sisters, and SMRA nurses sprang into action. Touched by their cause, British official John Miller Bottomley donated land to the CSC Sisters to build a home for the displaced.

From those bleak beginnings, a lasting legacy began to grow. With the steadfast support of Bishop Timothy John Crowley, CSC, and the tireless devotion of the Holy Cross Sisters, the vision took shape—a school and orphanage offering shelter, learning, and hope. It was named Bottomley Home Girls' High School, honouring the man whose generosity transformed a place of loss into a sanctuary of education. Today, it remains true to that mission, housing 145 orphaned girls

and serving around 1,500 students—where the past meets the present in a spirit of care, resilience, and shared purpose.

Students like Teresa Ribero (Koraiya), one of the first residents, captured the spirit of the school in her essay *The Unfinished Memoirs*, praising the missionaries' commitment to nurturing good human beings and a better society. After her father's death, Teresa was separated from her mother and placed in the care of the missionary sisters—a home that would go on to redefine her life.

She reflected, "Raising a hundred orphaned children was no easy task—especially for the foreign sisters, so far from their own families and homeland. But never, not once, did we feel unloved. There was no shortage of warm clothes, colourful toys, or nourishing meals. We played. We learned. We grew."

Initially a primary school until 1954,



Bottomley gradually expanded, adding lower secondary in 1955, and then achieving full secondary status in 1967. In 1968, the institution was officially upgraded to a high school.

Each class at Bottomley Home Girls' High School includes, on average, seven orphaned students who study alongside their peers from outside the home, fostering an inclusive and equal learning environment for all.

Sister Mary Jane, SMRA, the current headmistress, shared, "The girls residing in the home come from remote parts of Bangladesh. Most of them

have lost both parents, and many struggle to understand the standard language we speak. That's why we provide them with intensive care and support, so they can progress alongside other students—not only academically but also in life."

From the wreckage of war and the sorrow of lost childhoods, Bottomley Home Girls' High School rose as a sanctuary of learning and love. For more than seventy years, it has not only educated minds but also healed hearts—quietly nurturing generations of resilient young women. Its legacy endures not just in exam results or accolades, but in the lives it has transformed—each student a testament to the power of compassion in shaping a better world.

**Saudia Afrin** is a journalist and development practitioner with a deep commitment to environmental issues. She is also an alumna of Bottomley Home Girls' High School.



PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS