

# Population control and the lure of policy by numbers

## Why Mahmood Mamdani's question still matters



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Zohran Mamdani has recently been in the news—young, articulate, politically sharp, and controversial in equal measure. But whenever I read his name, my mind returns to another time and another figure: his father, Mahmood Mamdani. Today, as Bangladesh once again hears bold announcements about family cards, health cards, social protection, and Universal Health Coverage (UHC), I find myself wondering: are we standing before an old question in a new form?

I first encountered Mahmood Mamdani's work as a student at the London School of Economics (LSE) in the late 1970s. The world was then gripped by anxiety over what was called the "population explosion." Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* had injected a tone of urgency, even alarm, into development thinking. In the geopolitical climate of the Cold War, high fertility rates in the Global South were viewed not just as an economic problem but as a political risk as well. In policy circles in Washington and elsewhere, rapid population growth was increasingly framed as a driver of poverty, instability, and even extremism. Family planning became more than a public health initiative; it became a geopolitical priority. In classrooms, we were shown graphs: population curves rising steeply, food production lagging. The prescription appeared straightforward: reduce fertility. Set targets, increase "acceptors."

The numbers were clear. The logic was simple. It was at this moment that I read Mahmood Mamdani's *The Myth of Population Control*. The book unsettled me.

At the heart of Mamdani's analysis was Khanna, a district in India's Punjab, where, in

the 1960s, a long-term family planning study led by Harvard University was conducted. The objective was direct: if modern contraceptives were made available and incentives provided, would rural couples adopt them?

Researchers visited the village regularly, provided counselling, distributed pills and injections, and collected survey data. The results showed rising "acceptance." The study was celebrated internationally. Khanna became evidence that even rural India was embracing family planning. But Mamdani, an anthropologist, went back to the field and found a more complex reality. Many of those recorded as "acceptors" were not consistent users. Some took the pills but did not consume them. Others received injections once, but did not return. More importantly, Mamdani examined the power dynamics at play. The foreign researchers were educated, authoritative, and backed by state and international institutions. Villagers perceived them as *sahibs*. Refusal was not socially easy. In that context, what surveys recorded as "acceptance" often reflected deference rather than conviction.

In statistical terms, uptake had increased. In social terms, compliance masked constraints. Mamdani posed an even deeper question: why should these families reduce fertility in the first place? In agrarian settings marked by economic insecurity, absence of social protection, and reliance on children for old age support, children are not merely mouths to feed but also labour, insurance, and dignity. Without altering these structural conditions, how sustainable could a purely technical fertility intervention be?

I still remember sitting in the LSE library,

winter light filtering through the windows, reading Mamdani's arguments. I was studying demography—rates, regressions, projections. Yet, Mamdani reminded me that numbers do not float above society; they are produced within it. I may not have grasped the full implications at the time, but a seed of doubt was planted: does development thinking fall too easily in love with measurable success?

Later, during my doctoral studies at

technical matter or a question of power. Years later, Masuma visited us in Dhaka. In 2023, when our book *50 Years of Bangladesh: Advances in Health* was launched in London, jointly by LSE and the Bangladesh High Commission, she was present. Time seemed to complete a circle. The intellectual challenge that once unsettled me had become part of my own professional journey.

When I returned to BRAC to help build

The family planning revolution in Bangladesh did not stem from contraceptive supply alone. It was the result of the work of female community health workers, expansion of girls' education, women's economic participation, and reductions in child mortality. Smaller families become a rational choice when women earn, when girls stay in school, and when children survive. Mamdani taught me that "acceptance" is not the same as empowerment.

Years later, working on global health systems and UHC, I saw the same pattern recur: elegant policy frameworks, sophisticated financial models, coverage statistics. But the fundamental questions remained: is inequality narrowing? Are households protected from catastrophic health expenditures? Are women and marginalised communities genuinely empowered?

Today, in Bangladesh, we are discussing health cards, family cards, and expanded social protection schemes. Millions of cards distributed may indeed be impressive. But the essential question lies elsewhere: who is actually receiving services, and of what quality? Who is being excluded? Is a card equivalent to an entitlement? Numbers can write press releases. Justice writes history.

For me, *The Myth of Population Control* was never just a book about fertility. It was a warning against the arrogance of technocratic development. It taught me that evidence is never neutral, numbers never tell the whole story, and policies fail when power structures remain untouched.

As Zohran Mamdani's name circulates in political debate today, I am reminded that intellectual legacies travel across generations. His father once taught me to question the comfort of numbers. That question remains relevant not only in population debates of the 1960s but in contemporary discussions of UHC, social protection, and reform. Are we turning people into statistics, or are we putting statistics to work for people? Numbers tell stories. But when people cease to be at the centre of the story, the narrative collapses, and so does development.



**A female community health worker discusses family planning options with local women at a community clinic in Fulchhari upazila, Gaibandha.** FILE PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUI

the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, I became close friends with Mahmood Mamdani's sister, Masuma Mamdani. We spoke often about Africa, colonial legacies, and the politics of development. I visited her in Dar es Salaam. We walked by the Indian Ocean and debated whether development was fundamentally a

Research and Evaluation Division (RED), Mamdani's lesson was quietly at work in my thinking. We did not want to produce numbers for their own sake. We did not want to celebrate coverage rates without understanding context. We asked why people change, why they don't, and how power relations shape behaviour.

## INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ACTION FOR RIVERS

# Our rivers are dying, and so is our future



**SABBIR AHMAD**

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A few days ago, I stopped by the Turag River near Aminbazar on my way to Savar. The water, a murky greyish brown, barely moved. A thick film of industrial waste floated on the surface; the smell was difficult to endure. A local fisherman indicated that he had not caught anything worthwhile in three years. "This river is dead," he flatly suggested, as if it were obvious, the way one might comment on the heat or traffic. That casual acceptance stayed with me. How did we arrive at a point where a dead river is simply another feature of the landscape?

The world marks March 14 as the International Day of Action for Rivers to recognise the crucial role of rivers in sustaining livelihoods and ecosystems. This year's theme, "Protect Rivers, Protect People," feels like an ultimatum. The world also observes March 22 as "World Water Day," focusing on access to fresh water. The 2026 campaign slogan for the day is "Where water flows, equality grows." Naturally, these two days commemorate deeply interconnected themes.

For Bangladesh, a nation shaped by the sediments from the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna, the health of our rivers is not a peripheral environmental concern—it is the very foundation of our survival. A 2025 study by the River and Delta Research Centre (RDRC) reveals a grim reality: at least 79 rivers across the country have either died or are drying up. The crisis is most acute in the Khulna division, with 25 dying rivers, followed by 19 in Rajshahi and 14 in Rangpur. This decay mirrors a parliamentary statement from February 2024: that 308 rivers around the country have lost navigability. While the total river network in Bangladesh spans approximately 24,000km, the portion that remains navigable during the dry season is roughly 3,800km, a staggering decline that threatens the very lifeline of our delta. And yet, the gap between our riverine identity and our developmental choices has never been more consequential.

The picture is bleak in the capital. A recent study reveals that over the last three decades, Dhaka's built-up areas surged by 288

percent, while its vital water bodies shrank by 60 percent. Consequently, the six rivers encircling the city—Buriganga, Shitalakkhya, Bangshi, Turag, Balu, and Dhaleshwari—are now functionally dead, choked by industrial and municipal waste. The Department of Environment's 2023 report confirms that these waterways fail to meet the vital Environmental Quality Standards set by law. This is not just an ecological issue but also an economic one: the World Bank estimates river pollution costs the nation \$2.83 billion annually, a figure set to balloon to \$51 billion over the next two decades if we fail to act.

The drivers of this crisis are well-documented but politically inconvenient. According to the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), roughly 350 tonnes of waste are dumped into Dhaka's rivers daily from approximately 7,000 industrial and residential sources. Another RDRC survey report on 56 rivers finds them to be extremely polluted. The ready-made garment sector, the backbone of our economy, discharges an estimated 5.6 crore tonnes of wastewater annually, mostly into the Buriganga. The dissolved oxygen levels has become too low to support aquatic life in Buriganga, Turag and Balu. For nearby slum residents, the cost is physical: Human Rights Watch reports chronic fevers, skin diseases, and respiratory illness. Besides, with the rivers being choked by the 63,200 illegal encroachers identified by the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC), the city's natural drainage is also failing. The urban waterlogging that paralyses Dhaka with less

than an hour of rain is not a natural disaster but the predictable result of replacing waterways with concrete.

Beyond our borders, the challenge takes on a geopolitical dimension that demands far greater urgency than it currently receives. Bangladesh is at the downstream end of 57 transboundary rivers, which means we are perpetually subject to our neighbours' decisions. During the dry season, upstream diversions reduce rivers like the Ganges to trickles, allowing salinity to advance deep into the agricultural belt of our coastal districts, ruining farmland and displacing communities. During the monsoon, sudden uncoordinated releases from upstream dams trigger what are often described as flash floods. There is nothing natural about a flood caused by dam management decisions made without warning or accountability. The Ganges Water Treaty was ratified decades ago, yet we still lack access to transparent, real-time data on upstream operations. As the treaty comes up for renewal, Bangladesh must push for enforceable real-time data-sharing, early warning systems for dam releases, and a genuine framework for joint ecological stewardship of the shared watershed.

Domestically, the problem is not an absence of law but a chronic failure to enforce it. In 2019, the High Court declared rivers in Bangladesh as living entities with legal rights, designating the NRCC as their legal guardian. The court also directed that encroachers be barred from participating in elections and getting bank loans. In 2026, those directives

remain largely symbolic. Eviction drives generate headlines; encroachers return within months.

Breaking this cycle requires structural reform. The NRCC must be empowered with genuine fast-track authority to penalise polluters and evict encroachers beyond the reach of political interference. Every major infrastructure project must pass a mandatory river impact assessment before approval. In the case of industrial pollution, the standard cannot remain voluntary compliance. Industries operating without functional effluent treatment plants are externalising the true cost of their production onto the public health of millions. It is basic hydrological common sense, not idealism.

At the community level, the Halda River offers a model worth national attention. The partnership between local fishermen and government agencies to protect the country's last natural carp breeding ground shows what is possible when communities are given genuine ownership rather than treated as spectators to top-down policy.

There is no foundation more fundamental than the water that flows through this delta. A Bangladesh of high-speed internet and soaring skylines means very little if the rivers are retreating. If we fail to act urgently through enforceable law, assertive diplomacy, and genuine community stewardship, we will be the generation that presides over the irreversible loss of our most defining natural heritage, and our aspiration for equality may remain elusive.

**CROSSWORD**  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**  
1 Chops into fine bits  
6 Sore spots  
11 Extreme pain  
12 River of Provence  
13 Essential  
14 Dull finish  
15 Morse bit  
16 Chide  
18 Screw up  
19 Favoring  
20 Auditor's org.  
21 Genuine  
23 Trap  
25 Jazz style  
27 Flow out  
28 Fare carriers

**DOWN**  
1 Corporate shark  
2 Disregard  
3 Double-reed instrument  
4 Compass dir.

30 Upper limits  
33 "- Kapital"  
34 Ump's call  
36 Set fire to  
37 Treater's words  
39 Summer sign  
40 Put away  
41 Squirrel's find  
43 Nearby  
44 Sculptor Henry  
45 Madrid mister  
46 Had title to

5 Waffle topper  
6 Radius, e.g.  
7 Scorch  
8 Ride with a basket  
9 Complete  
10 Garden starters  
17 Twosomes: Abbr.  
22 Bagel topper  
24 Jackson 5 hit  
26 Lead the way  
28 Squeal  
29 Total  
31 Dakota city  
32 High  
33 Brake shapes  
35 I love you: Sp.  
38 Roughly  
42 Farm grazer

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

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