

LIFESTYLE CHANGES IN THE *MONGA* AFFECTED AREA: PAST AND PRESENT SCENARIO OF SHAGHATA UPAZILLA, GAIBANDHA, RANGPUR, BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

A wide variety of natural disasters including flood, drought, river erosion and cold wave have been affecting the lives of people of north-west Bangladesh. Although the climatic and physiographic condition of the region do not favor agriculture, since the beginning of the history of Bengal main occupation of the local people has been considered as farming and agro-based works. Unexpected loss of crop yield and sudden unemployment of people due to frequent disaster outbreaks had been causing food deprivation in the locality from the British ruling period. Monga, a near famine condition prevailed here from September to November and was periodically experienced by the local people. But this phenomenon has not been witnessed in the region within the last decade. This indicates that the local people has successfully combated Monga eradicating food insecurity and unemployment. Along with agricultural adaptation, the local people initiated progressive changes in their lifestyles which brought a cumulative change in the society. This study focuses on the changes in lifestyles of the local people over the years trying to identify areas of improvement in the study area. Two unions of Shaghata Upazilla of Gaibandha district was selected as the study area. Both primary and secondary data related to the research were brought under consideration. At present, people of the study area have started to realize the importance of education, health awareness and women empowerment which has improved their socio-economic situation. They are still tangled with poverty and other social impediments but their determination for betterment of their lives keeps them motivated to journey into a prosperous future.

Keywords: *Monga, Northwestern Bangladesh, Lifestyle Changes, Disaster Eradication*

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh holds the position of the 6th most densely populated country of the world with a total population of 166,280,712 ^[1] which is exceptionally higher compared to man-land ratio. Moreover, the country is listed as the fifth most disaster prone country ^[2] as she has to constantly deal with different natural disasters i.e. tropical cyclones, storm surges, tornadoes, floods and river erosions along with human-made disasters. In the past years almost every region of the country had experienced various types of hazards and disasters and went through social and economic losses. But the northern part of Bangladesh is considered as the worst of victims as this region repeatedly failed to

overcome their constraints due to repeating disasters^[3]. The northern region of Bangladesh attains floodplain topography and tropical monsoon climate. As a result, this area is vulnerable to a number of natural calamities i.e. flood, riverbank erosion, drought and cold waves; all of which occur more frequently and intensely here in comparison to the other area of the country^[4-6].

The situation worsens due to little diversification in the local economic activities which is profoundly dependent on agriculture. The farmers can harvest crops only one or two times annually in this area whereas the other areas of the country attains harvest thrice^[7-8]. In these circumstances, employment opportunities of the landless and poorest group of people who rely on agricultural wage labour gets inadequate from mid-September to mid-December. This cyclic phenomenon of poverty and hunger occurring every year is termed as '*Monga*' or '*Abhab*'^[9]. '*Monga*' is generally used to state the occurrence of severe deprivation of food and starvation due to the erosion of purchasing power from the lack of beneficial employment opportunities. Food insecurity and unemployment in the lean season or *Monga* prevents development in the greater Rangpur and this event had been taking place on an unvarying manner since British reign^[10]. According to Shahjahan^[11], "*Monga* is a local term used to indicate acute deprivation caused due to the erosion of purchasing power from lack of gainful employment opportunities".

Although *Monga* has remained as a constant problem in the northern region since the last half of nineteenth century and the area has history of severe food inadequacy, starvation even famine; during the past ten years the repetition of this phenomenon has decreased at a surprising rate^[12]. In the year of 2006, *Monga* was experienced for the last time in the area and the underdeveloped areas have been gradually improving their financial state. Combating *Monga* was a cumulative outcome of government initiatives, NGO activities and most importantly application of survival strategies, adaptive capability and improvement in the agricultural sector of the people of affected areas^[13]. The eradication of the silent disaster *Monga* has brought about a change in the lifestyles of the local people in the area as well.

OBJECTIVES

In the last decade, the socio-economic status of the people of northern Bangladesh has changed which was initiated by the eradication of *Monga*. This study focuses on the aspects of changes in their lifestyles in comparison with past scenario and intends to identify the rationale of these changes.

STUDY AREA

As chronic poverty is the major reason of *Monga* in northern Bangladesh especially in greater Rangpur, the economic condition is significantly inferior in this region^[14]. Although Kurigram, Nilphamari and Lalmonirhat are considered as the three most *Monga* affected districts, but the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rate of 2000 given by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) unfolds another reality. According to the records, the districts of greater Rangpur had minimum GDP in comparison to the other parts of Bangladesh and among the districts of Rangpur division, Gaibandha had the lowest GDP. Table 1 shows per capita GDP was much lower than the national average and Gaibandha had the lowest GDP among all the districts affected with *Monga*.

Table I. GDP of Districts of Rangpur Division in the year of 1999/ 2000 [15]

District	Per Capita GDP (Bdt)	Per Capita GDP % of National Average
Gaibandha	12,444	67.2%
Kurigram	13,757	74.3%
Lalmonirhat	13,855	74.8%
Nilphamari	13,292	71.8%
Rangpur	14,936	80.7%

This indicates the economic backwardness in this particular district during the *Monga* years. Shaghata Upazilla of Gaibandha district was chosen as the study area to search the socio-economic development or changes in this area. Gaibandha has a total area of 2,179.27 sq. km. and the district is divided into 7 Upazillas/thanas. They are Fulchhari, Gaibandha Sadar, Gobindaganj, Palashbari, Sadullapur, Shaghata and Sundarganj. The study was based on two unions of Shaghata Upazilla, located between 25°02' and 25°14' north latitude and from 89°29' to 89°40' east longitude. The population of this Upazilla is 267,819 [16]. In Shaghata Upazilla several villages of Ghuridaha and Shaghata union such as Pochabosta, Jadurtair, Ghuridaha, Jummarbari, Chinir Patal etc. were brought under survey. Fig. 1 is showing the maps of Gaibandha District and Shaghata Upazilla.

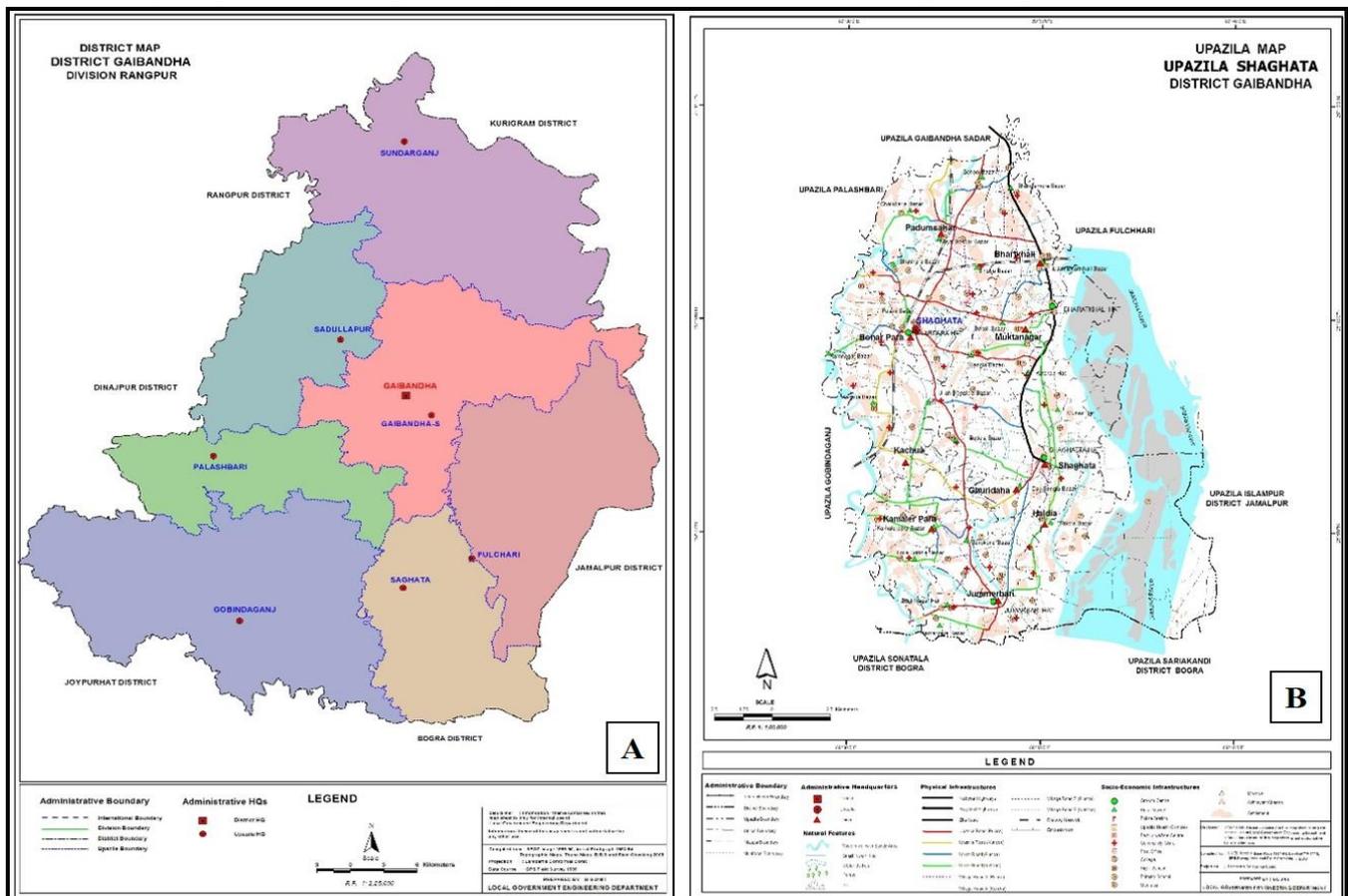


Figure 1. Map of A. Gaibandha District and B. Shaghata Upazilla [17]

DATA SOURCES

Both primary and secondary data were used to conduct the study. The primary data were collected through open-end and close-end questionnaire survey, interview with key informants, focal group discussion (FGD) and field observations. The questionnaire survey and FGDs were carried out among 200 households/families, selected by random sampling from the villages of Ghuridaha and Shaghata unions under Shaghata Upazilla. NGO persons, especially area representatives who are working in the study area for an extensive time shared their experience and knowledge during their interviews. Government officials including *Upazilla Nirbahi Officer* (UNO) and former chairman of the Shaghata union were also interviewed and similar type of questions from the questionnaire were asked to evaluate the authenticity of the information given by the farmers and local people.

Relevant books on *Monga* and food insecurity of Bangladesh, journals, reports, unpublished documents, review reports of major national newspapers and internet sources were taken into consideration for secondary data collection. "The District Statistics 2011 Gaibandha" published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) was a great help to accumulate the statistical information over the years. Several research reports from Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), *Udayan Shabolombi Sangstha*, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) etc. were very helpful to evaluate and compare the past and present picture of the study area and also to ensure the validity of the information provided by the local people.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *Family and Social Life*

According to the field survey, during *Monga* period certain social problems such as polygamy, dowry, human trafficking, domestic violence and criminal activities increased. Though the present scenario is much better compared to the past, many families are still carrying the curse of that time. When adult respondents of the study area were asked about their marital status they gave their answers within provided options and Fig. 2 shows the answers with a pie chart.

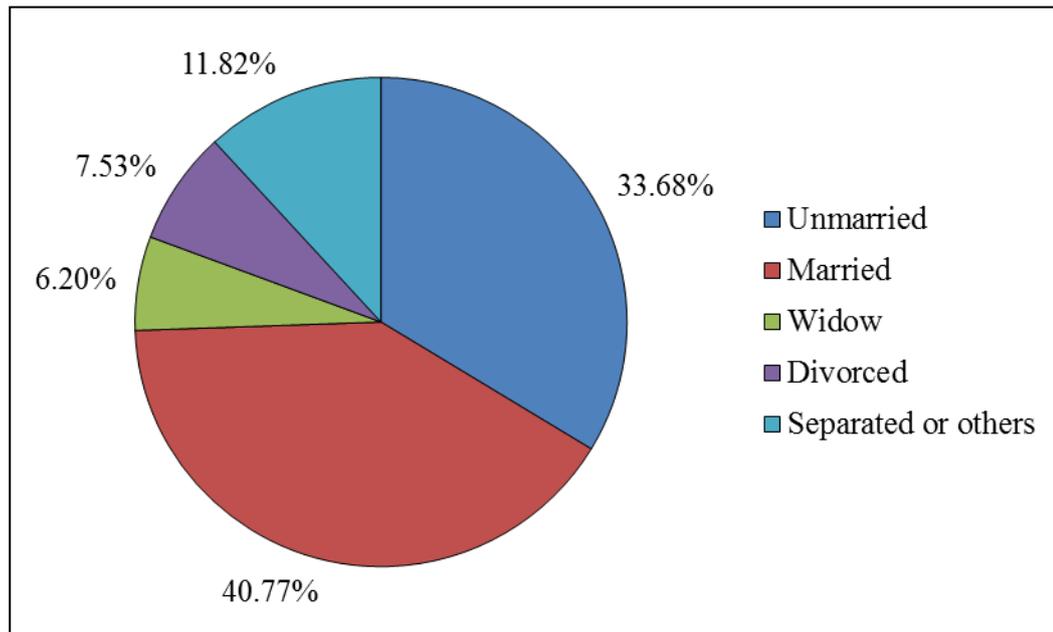


Figure 2. Marital status of the people during *Monga* period. (Field survey, 2015)

Fig. 2 depicts that divorced respondents of the focused area was 7.53% and 11.82% of them were separated and living without spouses. From the FGD with the respondents, it was revealed that the major reason of unwanted divorce or separation was poverty and unemployment during the *Monga* period which was inevitable. Both male and female members, especially the men of the families departed from their villages in search of employment, some promised to come back and some left without informing their family members. Many men expressed their doubt that their wives were victims of human trafficking, as none could provide proof against their statements. Still many of the people do not know where their spouses are. The women were the worst sufferers of such situations.

Although the socio-economic conditions have changed in the study area, the people of the study area are still facing the effect of their past problems because of ignorance and lack proper guidance and are facing difficulties to improve their situation. The divorced women claimed that they are continuously becoming victims of domestic violence in their paternal household and they are being physically and mentally tortured inside or outside their residences. Even though most of the people residing in the study area lives below the poverty line, their practice of dowry during marriages are alarmingly high. The unmarried group of women informed that dowry will determine their living conditions after marriage in their in laws house. After interviewing the single men it was also clear that they anticipate dowry as a medium of changing their lives, rather than accepting the fact that taking dowry is a social crime.

B. *Changes in Occupation*

Although the soil physico-chemical and climatic condition of northwestern Bangladesh do not favour agriculture, farming has been the chief earning source to the local people of the study area ^[18]. During the survey, it was asked whether the respondents or their family members changed their

occupation after the beginning of the last *Monga*. Fig. 3 reveals that 41% respondents or their family members switched their occupation with the hope to improve their lives, whereas 59% of the people replied negative. They said they could not show the courage to change their occupation and start from the scratch, as farming is the only skill they inherited.

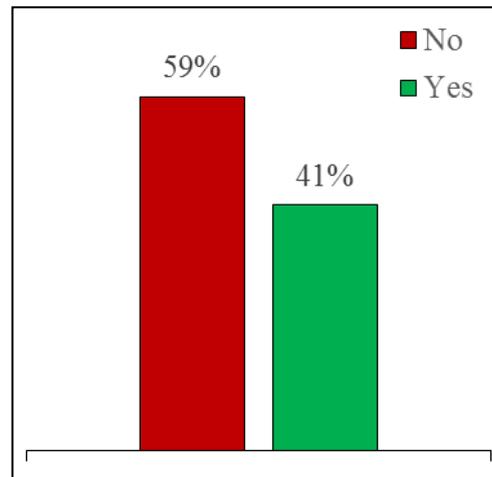


Figure 3. Change of occupation *Monga* period. (Field survey, 2015)

Among the respondents who moved to a new job, majority got involved in various development works and construction sites as day labourers (41.46%). Some started to pull rickshaw or vans in cities (35.37%). Many found jobs in tea stalls or other shops (12.20%). Few said that they tried their fate in tailoring business (4.88%). Fig. 4 delineates various jobs taken up by people during *Monga* period.

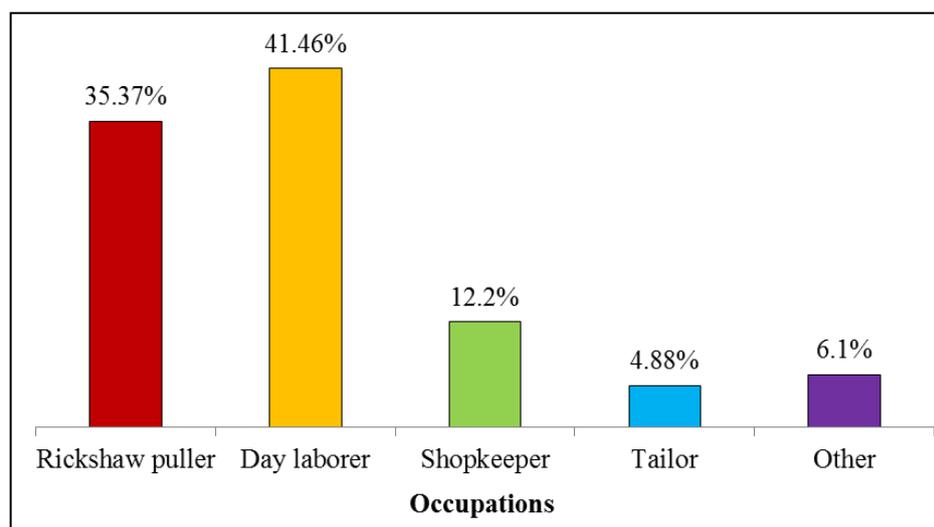


Figure 4. Various jobs taken up by people during *Monga* period. (Field survey, 2015)

C. Women Empowerment

During the period of *Monga* the infant and women had to face the worst experience. They remained inside their houses and continuously fought with hunger and diseases (Baqee, 2007).

From the interviews and FGDs, it was explicable that the male members of the families were not much enthusiastic to fight against a natural calamity. They preferred to spend their time in an unproductive manner if they failed to manage any earning source. Some moved to the nearby towns and cities. Those who stayed back, wasted their time sitting idle at the market places as they assumed if aid or relief came from somewhere the news would reach to the market place at first. Monga provoked the men to become selfish and self-centered. They chose to remain lazy rather than fight back the disaster with whatever they had. These reluctant behaviors from the earning members of the families made the women even more vulnerable. But the women of the area displayed courage and strength for their survival. The role of women to shield their families was so admirable that it often shaded the efforts of men. Where remaining in the boundary of the residence is considered as the olden tradition for women in the rural areas of Bangladesh, Monga made the women step out from home and be acquainted with the world. Poor women began to earn money by physical labor. They sided their shyness and embarrassment aside and came outside their boundary to earn livelihood.

This fighting spirit played a significant role in the study area to overcome the Monga situation and enhance socio-economic development. Rural industrialization added a whole new dimension in the economic growth in the poverty struck area. The emergence of cottage industry, handloom industry and agro-based business opened a new door of opportunity for the women of the area. 'Oxfam', an international NGO has been providing training to the women of study area on sewing, block prints, ambush or appliqué works according to their interest and skill. After completing their training the women can work as freelancer, under a cooperative society. Even some major Dhaka-based boutique houses also hire these skilled women. This concept has received enormous appreciation among the female population of the study area ^[13].

As the women are earning, they are no more dependent on the male members of the family. This independency has given them self-confidence and the importance in their respective families. Domestic violence has been reduced and dowry system is gradually becoming unpopular as well.

D. Development in Educational Sector

Due to poverty and lack of facilities the northern part of Bangladesh remained educationally deprived for a long time. The literacy rate was and still is the lowest among the other divisions ^[16]. Education of women was almost forbidden and only a few women managed to sign their names and their husband's name during the *Monga* years. But a gradual improvement has been noticed in the literacy rate in the recent years. In 2001, the male and female literacy rate (7+ age) was 40.4% and 28.2%, respectively in Shaghata Upazilla. Whereas in 2011 the ratio increased to 45% and 36.4% for male and female, respectively ^[16].

After Rangpur was declared as a separate divisions new educational institutions were established in Gaibandha district. Many international and national NGOs started their education program in the remote places of this district to eradicate illiteracy.

Fig. 5 shows that 37.81% of the respondents were still illiterate during the study in the area. 25.55% of people were below primary education, 15.36% of them had received primary education. Among them 11.52% people could continue their education above primary level and 5.76% people

passed S.S.C. Also 2.81% people were educated above S.S.C. level. Among them only 0.59% passed H.S.C. or equivalent examinations.

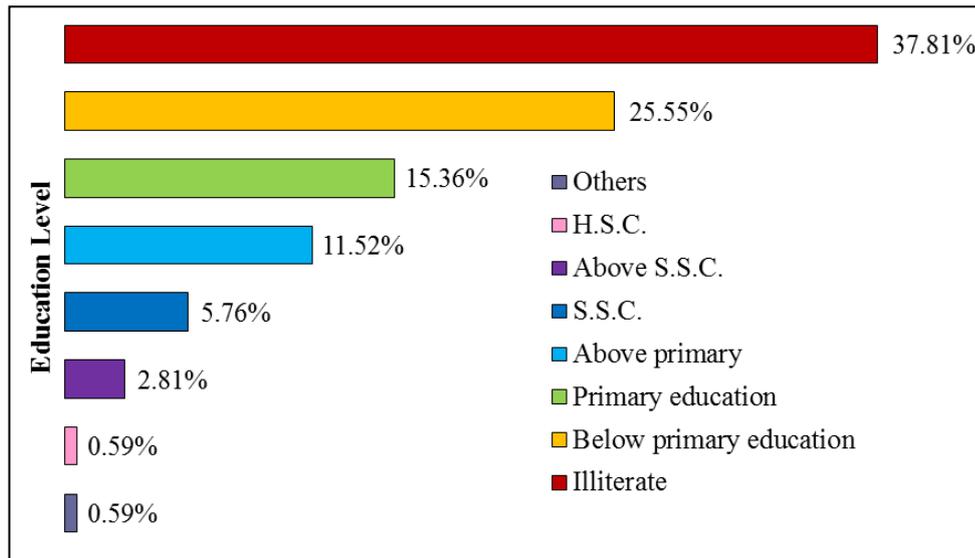


Figure 5. Educational qualification of the people of the study area. (Field Survey, 2015)

From the FGDs conducted among different groups in the study area, some changes have been noticed which can be considered important. The female children of the poor families are now getting institutional education and in many of the cases their academic results are better compared to their male siblings. Education has given the women of the area confidence and ability to work and help their families. The teenage girls are well aware of the disadvantages of early marriages and the curse of dowry system. This transformation has eventually influenced the local male population to alter their typical mentality towards women. Most importantly, increase in the rate of education has brought about a social change.

CONCLUSION

The poor population of Bangladesh has been showing their creativity to combat different disasters. These measures are not only natural sometimes social as well. They have shown their individual talents and hard work thus utilizing the aids from outside into highest extent and in this way they have attained success in combating such disasters. Many actions were undertaken to help the destitute people of *Monga*. When *Monga* turned into famine, the Government as well many NGOs stood along the *Monga* affected community. The spirited and honest group of people supported the poor set of people to save the affected people from the hard reality of hunger and food unavailability. Now the marginal farmers dream of a better future and can live a life without the pressure of food insecurity. Even though *Monga* is not prevalent in the study area since the last decade, the people living there are still below the poverty line and suffering with various health issues. Social problems retain in the area and this prevents the full potential socio-economic development and growth of the area. It is needless to say that though the inhabitants of the study area still need to make a long journey to finally reach to

the level where their economy and lifestyles will be comparable to other areas of Bangladesh, they have overcome *Monga* and survived a very hard period.

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