

# How forest loss, water crisis and inequality collide



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Last month, three special days of observation occurred in succession. March 21 marked both World Forest Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, while March 22 was observed as World Water Day. Historically, the themes of these days have been deeply intertwined. But in our civic and academic narratives, these issues have always been treated separately. Why is there no water in the streamlets of Soroi hill in Bandarban or in the Madhabkunda waterfall in Moulvibazar? In the name of establishing a commercial rubber plantation, the Lama Rubber Industries Ltd took over the Soroi hill area, cut down the forest, and poisoned the streamlets. On the other hand, under the guise of creating an eco-park, the Forest Department enclosed Madhabkunda, built artificial infrastructure incompatible with the local forest, and leased out this ancient waterfall to a private company. Reckless tourism has turned streams into dumping grounds for plastic waste. The very stones that retain water have been looted by powerful outsiders. That is why the streams in the hills are drying.

What is the relationship between the dying forests and water sources and racial discrimination? It is one that is historical and colonial. For the sake of profit and trade, water bodies and forests have been repeatedly plundered, occupied, and polluted. Authoritarian binaries and neoliberal power structures have legitimised this practice. Why does this looting and grabbing continue against poor farmers, forest dwellers, Indigenous communities, and fishers? Why must the rural "lower classes" be evicted from their ancestral land, streams, and sacred forests? Amid all this, the politics of historical racism and division continues to thrive.

In the 1700s, British colonial official Robert Lindsay wanted to take control of the limestone hills in Sylhet, but the local Khasi people fought against that. However,

the Hajongs in an independent Bangladesh could not save the hilly mounds of Durgapur in Netrakona; to trade white clay and china clay, the entire area has been gouged out and mutilated. Why did they plan to build a five-star hotel on Chimbuk Hill, where there is not a drop of water? Why did Birsa Munda, Piren Snal, Abinash Mura, Salik, and Goni surrender their lives to save the jungle throughout history? To some, the jungle is a way of life, and to others, it is a profit mine.

Not just for forests, but the so-called lower classes have sacrificed their lives fighting to secure the right to water as well. In the haor region, the Bhashan Pani Movement arose with the aim to secure every individual's right to accessing public water. For this, Barun Roy endured imprisonment and repression. Similarly, Karunamoyee Sardar and Zayeda of the southern region gave their lives to save wetlands and land from the salinity of commercial shrimp enclosures.

Just as forests cannot grow if water does not flow freely, so too water flow dies down when forests are ravaged. But in the conventional discussions on resolving water crisis or the conservation and management of forests that dominate the space, these interrelationships and multidimensionalities are always suppressed. There are also some stereotypical debate on the "elimination of racial discrimination." However, in those discussions, the multidirectional tendencies of power, marginality, commerce, the relationship with nature, and hegemony remain strongly absent. Why do Indigenous and farmer households get upended in the name of coal or gas surveys? Why does a poor woman in the coast, the Barind, the hills, or the urban slums have to wait for hours to collect a single pitcher of water, or why does a poor farmer, after backbreaking agricultural labour, die by suicide after not getting a decent price for their harvests? Despite not having used fossil fuel in her lifetime, why

is the life of a rural woman shattered by cyclones, floods or drought? Why do the rich of the world get to drink one bottle of Kona Nigari water for Tk 60 lakh, while poor fisherwomen in Bangladesh are forced to have their wombs removed because of sores caused by increased salinity in their water? Why do millions of children in the world go to sleep in agony without food every day, while the United Nations prepares lists of countries

expensive time to bring home water. Meanwhile, men typically end up either bottling up public water for sale or becoming part of the syndicate that keeps water under hostage. In a country plagued by barriers to accessing water, various multinational companies bottle up and sell gallons upon gallons of it. Why are there no protests against this on the streets or in parliament? Water is fundamentally a matter of power.

foresters is an imposed division, which has created a distance between the authorities and the forest dwellers and forest-dependent Indigenous peoples. At the same time, because the authorities never question this binary, they have not been able to learn from the foresters' folk knowledge about ecology and conservation. The coloniality and historically established control still remains in force. With such a discriminatory attitude from the authorities, the development and expansion of natural forestland is not possible as such an ecosystem can only develop through the combination of natural and social forces.

The forest has its own right to develop and adapt itself per its needs. Legal recognition of forests' personhood is urgent. At the same time, it is also important to legally recognise the rights of the people dependent on forests, as well as all other forest-dependent species. To this end, the government should start working on a forest rights law.

## When the soul burns

On the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination this year, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said, "The ancient poison of racism is alive and kicking in every community, society, country and region of the world. The antidote is unity and action." Do we have enough of this antidote?

In 2022, after two Santal farmers in Rajshahi's Nimghatu village died by suicide because they were deprived of water for irrigation, other Santal farmers from the same village said, "There is no water. The soil's soul is burning." In Satkhira's Gabura village, one Bangalee farmer told me about the paddy harvest suffering due to the lack of water. Every day, one could hear the cries of the forests as well. At the Beribadh slum in Dhaka, I have heard from many people the stories of souls being crushed by water scarcity. Across the country, souls are burning. The souls of water, soil, birds, fish, people, settlements, villages, wetlands, and forests are all ablaze. Not a single agency of the state will be able to handle this crisis or protect the citizens by itself. Effective coordination is needed among all the ministries and departments, alongside inclusive action. Shedding all biased outlooks, the state must stand on the side of every burning soul.

*This article has been translated from Bangla.*



Hills in Bandarban terraced for rubber plantation.

FILE PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

that waste food? These questions have yet to find any space in our racial discrimination discourse.

It is only against the poor, the powerless, the peasants, the fishers, the Indigenous peoples, the traditional healers, the forest dwellers, and the landless that ruthless discrimination and division go unquestioned. All the facets of modern racism carried forward from the colonial legacy must be brought into mainstream discussion.

## Isn't access to water a fundamental right?

The theme for this year's World Water Day was "Water and Gender." Across the country, every day, it is our women who are burdened with the responsibility of household water management. Walking mile after mile, they fight, endure getting shoved, and

The High Court recently declared free, safe drinking water to be a fundamental right of every citizen, in light of Article 32 of the constitution. Will the government implement this order?

## A law to ensure forest rights is urgent

The theme for World Forest Day this year was "Forests and Economy." Forests in Bangladesh have always been viewed in terms of how many cubic feet of timber could be yielded from them. Not a single forest in the country is intact, let alone healthy. Each one is surviving against the unjust actions of the influential quarters in the country. Yet, geographically, the diversity of our forestry is quite notable.

Usually, in any conversation on forests, the forest authorities' name come up not as a protector but as an adversary. Forest versus

# Maternal vaccination can close the immunity gap for newborns

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Despite remarkable progress in child survival, newborn deaths remain a major challenge in Bangladesh. According to recent estimates, about 60,000 newborns die each year in the country, with nearly three-quarters of these deaths occurring in the first week of life. Many of these deaths are caused by infections that strike before infants are old enough to receive routine vaccines. While Bangladesh expanded childhood immunisation and maternal health services over the past decades, protecting babies in the earliest days of life requires additional strategies. Maternal vaccination, which allows mothers to pass protective antibodies to their babies during pregnancy, offers a promising opportunity to reduce these preventable deaths and strengthen newborn survival. Yet, despite this potential, maternal immunisation remains absent from routine pregnancy care in Bangladesh, reflecting a collaboration gap between antenatal care services and the national immunisation programme.

The recent measles outbreaks in Bangladesh, where around 50 children have died and hundreds of cases have been reported this year, serve as a reminder of the risks posed by immunity gaps and the consequences of delayed or incomplete protection against infectious diseases. While measles primarily affects older infants and children, it reflects broader vulnerabilities in maintaining population immunity and protecting those who are too young to be vaccinated. This underscores the importance of complementary strategies such as maternal vaccination, which can provide early protection to newborns and help bridge the critical window before routine vaccination.

Maternal vaccination falls between two health platforms. Vaccine delivery is managed through the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), while pregnancy care is provided through antenatal services. Because these systems often operate in parallel, vaccination is not routinely integrated into antenatal visits, and opportunities to counsel or vaccinate pregnant women may be missed. Bridging this gap will be essential to expand maternal immunisation and prepare for new vaccines that protect mothers and newborns.

Encouragingly, public trust in vaccines remains one of Bangladesh's greatest strengths. Decades of successful childhood immunisation have built strong confidence among communities, families, and frontline health workers. National immunisation coverage for many childhood vaccines remains above 90 percent, and vaccination

has become widely accepted as a normal part of protecting children's health. Many women, therefore, view vaccination as an important step in safeguarding their own and their babies' health. In community discussions, participants frequently expressed willingness to accept vaccines when they understand their benefits. As one pregnant woman mentioned during our qualitative fieldwork, "If the doctors or healthcare providers explain that this will help the child and prevent illnesses, of course I will say yes. Why would I want harm?" This deep-rooted trust creates a favourable environment for introducing new maternal vaccines, provided that pregnant women receive clear information and guidance from trusted health providers.

Antenatal care offers one of the most promising platforms for strengthening maternal immunisation in Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2022, more than 85 percent of women receive at least one antenatal care visit during pregnancy. These contacts provide crucial opportunities to counsel women about vaccination and deliver vaccines at the right time. Timing is particularly critical for maternal vaccines, as they are most effective when administered during specific stages of pregnancy. Accurate assessment of gestational age is therefore essential. Ultrasound examinations, used by 94 percent of women who sought antenatal care during their pregnancies, can help determine gestational age and support the appropriate timing of maternal vaccination.

However, a significant proportion, around 70 percent of antenatal care in Bangladesh is delivered through the private sector, where vaccination services are not always systematically integrated with the national immunisation programme. Strengthening coordination among immunisation programmes, public antenatal care services, and private providers could transform routine pregnancy visits into effective opportunities for maternal vaccination.

At the same time, the global maternal immunisation landscape is evolving rapidly. Tetanus toxoid-containing vaccines have long been administered during pregnancy to prevent maternal and neonatal tetanus, and some countries have introduced pertussis vaccination for pregnant women to protect newborns from severe respiratory infection. More recently, maternal vaccines against respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) have emerged as a promising tool to reduce severe illness in early infancy, while vaccines against Group B Streptococcus (GBS) are under development. Importantly, these vaccines are also considered highly cost-effective public health strategies because a single dose given during pregnancy can protect newborns during their most vulnerable months and reduce hospitalisations and healthcare costs. For Bangladesh, these innovations present both opportunities and challenges. While maternal vaccines could significantly strengthen newborn protection, their successful introduction will require preparedness across the health system.

Without clear delivery strategies, provider training, and coordination across health services, new vaccines may face delays or low uptake. Planning must begin well before the vaccines arrive.

Research and evidence will play a critical role in guiding this process. The Maternal Immunisation Readiness Network in Africa and Asia (MIRNA), funded by the Gates Foundation, is a nine-country consortium working to strengthen the evidence base for maternal vaccination in low and middle-income countries, including Bangladesh. Through collaborative research, the network aims to understand maternal vaccine demand, acceptance, and implementation challenges across health systems to help policymakers address key questions before introducing new maternal vaccines.

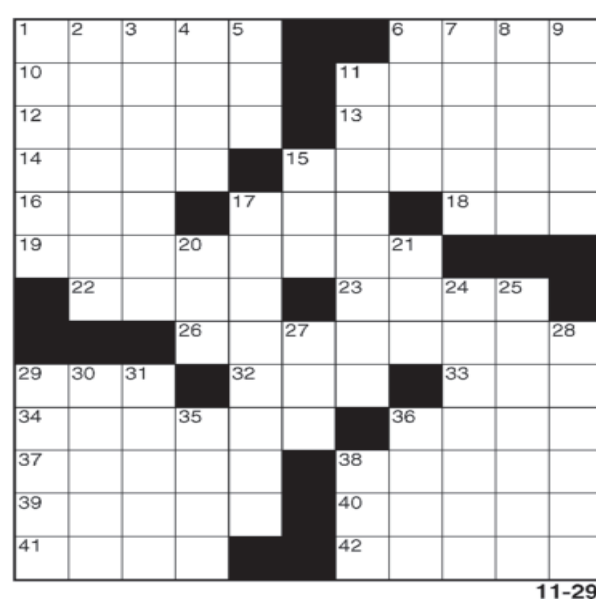
Protecting newborns begins before birth. As maternal vaccines such as those for respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) approach introduction, Bangladesh has an opportunity to prepare its health system now. Recent measles outbreaks point to the need for stronger efforts to close immunity gaps early in life, through routine immunisation, including vaccination during pregnancy. Strengthening coordination across immunisation and maternal health services, engaging both public and private providers, and building on the country's strong trust in vaccines can make maternal vaccination routine part of pregnancy care and help protect newborns in their most vulnerable early days.

CROSSWORD  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**  
1 Javelin  
6 Pull forcefully  
10 Momma's mate  
11 Head, in slang  
12 Space visitor  
13 National symbol  
14 Alley rowlers  
15 Dojo dougins  
16 Pitching stat  
17 Snapshot  
18 Twisty fish  
19 Shredded  
22 Herring's kin  
23 Teller of tales  
26 Bundled for cold weather, say  
29 Beat walker  
32 Spying org.  
33 Soccer's Hamm

- 34 Bare one's soul  
36 Join the choir  
37 Home design  
38 Writer Puzo  
39 Make blank  
40 African antelope  
41 Rational  
42 Hagar's wife  
**DOWN**  
1 Keyboard bar  
2 The North Star  
3 Headstone words  
4 Some primates  
5 Operated  
6 Calendar span  
7 Pond growth  
8 Nick of movies  
9 Prepare to propose  
11 Guilty

- admission  
15 Young one  
17 Toe treatment  
20 Poet  
Octavio  
21 Diner dessert  
24 Navy bigwig  
25 Spoiling  
27 Card spot  
28 Asian temple  
29 Message systems  
30 Sung drama  
31 Praline bit  
35 Snowman's carrot  
36 Store event  
38 "Doesn't excite me"



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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