

Bangladesh in 2020

Debating Social Distancing, Digital Money, and Climate Change Migration

ABSTRACT

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladeshi economist Mushfiq Mobarak argued that in developing countries, lockdown-based social distancing would not be feasible to mitigate its spread. This was because they would be unable to impose restrictions, undertake mass testing, or provide adequate safety nets to the poor. Bangladesh was one of the first countries to allow the reopening of work places (as early as April 28, 2020), especially in the export-oriented garment industry, and has done economically better than its South Asian counterparts. A crucial enabling factor for this pandemic-era economic growth has been the explosive boom in digital money. On the downside, free speech has been sharply curtailed, and women's futures were further jeopardized when the garment industry was severely hit by order cancellations. But perhaps the most frightening development is the effect of climate breakdown and the mass movement of populations within Bangladesh as well as in and out of the country.

KEYWORDS: lockdown, digital money, Rohingya, Cyclone Amphan garments, migration

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COVID-19: DEBATING SOCIAL DISTANCING AND TURNING TO DIGITAL MONETARY TRANSACTIONS

When Mushfiq Mobarak and Zachary Barnett-Howell, both development economists at Yale, argued that social distancing might not be the way forward for poor countries, South Asian experts were thrown into a sharp debate. As the coronavirus was ploughing through Italy's older generation, the two argued that in poorer countries with younger populations, shuttering the economy for months would cause mass unemployment, impoverishment, and hunger and might therefore not be a "reasonable cost to pay" for "flattening the curve." Based on data from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, they found that up to 37% of households in low-income countries are food insecure and correctly predicted that households in developing countries would face dire circumstances if the complete shutdown and social-distancing measures of a severe lockdown were imposed (Barnett-Howell and Mobarak 2020).

When COVID-19 was first reported in Bangladesh (on March 8, 2020), the rich in Bangladesh, like elsewhere in South Asia, were keen to socially distance but found it difficult to do so with every household task depending on the labor of the poor. Initially, "overseas returnees," especially from richer households, were spreading the disease, and the COVID-19-related deaths of some renowned members of Dhaka society sent shockwaves into the elite and the media. Bangladesh's health care is notoriously inadequate, and those Bangladeshis who can afford to usually travel to India, Thailand, or Singapore to get it. With frontiers suddenly shut, the elite and middle class were forced into competition for the few spaces in the dismally inadequate medical infrastructure of Bangladesh. By the end of May, a couple of desperate CEOs and politicians were chartering planes to leave with their families for the UK or Thailand. The WHO initially feared that the coronavirus would tear through populations in South Asia and lead to millions of deaths in countries such as Bangladesh. Thankfully, and to many experts' surprise, this did not happen; but as for what was/is happening to the majority, the figures still remain a mystery. As of January 10, 2021, the official total is a little over half a million COVID-19 cases (in a population of 166 million), and 7,756 deaths. Bangladesh's case fatality rate is well below 2%, which is among the lowest in the world.

With internal and international migration rising each year, "mobile money" has become big business. Three-quarters of Bangladeshis have

a mobile phone, but less than half have a bank account, and rural areas often lack banks. Migrants from rural areas can send remittances through mobile apps that charge as little as 1.45% per transfer, and the payment can be picked up at a local post office. In 2019, US\$ 51 billion in transactions were made using cellphones, and in 2020 this has increased. The private commercial BRAC Bank's BKash now has 45 million customers (and has attracted foreign investment from China's renowned Alibaba as well as the Gates Foundation). BRAC's rival Nagad (which has the advantage of signup being mandatory when joining the mobile-network operator Robi) has 60 million. The digital divide remains, however, not just along rich/poor and urban/rural lines but also by gender, with cellphone ownership and access to digital services remaining unequal between men and women (Islam 2020). The digital divide has also hurt poorer children. Schools have been shut since mid-March, and access to online classes is practically nonexistent among the poor, threatening the education of 42 million kids, especially in the coastal areas (Montu 2020). This has increased child labor and child marriages (especially of girls).

ECONOMY: OFFICIALLY DOING WELL BUT (FEMALE) WORKERS' LABOR CONDITIONS ARE ABYSMAL

With its rapid GDP growth since 2004, in 2019 Bangladesh overtook India in GDP per capita, and in 2020, the per capita income of an average Bangladeshi was greater than that of an average Indian (Misra and Iqbal 2020). In the last 15 years, Bangladesh has kept its population growth under 18%, while India's is 21%. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the two economies have been different: while India's GDP is expected to fall by 10%, it is officially anticipated that Bangladesh's will grow by 4%. Bangladesh's GDP is led by the industrial and the service sectors: both create more jobs and are more remunerative than agriculture. Bangladesh's labor laws have not been as stringent as elsewhere in South Asia, and its economy has seen higher female participation; both these factors have contributed to its growth.

With COVID-19, the glaring vulnerability of garment workers was made evident when Bangladesh was severely hit by order cancellations, and nearly half of the four million women garment workers lost their jobs (Hossain 2020). After thousands protested over unpaid wages, factories reopened at the end of April, but without adequate precautions, leaving workers with the stark choice of either risking infection or facing starvation.

The world's second-largest exporter after China, the Bangladesh garment industry employs 4.5 million people in about 4,500 factories. After the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in 2013, which killed 1,135 workers and injured more than 2,500 (mostly women), European and US retailers, fearing consumer backlash, worked to improve labor and safety conditions. The European Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and its weaker US counterpart, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, were ratified in 2013. However, once their five-year term and extension were up, in May 2020, garment factory owners formed the RMG Sustainability Council, which absorbed the Accord and Alliance (plus their Bangladesh-based successor, Nirapon). Under this new scheme, compliance is no longer legally binding but “a voluntary step,” and punitive measures against noncompliant factories are not mandated. The latest report compiled by labor rights groups (FIDH/ODHIKAR 2020) finds that the council has yet to commit to ensuring workplace safety or preventing child labor.

Bangladesh's progress has been largely credited to certain political and social metrics, including health, sanitation, financial access, and women's workforce participation. With regard to health, the mortality rate attributed to unsafe water and sanitation is much lower in Bangladesh than in India. And in a way, the growth of the garment industry can be read as a success story in relation to gender parity. Out of 154 countries surveyed, Bangladesh is in the top 50, while Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India are in the bottom 100. And yet, recent surveys and media reports have highlighted rising gender discrimination. According to Labour Behind the Label, an NGO advocating workers' rights, 80% of garment workers in Bangladesh have experienced or witnessed sexual violence and harassment. Women have been harassed for not following “socially acceptable behavior,” for example smoking in public or not wearing a hijab. In January 2020, after a brutal rape in Dhaka sparked nationwide outrage, protesters called for the resignation of government officials over the alarming rise in sexual violence against women and girls. According to Ain o Salish Kendra (Center for Law and Mediation), a Bangladeshi human rights organization, 907 women or girls were raped in Bangladesh in the first nine months of 2020. Most survivors do not report such assaults, and those who do often face stigma and humiliation. Gender-based violence is still normalized, with 63% of men, both rural and urban, believing they are justified in beating their wives if they are refused sex. Violence against women and girls in Bangladesh appears to have further increased

during the COVID-19 pandemic, with NGO hotlines reporting a rise in distress calls (Human Rights Watch 2020).

THE DIGITAL SECURITY ACT: A LAW THAT IS USED TO TERRORIZE CITIZENS

The answer to last year's question of whether Bangladesh was the world's newest autocracy seems to be leaning toward the affirmative. The Digital Security Act of 2018, has been misused to criminalize and silence voices critical of the government. In May 2020 alone, the act was used to justify nearly 60 cases against more than a hundred people, 22 of them journalists. Those arrested include cartoonists, writers, journalists reporting on corruption, and critics of the government's handling of the pandemic. Data from Bangladesh's government-run Cyber Crime Tribunal show that nearly 800 cases were filed under the act in the first nine months of 2020. Civil rights activists and even teenagers who have voiced complaints about the government, even on social media, have been detained and often tortured under this law. Over 500 people have been "disappeared" in Bangladesh over the last decade. It now ranks very low, 151st out of 180 countries, in the Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index.

The act conflicts with international standards that Bangladesh has signed: Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It also contradicts Article 39 of Bangladesh's own constitution. Bangladesh's academy was once regarded as a relatively safe space in which to air critical views. But this year, several professors at Rajshahi University, Begum Rokeya University, National University, and even Dhaka University were sacked and prosecuted for their Facebook posts or opinion pieces. Sections of this law are vague in defining "crime," and the punishments are disproportionately harsh. For instance, Section 17 of the act dictates prison time of 10 years for jeopardizing "national security"—for example by protesting a bilateral project such as the Rampal Power Station. As Bangladesh turns 50 in 2021, and in the light of some very disturbing developments in relation to the curbing of civil rights and the continued rise of radical Islam, some soul-searching by the leaders of the country in relation to Bangladesh's identity would be welcome. Scholars have been offering pointers toward in-depth rethinking of studies on Bangladesh (Dewan 2020; Fair and Patel 2020; Lewis and Schendel 2020).

CYCLONE AMPHAN, SEA-LEVEL RISE, THE ROHINGYA CRISIS, AND THE RISE OF DISTRESS MIGRATION

On May 20, a “super-cyclone” with winds of 260 km per hour hit Bangladesh’s coastal areas (mainly the districts of Satkhira, Khulna, Barguna, and Patuakhali); this was the strongest cyclone to hit the region since 1942. Cyclones in Bangladesh are biannual events, and the recent strong tropical cyclones (Sidr in 2007, Aila in 2009, Bulbul in 2019) have caused billions in damage, with Cyclone Amphan being the costliest ever in the Northern Indian Ocean, at over US\$ 13 billion. It has been estimated that in the next 30 years, 18 million Bangladeshis will be victims of distress migration because of sea-level rise alone, and 40 million to 63 million people in South Asia will be forced to migrate (Kugelman 2020; Sarkar 2020).

In a way, the unfolding Rohingya crisis can be read as the start of climate-change-related migration in the region. Like Bangladesh’s, Myanmar’s topography is extremely vulnerable to climate-induced disasters, and this also renders both governments fragile. Katie Foley (2020) has demonstrated how this combined instability fueled the Rohingya refugee crisis, and Ambalika Singh (2019) poignantly demonstrates how the Rohingya crisis is heightening the pressure on an already imperiled Bangladesh. Indeed, Bangladesh is situated at the head of the Bay of Bengal, and with India’s West Bengal, has the largest river delta on the planet; one-quarter of the inhabited Bengal delta is less than seven feet above sea level. The melting glaciers of the Himalayas, along with more frequent and stronger cyclones and shifts in river currents, have dramatically pushed brackish water up the Delta’s rivers, causing floods and loss of agricultural land. Bangladesh is expected to lose 30% of its food production by 2050 (International Monetary Fund 2019). As a result, much of its rural majority is likely to be internally displaced, increasing strain on government social services and threatening political stability.

Bangladesh currently hosts more than a million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. Although much of 2018–19 was consumed by heads of state discussing the return of Rohingyas to Myanmar, in 2020 Bangladesh began to look like a permanent refugee camp for this community. Recently, the government has been relocating them, defying pressure from the UN and human rights groups, to Bhasan Char, a remote island in the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh has spent more than \$300 million preparing the previously uninhabited island to host 100,000 refugees, but experts say that Bhasan Char is

vulnerable to cyclones and floods. But what are the options on either side? With a million Rohingyas, Bangladesh already hosts the most stateless persons in the world (Myanmar itself has 620,000 stateless persons). Bangladesh also has about eight million migrants, which means that nearly 5% of its population works overseas. A quote from Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, a 2019 novel that links Bangladeshi migrants, climate breakdown, and the sinking of Venice, comes to mind when concluding this piece: "People think that knowing the future can help you prepare for what is to come—but often it only makes you powerless."

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