

# Shrimp over rice and the quiet erosion of our food security



Dr Abdullah A Dewan is professor emeritus of economics at Eastern Michigan University in the US, and a former physicist and nuclear engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission. He can be reached at aadeone@gmail.com.

ABDULLAH A DEWAN

Recent reports on the southern coast describe an alarming breakdown in dry-season farming. In Chitalmari, Fakirhat, Rampal and Mollahat, land was ploughed and prepared for Boro paddy as it has been for decades, but irrigation pumps could not supply freshwater. Salinity had crept into canals that once sustained winter cultivation, leaving seedlings to dry on nursery beds. With no cyclone damage or embankment breach to blame, farmers faced a quiet failure: irrigation systems rendered useless by brackish water. Some abandoned planting altogether; others shifted to cultivating Bagda shrimp as the only viable way to salvage the season.

When salinity rises, the soil creates a condition agronomists call physiological drought: salt increases osmotic pressure around plant roots, preventing crops from absorbing moisture even when fields appear wet. Seedlings stand surrounded by water they cannot drink. The failure is invisible to the eye, but fatal to the crop.

In recent years, coastal districts have lost nearly 50,000 hectares of cultivable land to salinity. Salt does not announce itself through catastrophe. It enters quietly—an inch of tide here, a dry monsoon there, a river slightly less generous than before—until the soil forgets how to hold rice. Farmers rarely meet this with protest; they adapt by turning to shrimp.

Shrimp aquaculture generates income where paddy fades. In one season alone, shrimp exports from a single district exceeded Tk 700 crore—attractive in economic terms. Yet profitability cannot disguise a deeper exchange: shrimp contributes to export earnings, while rice secures nourishment. When one replaces the other, income may continue, but food security shifts. Soil that converts to shrimp ponds rarely returns to rice; salinity lingers.

This quiet transformation is not local or isolated. Salinity is already redrawing coastlines and harvest patterns worldwide.



Saltwater has overtaken vast stretches of farmland in Satkhira, where once-thriving rice fields and freshwater ponds have been replaced by shrimp enclosures.

FILE PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

The Mekong Delta has begun losing rice for the same reason, with tides pushing upriver millimetres by millimetres. The Nile Delta is gradually surrendering to the Mediterranean, and in the Indus Basin, salinity has challenged yields for decades. The UN estimates that over 1.4 billion hectares of farmland globally are now salt-affected—nearly 10 percent of the world's cultivated base. Hunger arrives slowly, not through famine but erosion.

Even the world's most engineered agricultural economies face similar

groundwater depletion has triggered a salinity shift, forcing farmers from almonds towards pistachios and other drought-tolerant grains. Across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), governments have responded to signs of salinity stress with research funding, soil restoration, crop insurance, and irrigation reform.

These comparisons matter because they shift the discussion from misfortune to management. If high-capacity nations treat

soil salinity as a strategic threat, coastal agriculture in Bangladesh cannot afford to treat it as a slow inconvenience.

There are still paths forward for Bangladesh. Along the western coast of India, farmers have cultivated Pokkali rice—a salt-tolerant indigenous variety—for over three thousand years. During lower-salinity months, they grow rice; when the tide turns brackish, they shift to prawn cultivation by opening and

The danger ahead is not only environmental; it is generational. If rice cultivation no longer sustains dignity or income, the children of farmers will not remain farmers. Land may stay fertile on paper, yet unused in practice. Soil security depends not only on water and seeds, but on the faith that farming still has a future.

Meanwhile, urban progress speaks loudly through structures that reach into the sky—flyovers, expressways, power plants, megaprojects—and each ribbon-cutting is celebrated as an achievement. But concrete does not feed families. A functioning irrigation channel receives no ceremony, though without it every new expressway ultimately leads to a place where nothing grows. Economic growth may continue for a time even as agriculture declines, but eventually the imbalance reveals itself at the dinner table rather than in budget documents.

The steps we need to overcome and manage the problem are neither mysterious nor unreachable. Irrigation infrastructure must be funded, maintained, and governed with the same seriousness applied to the power or transport sector. Shrimp expansion needs zoning rather than market momentum. Salinity-tolerant rice seeds should be distributed widely, supported by services that help farmers manage new methods, not left isolated in trial plots. River dredging must be ongoing rather than intermittent, recognising that rivers are agricultural arteries. Crop insurance, procurement pricing, and credit support must sustain the farmers who hold the food system in their hands.

A half-century ago, the threat was famine, and agriculture recovered through research, extension, cooperation, and resilience. Flood, cyclone, and the pressure of population did not break food security then. But, salinity may, if allowed to proceed unchallenged. It does not uproot houses or break embankments; it waits, season after season, until fields go quiet.

A nation may grow economically while allowing cultivable land to slip into export ponds, but it becomes dependent. Food security is not achieved through ports, highways, or megaprojects; it is achieved when water reaches the fields and seed meets soil. No country retains full strength if it cannot feed itself, and whether that foundation is protected or allowed to erode will determine not just the next harvest but the country's long-term resilience.

## Dipu Chandra Das and a tragedy of outrage without truth



H. M. NAZMUL ALAM is an academic, journalist, and political analyst. Currently, he teaches at International University of Business Agriculture and Technology (IUBAT), and can be reached at nazmulalam.rijohn@gmail.com.

H. M. NAZMUL ALAM

Dipu Chandra Das did not die because he insulted a religion. He died because accusation has become a more powerful weapon than truth, and because crowds in Bangladesh increasingly believe that outrage is evidence enough. He died because someone decided that verification was optional, that due process of law can be ignored. He was beaten, dragged, hung, burned and filmed. Not in the dark. Not in secrecy. But in public, under streetlights, beside a highway, before cameras and spectators.

This follows a familiar script we have seen play out frequently in recent times. What makes this death particularly unbearable is not only its brutality but its emptiness. Even the agencies tasked with enforcing law and order have admitted that there is no direct evidence that Dipu Chandra Das insulted religion at all, not that doing so justifies extrajudicial actions. No post. No recording. No witness who actually heard the alleged words. Everyone heard that someone heard something somewhere. That was enough.

German American philosopher Hannah Arendt warned that when facts lose their authority, the space they leave behind is quickly occupied by violence. A mob does not require proof. It requires permission. Sometimes that permission comes from silence, sometimes from delay, and sometimes from the quiet decision to push a man outside a factory gate to save property while surrendering a life. Institutions may not strike the blow, but they often step aside to make room for it.

The most terrifying line in the official narrative, therefore, is not about the fire or fists. It is the sentence that says he was handed over to protect the factory. It reveals a hierarchy more disturbing than any slogan shouted that night. Order was maintained. Production survived. A worker did not.

This was not an eruption of uncontrollable madness. It unfolded over hours. Accusations circulated. Groups formed. Calls were made late. By the time law enforcement arrived, the ritual had concluded. And yet, even as Dipu's body burned, the next tragedy for the nation was already in the making. A young political leader and organiser, Sharil Osman Hadi, shot

in broad daylight of December 12, was declared dead on that same day—December 18—by the doctors in Singapore. The aftermath? Vested groups exploiting it to attack the offices of *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star* at night and vandalise cultural institutions.

What's worth noting is each such incident of mob violence often arrives with a press statement from the government promising justice, and departs with an investigation that soon fades into abstraction. The pattern is so consistent

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that it now feels almost administrative. Besides, there is a peculiar irony in how quickly the word "conspiracy" is deployed in public discourse. Everything is planned, we are told. Everything is destabilisation. Everything is someone else's design. But what if the most effective "conspiracy" requires no mastermind at all? What if it is sustained by predictable delays, familiar denials, and the collective comfort of never holding the system itself accountable? When people do not trust institutions to deliver the justice they want, they outsource judgment

to the street, even if the verdict is flawed. When law becomes slow, spectacle becomes swift. The mob promises instant resolution, even if that resolution arrives soaked in blood.

There is something grotesquely modern about this violence. It is not only physical but performative. Phones are raised as fists fall. The burning body becomes content. The horror is shared, commented on, argued over, monetised by attention. American writer Susan Sontag warned that repeated exposure to images of suffering risks turning pain into consumption. We are now consuming our own collapse.

The state responds with numbers. Arrests counted. Law enforcement operations named. Weapon licenses facilitated. Police training programmes announced. The language is managerial, as if violence were a logistical glitch rather than a moral failure. We are told that thousands have been arrested. We are told that security is being strengthened. Yet, crime statistics rise, as does people's sense of fear and uncertainty.

Perhaps the problem is not absence of force but absence of foresight. Preventive intelligence is discussed after each catastrophe like an afterthought we keep forgetting to remember. Former police officials now speak openly about preventive detention, a tool that sounds alarming in theory but strangely comforting in a society where prevention has become an endangered concept. But even prevention cannot succeed if it is applied selectively or theatrically. Law enforcement cannot appear only when cameras are present and vanish when crowds gather.

A society is judged not by how loudly it condemns such violence but by how rarely it allows it to happen. Bangladesh today condemns well. It investigates verbosely. It mourns briefly. Then it moves on, leaving behind families who must learn to live with the knowledge that truth arrived too late to save a life.

Dipu Chandra Das had a daughter who will grow up knowing her father through news reports and viral videos. That is the inheritance we are offering the next generation. Not safety. Not surety of justice. We must reverse this course. We must understand that if the upcoming elections are a national priority, so is preserving the sanctity of life. If religion is sacred, so is restraint in a democratic society. And if the state claims authority, it must reclaim its credibility through sufficient presence, speed, and moral clarity.

Otherwise, we should stop pretending that these are isolated failures. Rather we should accept the truth that a society that continuously allows outrage to replace evidence will keep producing graves long before it produces justice.

## CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

1 Concede	28 Bee follower	e.g.
6 Set one's sights	29 Slugger Williams	9 Approve
11 Smoker's pipe	30 Nut	10 Tyrants
12 Play part	34 Hot blood	14 Mechanical
13 Some sharks	35 Curved path	learning
15 Unclose, to poets	36 Hoopla	19 Brewing need
16 Bartender on "The Simpsons"	37 Manicuring tool	22 Pooch pest
17 Spinning toy	40 Be in accord	23 Eye parts
18 Cinnamon candies	41 Racket	24 Ordinary
20 Debate side	42 Plane choices	25 Amber wine
21 Valuable rock	43 Polite chaps	26 Sport with blades
22 Boxing weapon	DOWN	28 Area under a wave
23 Skate park sights	1 Despise	30 Oxford parts
26 Runs away	2 Hang loosely	31 Short putt
27 Green and Longoria	3 Acted wordlessly	32 That is: Latin
	4 " _____ a Rock"	33 Centers
	5 Quakes	38 Permit
	6 Grill waste	39 "Lenore" writer
	7 Water cooler	
	8 Cornish pastry	



### WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

L	I	B	R	A	L	I	N	E	
O	N	A	I	R		I	R	O	N
S	A	L	M	A		T	A	S	T
E	W	E	P	S	U	T	I	N	
S	E	R	I	A	L	P	O	R	T
R	U	S	S	O		S	H	Y	M
E	S	A	U	F		D	A	L	E
C	E	R	E	A	L	A	I	S	L
O	D	D	C	U		L	A	X	
I	C	I	E	R		E	L	I	T
L	A	N	G	E		R	I	D	E
R	E	O	S						S

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