



Dhaka’s changing conversation on mental health

SHUBHRO HAQUE

When I was a child, a TV commercial declared, “Bishonnota ekta rog.” Back then, it sparked public outrage. Viewers accused it of “supporting” mental illness and normalising antidepressants.

How times have changed! We no longer treat people suffering from depression, anxiety disorders, manic depression, or schizophrenia as demons. Although this process of acceptance has been slow, the ripple effects of a mental health care movement are visible across the city.

There is no doubt that psychiatric ailments are still on the rise. With the recent trauma of witnessing a pandemic and a bloody mass movement against fascism, it is evident that a dark cloud hangs over the city’s health sector. One newspaper report goes so far as to state that suicide is the second leading cause of death in Bangladesh, only after road traffic accidents. And truth be told, the crowded waiting rooms at the psychiatrist’s chamber are a testament to such astonishing claims.

Every cloud, they say, has a silver lining. And what appears to be a hopeless situation when it comes to mental health, in reality shows positive signs, giving hope to those suffering from psychiatric illnesses of a recovery.

Today, Dhaka’s own landscape speaks about depression and anxiety without shame. Radio talk shows discuss such topics without hesitation or guilt. Facebook Lives are done by those who suffer, trying to make others going through similar ordeals feel a little at ease. University awareness programmes are now as common as scholarship recruitment events!

From the National Institute of Mental Health in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar to the consultation rooms of BSMMU and the growing network of private clinics in Dhanmondi, Gulshan, and Banani, Dhaka is no longer a silent spectator to its people’s struggles. NGOs and hotlines, born in this city, are offering new lifelines that did not exist



ILLUSTRATION: ASHIF AHMED RUDRO

when I was younger.

As a teenager, when I was first diagnosed with manic depressive disorder, the idea of medication was scandalous to those around me. “It will rattle your brain,” they said. Almost thirty years ago, very few in Dhaka understood the effects of psychiatric medication and truth be told, even today, many still do not.

My first visits to a psychiatrist were filled with embarrassment. But with

time, with countless regular visits, now, I feel no different walking into a psychiatrist’s chamber than into a cardiologist’s.

What has changed is that conversations can now happen out into the open. Acquaintances share their own struggles, making me feel less alone in this city of millions. Dhaka still tests the limits of my patience, but the city also offers me a respite on dull evenings at the shaded paths of Ramna

Park.

It is a sigh of relief for me that the bookstalls of Nilkhet now offer self-help books on how to combat mental illnesses, just as it offers guidebooks on science and engineering. And, how the conversation on mental disease is not as awkward as it used to be in office cafes.

The city still rattles me, yes – but it also heals me, slowly teaching me that my struggles, too, have a home here.

Dhaka edges closer to boiling point

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in climate adaptation and taking a coordinated approach across sectors, Bangladesh can address the heatwave impacts and maintain sustainable growth.”

Dhaka has been hit the hardest, with its heat index rising 65 percent higher than the national average. Rapid urbanisation, population growth, and unplanned development, including the large-scale loss of green space, are driving the “urban heat island” effect.

The report says Dhaka lost 47 percent of its dense green cover between 1989 and 2020 as land was converted into built-up areas. Urban expansion accelerated after 1999, and by 2020 green spaces had shrunk to 5,600 hectares from 12,745 in 1989.

Between 2001 and 2017, Dhaka’s total area grew by 19 percent, but the population rose by nearly 77 percent, sharply intensifying heat exposure. Green spaces, the report notes, are crucial for reducing heat intensity,

improving air quality, lowering flood risk, and protecting public health.

The use of heat-trapping building materials is making conditions worse. Indoor air temperatures in South Asian cities can exceed outdoor temperatures by up to 4°C at night, particularly in tin-roofed homes, raising the risk of heat stress.

Rizwana noted that the Detailed Area Plan for Dhaka had been prepared years ago but was never finalised due to resistance from business groups. “The city should not be left in the hands of business interests; it should serve its dwellers,” she said, calling for strict enforcement of environmental laws, protection of remaining green spaces, better city planning, and an overhaul of public transport to cut emissions and heat buildup.

Prof Sayedur Rahman, special assistant to the chief adviser for the health ministry, said those responsible for climate damage, both globally and locally, must be held accountable and contribute more funds to mitigation

efforts. He urged the creation of a comprehensive intervention plan to reduce the health and economic impact of climate change.

IMPACTS ON HEALTH AND PRODUCTIVITY

The report highlights serious health and productivity consequences of rising temperatures. In summer, cases of diarrhoea and persistent cough nearly double compared to winter.

Nationally, 6 percent of surveyed individuals reported having persistent cough in summer, compared with 3.3 percent in winter. The elderly reported the highest prevalence of persistent cough, followed by those aged 50–65.

Women are disproportionately affected, with higher rates of heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

Mental health effects are also pronounced. Depression and anxiety rise during hotter months, with depression increasing progressively with age and anxiety peaking among those aged 50–65.

These health effects translate into

significant productivity losses, which are far higher in the hotter months.

“Our analysis shows measurable links between exposure to heat and poorer health outcomes, alongside substantial productivity losses. Like many other countries, Bangladesh faces real risks of lost human capital and productivity,” said Iflat Mahmud, senior operations officer at the World Bank and co-author of the report.

The World Bank has called for urgent, coordinated action to protect people, livelihoods, and the economy from escalating heat risks. The report urges stronger national preparedness through a multisectoral approach to heatwave management, upgrades to health systems to treat heat-related illness, and the expansion of urban green spaces.

It also stresses the need for better weather and health data to guide policy and for international public and private financing to help Bangladesh confront the growing impacts of global warming.

Jamaat wants PR system

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elections until 4:00pm. When they sensed they were losing, they announced a boycott of the polls. From here, we can understand that they don’t want fair polls.”

Of the 31 political parties, 26 are in favour of introducing the PR system, he said.

Some of the parties want PR in the upper house, some want it in the lower house, while others want it in both houses.

Jamaat-e-Islami wants PR in both houses.

“We told them that we have a special opportunity after 54 years. We, the political parties, are united and sincere

about bringing the necessary changes using this opportunity.”

But differences of opinion have arisen regarding how to implement the reform process.

On the issue of the National Consensus Commission, he said: “I don’t think consensus will come just by extending the commission’s tenure.”

Disagreements can be resolved even in a one-hour meeting.

“Questions have arisen whether the commission’s meetings are being used as a pretext to waste time. Although solutions are possible at the negotiating table, the sincerity of the parties is essential.”

BNP plans image clean-up

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at its chairperson’s Gulshan office on Monday night. Acting chairman Tarique Rahman chaired the meeting virtually from London.

The move comes at a time when the BNP is struggling to rein in its grassroots, as many leaders and activists have been accused of various crimes, including extortion.

The meeting also discussed the decision of Jamaat and other like-minded parties to take to the streets to realise their five-point demand that includes banning the activities of Jatiya Party and the 14-party alliance and holding the election on the basis of the July Charter and under the proportional representation system.

BNP leaders at the meeting termed the demands “illogical” and “delaying tactics”.

They believe Jamaat and some other parties are trying to put pressure on the government and BNP, which they think is unlikely to succeed.

The party also worries that Jamaat’s programmes may disrupt the electoral process, creating instability and confusion among voters.

According to multiple Standing Committee members, the issue of the PR system for the lower house of parliament never came up for discussion at the National Consensus Commission talks.

Speaking to journalists at his Gulshan residence yesterday, BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed said, “Demand for the PR system just for the sake of securing a few parliamentary seats goes against national interest and will bring terrible consequences.

“Also, we don’t support banning any political party through an executive order; the matter should be decided through judicial proceedings.

“Any political tactic to delay or obstruct the election will be rejected by the people. Because the people have struggled for 16-17 long years for their voting rights, which will only be realised

Appoint religious teachers in primary schools or face demo

Say speakers at seminar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The interim government’s decision to appoint music and dance teachers in primary schools, instead of religious teachers, is “forced and irrelevant”, leaders of Islamist political parties and organisations said yesterday.

The seminar, organised by Jatiya Olama Mashayekh Aima Parishad, was held at the Institution of Diploma Engineers, Bangladesh (IDEB) auditorium in Dhaka’s Kakrail.

Representatives from Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Andolon Bangladesh, Khelafat Majlish, Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish, and Bangladesh Khelafat Andolon attended the programme.

At the event, they said the move is “indirectly connected with an atheistic philosophy to make the future generation faithless and an attempt to destroy schoolchildren”.

Emphasising that there is no alternative to religious and moral education, speakers alleged that the current interim government wants to push the nation backwards.

Addressing the event as chief guest, Islami Andolon Bangladesh Ameer (Charmonai Pir) Syed Rezaul Karim said, “When we took religious studies as children, there were separate teachers for Hindus

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‘Personal grudge behind accusing Sheikh Hasina’

Alleges defence against Mahmudur’s statement on BDR carnage

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The state defence counsel for deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday alleged that Amar Desh Editor Mahmudur Rahman implicated the former PM and Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh in the 2009 BDR carnage out of personal vendetta.

During cross-examination, defence lawyer Amir Hossain, representing Hasina and former home minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal in the crimes against humanity case related to the July uprising, argued that Hasina handled the BDR mutiny “skillfully” and ensured trial of those involved.

He rejected Mahmudur’s claim that Hasina harboured resentment towards the army and weakened it, saying instead that she strengthened the force.

Mahmudur responded, “It is not true.” Earlier in the day, Mahmudur concluded the deposition he began on Monday at the

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‘Escaping from death towards death’

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that the war in the Palestinian territory was morally, politically and legally intolerable.

“It is absolutely clear that this carnage must stop,” United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk told AFP and Reuters.

The UN rights chief stressed that “the people of Gaza cannot sustain yet another intensification of violence and destruction and killings and lack of humanitarian assistance that needs to come.”

“I can only think of what it means for women, malnourished children, for people with disabilities, if they are again attacked in this way,” he said.

“We see the piling up of war crime after war crime after war crime, of crime against humanity, and potentially even more,” Turk said.

“It’s for the court to decide whether it’s genocide or not, and we see the evidence mounting.”

The European Union said the ground assault on Gaza City would worsen an already “catastrophic” humanitarian situation, while Britain said it would bring only “more bloodshed, kill more innocent civilians and endanger the remaining hostages.”

Despite the mounting criticism, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Monday offered robust backing for the offensive and vowed “unwavering support” for Israel.

Rubio’s comments came a week before France was set to lead a UN summit in which a number of Western governments, angered by what they see as Israeli intransigence, plan to recognise a Palestinian state.

Yesterday, Luxembourg became the latest European state to announce that it will recognise the State of Palestine.

Gaza health officials reported at least 106 people had been killed yesterday, most of them in Gaza City, as airstrikes swept across the city and tanks advanced.

Where a missile had destroyed two multi-storey residential buildings during the night, people clambered over an immense mound of dislocated concrete to pry out victims, footage obtained by Reuters showed. A woman cried as a small child’s body was pulled from the wreckage, hastily wrapped in a green blanket and carried away.

Abu Mohammed Hamed said several of his relatives had been wounded or killed, including a cousin whose body was trapped by a concrete block: “We don’t know how to take her out. We have

been working on it since 3:00am”

Israel renewed calls on civilians to leave, and columns of Palestinians streamed towards the south and west in donkey carts, rickshaws, heavily laden vehicles or on foot.

“They are destroying residential towers, the pillars of the city, mosques, schools and roads,” Abu Tamer, a 70-year-old man making the journey south with his family, told Reuters in a text message. “They are wiping out our memories.”

In Brussels, a spokesperson for the EU executive said it would agree today to impose new sanctions on Israel, including suspending certain trade provisions.

Some residents were staying put, too poor to secure a tent and transport or because there was nowhere safe to go.

“It is like escaping from death towards death, so we are not leaving,” said Um Mohammad, a woman living in the suburb of Sabra, under aerial and ground fire for days.

The IDF said it estimated 40 percent of people in Gaza City had left. Hamas said 350,000 had left their homes in the eastern parts of the city, heading to displacement shelters in its central or western areas, while another 175,000

people had fled the city altogether, heading south.

Much of Gaza City was laid to waste in the early weeks of the war in 2023, but around 1 million Palestinians had returned there to homes among the ruins. Forcing them out means confining most of Gaza’s population to overcrowded encampments along the coast further south, lacking food, medical supplies and space.

The offensive has been launched at a time when the UN last month declared famine in parts of Gaza. Three more Palestinians died of malnutrition and starvation in the past 24 hours, Gaza’s health ministry said yesterday, raising total hunger deaths to at least 428. Israel says the extent of hunger has been exaggerated.

Some Israeli military commanders have expressed concern that the Gaza City assault could endanger remaining hostages held by Hamas or be a “death trap” for troops.

Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir, at a meeting Netanyahu convened late on Sunday with security chiefs, urged the prime minister to pursue a ceasefire deal, according to three Israeli officials, two of whom were in the meeting and one of whom was briefed on its details.