

EMPTY HOMES, EMPTY PROMISES

Who Will Stand by Our Parents?

Parents, once considered the cornerstone of family life, now find themselves alone in empty homes. The big dream for the youth has become leaving the country, but what becomes of those who are left behind? They are left in deserted houses, living not with their children but with memories.

JOBEDA AKTER RINI

There was a time in Bangladesh when the family home was more than just a roof over one's head—it was a living institution. Generations grew together under its shade, sharing meals, quarrels, stories, and responsibilities. Old age was never lonely; it was filled with warmth, community, and care. In those days, children were not just economic contributors but the promise of security, affection, and dignity in their parents' twilight years. To grow old meant to be surrounded by those whom you had raised, to live with respect in a home that echoed with shared histories.

But times have changed. Today, the story is different. A new wave of migration has swept across Bangladesh, especially among the younger generation, the only path to success in a nation where political and economic instability pushes people to escape rather than rebuild. Every day, thousands line up for IELTS coaching centres, visas, and student permits—dreaming of settling abroad for a better life. While these journeys bring remittances, they also leave behind broken households.

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An elderly woman sits in an old-age home, reading the day's paper. With no direct contact with her children, she pours her heart into a letter each month, pinning it to the board behind her — a silent plea for connection. FILE PHOTO: STAR



of those who are left behind? They are left in deserted houses, living not with their children but with memories. What once was the warm sound of laughter is replaced by silence, and the family home has turned into an unspoken alternative to an old age home.

Is money the only thing parents deserve after raising their children with love and sacrifice? Or do they deserve companionship, care, and dignity in their old age? It is heartbreaking that we even have to ask these questions. Even more troubling is how society is slowly adapting to this reality, adjusting to emptiness, normalising absence.

The crisis is real and growing. Bangladesh is undergoing a rapid

demographic transition, with its elderly population increasing much faster than the overall population. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, people aged 60 and above made up about 7-8% of the population in 2015, rising to around 9-9.5%—about 16 million people—by 2023 (BBC, 2024).

Projections from the UN and World Bank indicate that by 2050 nearly 20-22% of citizens—or roughly 44-45 million people—will be elderly, nearly tripling since the start of the century (World Bank, 2023). Although the government has introduced social protection measures such as the old age allowance and, more recently, a

universal pension scheme, coverage remains limited. In practice, the old age allowance reaches only about one third of elderly citizens and provides very low benefits, and the new pension scheme launched in 2023 requires at least 10 years of contributions, making it inaccessible for many informal sector workers.

Alongside economic insecurity, loneliness and social isolation are widespread; studies on Bangladeshi older adults have found that more than half report feeling lonely, particularly women, rural residents, and those living alone after their children migrate abroad.

Researchers describe a “systematic

neglect” of elderly care, as the erosion of the joint family system combined with weak state support leaves millions of older Bangladeshis facing old age without adequate security, dignity, or companionship.

This abandonment is not just personal, it is systemic. Social values have shifted: children are no longer seen as lifelong companions of their parents but as economic projects. Parents invest everything in educating their children, often at the cost of their own well-being, only to see them disappear overseas, leaving behind remittances in place of love. Physical presence and affection have largely been replaced by short video calls once a day or once a week.

The future is grim if nothing changes. An ageing population, coupled with an unstable political order, will mean millions of abandoned elderly living in isolation. The state has shown little initiative in creating sustainable eldercare systems, and in a society where the focus is solely on political and economic survival, compassion risks being written out of our collective values.

Money may flow in from abroad, but what is the price of this money if it costs parents their dignity and companionship? Bangladesh stands at a moral and political crossroads. If the family is the backbone of society, what happens when the backbone weakens? Who will take care of the parents when dreams of migration overshadow dreams of togetherness?

Empty homes cannot provide care, remittances cannot wipe away loneliness, and no amount of political rhetoric can replace the presence of a child sitting beside an ageing mother or father. It is time we confront this uncomfortable truth: in a nation where “nothing gets fixed”, perhaps the most urgent question is not just about politics or economics, but about our humanity itself.

Jobeda Akter Rini, is a M.A student in Department of Sociology at South Asian University, New Delhi. She can be reached at jarini0109@gmail.com

READING TIGER PUGMARKS

Human–tiger co-existence in the Sundarbans



PHOTOS: MD RAIHAN RAJU

Tiger pugmarks spotted on the alluvial terrain of the Sundarbans.



Bishwa Mandal, a fisher and devotee of Bonbibi, who has spent his entire life fishing in the Sundarbans.

MD RAIHAN RAJU

In the shifting mudflats and mangrove thickets of the Sundarbans, survival is a constant negotiation. For the Bonojibis—the people who depend on its marshy terrain, venturing out for fish, honey, and firewood—living alongside tigers is not just a matter of danger, but of daily practice. Over generations, they have developed a quiet language of respect, reading the forest for signs and symbols. Among these, the pugmark of a tiger is not merely a footprint: it is a message, a presence, a reminder that the jungle belongs to more than humans. To acknowledge it, even to greet it, is to accept the terms of co-existence in a shared and perilous home.

“Whenever we venture into the forest and work in the forest creeks—whether fishing, collecting crab, or honey—if we find any pugmarks, we offer Salam to it,” shared Bishwa Mandal, an elderly Bonojibi from Abad Chandipur, a village adjacent to the south-western range of the Bangladesh Sundarbans. He added, “If you give Salam, then it brings satisfaction to whom you are offering it. The jungle is a sacred place; if we offer Salam to the tiger and to all creatures in the jungle, they feel respected and acknowledged.”

The act of offering Salam also symbolically signifies seeking permission to access the tiger's abode. For them, pugmarks are not merely tracks; they are symbols representing the mythical character of Dakshin Ray (king of the south), also known as the adopted son of Bonbibi (mother of the Forest).

Like Bishwa Mandal, the wider Bonojibi community believes that Salam, as a form of greeting between species, creates a space of mutual respect and dignity and acknowledges the existence of different creaturely beings.

The form of such greeting rituals functions as a way of communication between humans and non-humans. It precisely conveys a sense of collective relatedness and affinity between prey and predator.

Whenever the Bonojibis enter the jungle and step into the alluvial creeks (mal), at first sight they carefully scan the trunks of large trees. They believe tigers often inscribe scratch marks—known as noli hasor—on these tree trunks with their front claws. These marks are thought

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to signify their abode and territory, eventually helping them to navigate when returning from the hunt. The Bonojibis refrain from entering the alluvial creeks and dense forest territory if they find any claw marks inscribed on the trees.

If they find any fresh pugmark (taja bager kor) on the muddy creeks, they immediately leave that place. They usually vacate the forest passage for the tiger and try to find another passage for fishing and collecting honey. Most of the Bonojibis are highly skilled in reading pugmarks. They can often tell how old the tracks are and when the tiger last passed through the area by closely observing the condition and

texture of the mud. However, they often face difficulties tracing fresh pugmarks since the forest passages are submerged twice a day due to the tide and ebb cycle of the rivers. The high tides frequently wash away the tracks left on the alluvial forest bed.

For the Bonojibis, pugmarks serve as a repository of numerous signs that in extension unravel the motives and behaviours of tigers. By observing the movement and pattern of these tracks, they can interpret the tiger's intent—whether it is simply walking, searching for prey, lying in ambush, or chasing a target. These marks also help them to guess the tiger's gender and age, distinguishing between a mature tiger and a cub. Additionally, experienced Bonojibis note that the depth of the pugmarks in the alluvial mud can suggest whether the tiger is carrying prey in its mouth.

The matter of reading pugmarks, in other words, functions as a semiotic system related to wildlife, as the Bonojibis meaningfully understand it. That embedded ecological knowledge of semiotics enables both human and tiger to share the forest passages, the food granary of the forest, and cultivate co-existence and mutual survival.

Yet, the risks remain high; a single misreading of pugmarks or a moment of disrespect can lead to fatal consequences. Since 2000, about 300 people have been killed in tiger attacks in the Bangladesh Sundarbans, and in the deltaic villages along the forest's edge you can readily meet survivors whose bodies bear the scars. In this place where river and tide constantly erase and redraw the lines of passage, the pugmark endures as a reminder that co-existence is never without risk, but neither is it without meaning.

MD Raihan Raju is a journalist at The Daily Star