CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

Transforming Mental Health Care in Bangladesh through Telepsychiatry Services

Tanjir Rashid Soron

Bangladesh, one of the world's most densely populated countries, has an estimated population of over 168 million as of 2024.

Two-thirds of its people live in rural areas where access to healthcare facilities is often limited, particularly for mental health services. A 2021 review published by Cambridge University Press revealed that mental health expenditure accounts for only 0.44% of the government's total health budget. This has resulted in a severe shortage of psychologists and psychiatrists, with most available services concentrated in urban areas, making them inaccessible to much of the population. Beyond structural barriers, stigma surrounding mental health further prevents individuals from seeking care. The National Mental Health Survey of Bangladesh (2018–2019) reported that a high number of patients are prevented from seeking mental health support by the stigma associated with it which leads to social prejudice and isolation. The treatment gap exceeds 92%, leaving the majority without adequate care, and only 5% of children and adolescents receiving the support they need.

Tanjir Rashid Soron, a Commonwealth Distance Learning Alumnus, earned a Master's in Global eHealth from the University of Edinburgh in 2019, and a postgraduate degree in psychiatry from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Medical University in 2016. Determined to address the barriers to access mental health care and support, Tanjir saw that traditional face-to-face mental healthcare was impractical for much of the population, particularly in rural areas. He recognised the potential of digital technologies like telepsychiatry to expand mental health support without requiring travel. This approach particularly benefits those with severe conditions and limited financial resources, who face the greatest barriers to care. Tanjir initiated Bangladesh's first nationwide, mobile, call-based mental health service with the help of a tech company in 2016. However, after launching the first telepsychiatry services in the country, Tanjir realised that implementing such solutions required specialised expertise, as digital healthcare in Bangladesh was still in its early stages. To gain the necessary knowledge and skills without any disruption to the newly launched service, he applied for a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship, to build skills in developing innovative eHealth platforms.

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

Tanjir Rashid Soron is a clinical psychiatrist, researcher and entrepreneur dedicated to expanding mental healthcare access through innovative eHealth solutions. Awarded a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship in 2016, he completed a Master's in Global eHealth at the University of Edinburgh in 2019. That same year, he founded Telepsychiatry Research and Innovation Network Ltd, a digital mental health-focused organisation providing more than a hundred people with employment and opportunities for academic research career development. Since 2016 he has led MindTale, Bangladesh's first nationwide, mobile, call-based mental health service, which provides critical mental health support 24/7. Seeking to expand digital mental healthcare, he later launched MonerDaktar, the country's first web-based mental health platform, offering online consultations with psychiatrists and clinical psychologists. MonerDaktar became a mental health lifeline during the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2019 to 2022, Tanjir worked as a Consultant for the World Health Organisation (WHO), Save the Children International, and different ministries of government of Bangladesh. He contributed to the development of a national mental health strategic plan in the Maldives, the 2019 Disability Integrated Special Education Policy in Bangladesh, and the Rehabilitation Council Act in Bangladesh. As a researcher, he has received grant funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) and the Government of Bangladesh. Tanjir established Naturalistic Intelligent (NiHealth) Ltd, an organisation dedicated to innovative digital preventive mental health services like Moner Jotno and Moner Jonno. He remains engaged in academia, mentoring PhD students in Rwanda and the UK on digital mental health.

eHealth and Emergency Psychiatry - MindTale

In 2016, Tanjir started a Master's in Global eHealth as a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholar at the University of Edinburgh. Over the course of his studies, he learned the essential principles of eHealth. This included learning about methods of implementing digital health services, but also the legal, moral and ethical responsibilities to which eHealth practitioners must adhere:

'There are lots of legal and moral responsibilities that we should follow during digital mental health service delivery. And, in fact, my Master's gave me that theoretical understanding, and based on these things, I can guide my teams. When I practise as a psychiatrist, I also try to follow these principles. Right now, I lead a team of more than 35 people. Hundreds of people have worked with me at different times. I tell my team members that it is very important maintain the ethical and legal standards of our digital health services.'

The education provided by the University of Edinburgh was essential to Tanjir, and it contributed towards filling the skills gap in eHealth in Bangladesh; to Tanjir's knowledge, he is the only person in the country holding a Master's degree in eHealth. Upon the completion of his course, Tanjir was eager to put his new knowledge into practice. Prior to 2016, Bangladesh had no established nationwide telepsychiatry service. This meant that, in the case of a mental health emergency, there was no option for a hotline number or online service for patients to ask for help, leaving them unable to access the urgent mental health support that they needed. Tanjir saw this as a key area in which digital health services had the potential to be transformative by ensuring access to 24/7 mental healthcare for all.

In 2016 Tanjir established MindTale with SynesisIT, the first nationwide telepsychiatry service in Bangladesh. Intended to support those who are experiencing a mental health crisis, MindTale is a lifeline for people seeking urgent mental health support. People in crisis can call the service and receive professional support to address their immediate and urgent mental healthcare needs. The service can be accessed from anywhere in Bangladesh that has phone reception. As such, geography is no longer a barrier to access, and those living in rural areas can finally seek the support they need and deserve.

Tanjir conducting a training session.

Tanjir conducting a psychiatric consultation.

Initially, Tanjir said, the service was received with disbelief, with callers astonished that there was someone on the other end of the phone with the knowledge and expertise of mental health care that they needed. However, gradually, the service has become better known:

'After the eight years of initiation of the course with the Commonwealth Scholarship, the situation has changed. Now a person from anywhere in the Bangladesh can communicate with us, can consult with a psychiatrist. They have the belief that over the phone there is a person, there is a person to whom they can talk and they can believe. When I first started talking at MindTale, there were times people asked me 'are you a human being or robot?' I was used to facing these types of question, but now people are actually convinced that there is a person, that they're knowledgeable, that they are qualified, and we can seek help from them. So that was the major and fundamental change in the community.'

Since it was established in 2016, MindTale has received more than 20,000 calls. Tanjir recalls a particularly moving incident, in which a young woman called at MindTale in serious mental distress. Tanjir spent 90 minutes on the phone with her, and he was able to talk with her until she was no longer at immediate risk of harm. He then enlisted the support of her local physicians, who were able to provide in-person care. Over a period of six months, Tanjir provided follow-up mental health support. By the end of this period, the patient's mental health had improved to the point that she was able to enrol in an education course.

Tanjir reflects that the availability of an emergency psychiatry service is the biggest change he has been able to affect in his community as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship:

> 'I was able to help people with mental illness in my country, in my local stigmatised context. This might not have been possible if these types of digital technology were not available, MindTale, Moner Daktar or Moner Jotno were not established. In addition to my personal effort, dedication, dream and experience, the theoretical underpinning from my Master's in Global eHealth made these services very successful and impactful.'

Expanding the Provision – MonerDaktar and MonerJotno

MindTale provided essential mental healthcare in emergency situations. However, Tanjir wanted to expand the provision of digital healthcare further. He believed that through digital technologies, it was possible to offer a wide range of mental health services empowering both patients and professionals with freedom of choice and method of communication. This would be delivered in the form of online appointments. To achieve this, Tanjir established MonerDaktar (in English, 'Doctor of the Mind'). MonerDaktar is a digital platform that patients can use to connect with a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist. It was the first web-based mental health platform introduced in Bangladesh.
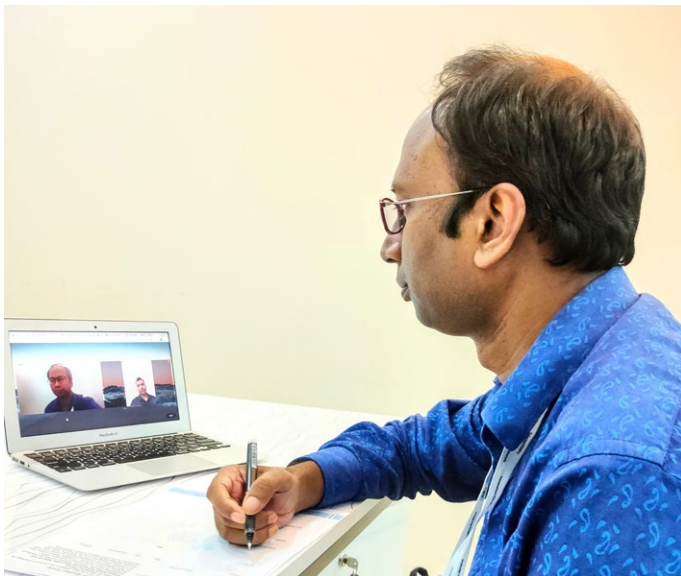
Tanjir using the MonerDaktar eHealth platform to provide mental health support.

As Tanjir had expected, the introduction of such a novel technology was initially met with some scepticism. He remembers that, when he first launched MonerDaktar, his colleagues doubted the efficacy of the system and suggested that Bangladeshis would not be open to using such a service. The turning point was the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing meant that in-person consultations were heavily restricted, and so it was to MonerDaktar that psychiatrists and clinical psychologists

turned. The number of users skyrocketed in this period; Tanjir reports that the platform was used by 90% of clinical psychologists and psychiatrists in Bangladesh and provided care for more than 2,500 patients.

The MonerDaktar platform was providing critical resources and support to patients in need of clinical psychiatric help. However, Tanjir also saw a need to support people with their general mental wellbeing, and wanted to provide a wider range of people with the holistic support that would help them maintain good mental health. To fulfil this aim, he established a separate platform – MonerJotno. MonerJotno (in English, 'Taking Care of Minds') is a platform providing mental wellbeing resources that empower people to better their own mental health. It offers tools to cope with stress, and methods to ameliorate people's mental resilience when they confront difficult and distressing circumstances. Additionally, research has shown that stigma and prejudices towards those with mental illnesses can be reduced by a greater awareness and understanding of mental health. Therefore, not only does MonerJotno provide essential resources to the public, but the platform contributes towards the vital dissemination of knowledge surrounding the subject that can combat the stigma of mental health problems.

Tanjir sharing information about MonerJotno at a seminar for World Mental Health Day 2023.

Both MonerDaktar and MonerJotno are available online, making them accessible to all Bangladeshis, no matter where they live. Tanjir highlights that one of the key strengths of eHealth platforms is that they have the potential to improve equity in healthcares accessibility:

> 'I have served people from the slums, from the hill tracts, rich people, so I think all ranges of the people now seek help from the digital platforms. It is not for any class, rather, it is for all. And that is very inspiring for me. When I started, I thought, and frequently our seniors used to say, that these are for the elite class. They use the phones, they have the laptops, they have the tablets, but the poor will never seek help from your digital platforms, they will not call you. But when I started working in this field, after a decade of working in this sector, I can say that we served people from all classes. We served rickshaw pullers, we served security guards, garments workers, we served people from poor backgrounds who don't have enough money to visit any psychiatrists face-to-face. We serve all class of peoples.'

'The most significant change in me as a result of my Commonwealth Scholarship has been the deepened theoretical understanding of eHealth, which I have successfully integrated into my practical work, revolutionising mental health care delivery, research, and global health contributions. Before the Scholarship, my work was largely confined to traditional psychiatric practices within Bangladesh, with limited reach to underserved populations. The Scholarship provided me with the necessary theoretical foundation in eHealth, empowering me to establish and lead two digital mental health focused organisations like TRIN and NiHealth, and digital platforms such MonerDaktar and MonerJotno, that have significantly expanded access to mental health services across the country.

This change is significant because it allowed me to transition from localised impact to a broader, more global influence. These advancements have not only reshaped my career but also solidified my role as a leader in eMental Health, allowing me to make substantial contributions both in Bangladesh and on the international stage.'

Beyond Bangladesh – International Policy and Research Impact

Having gained valuable expertise whilst working in Bangladesh, Tanjir sought new opportunities to support in the development of eHealth systems elsewhere. He was employed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a Consultant to update the WHO mental health treatment gap (mhGAP) programme for the Maldives context and to draft the Maldives' national mental health strategic plan:

'My capacity building activities were also extended to other countries, like I worked as consultant to contextualise the mental health treatment gap program for the Maldives, I and drafted the 5-year-long mental health strategic plan for the country. As a consultant, WHO assigned me for the work. I went there and trained their health professionals to implement that.'

Tanjir teaching a class about the core symptoms of depression at an mhGAP training session in the Maldives.

Through international policy projects such as this one, Tanjir's approach to eHealth has been successfully implemented in multiple contexts.

'I have been working in different research project including the research project funded my NIH, USA and NIHR, UK. In one of our research projects, we try to develop a mobile based system to monitor the children with autism and share the information with professionals for early and more evidence-based care for them. In another project, "TRANSFORM" we are working to co-develop intervention for the traditional and faith-based healers, community health workers and medicine seller to increase the access to biomedical care for the slum communities in Bangladesh and Nigeria.'

Tanjir talking with a local healer as part of the TRANSFORM project, which aims to increase access to biomedical care for slum communities.

Tanjir working with local healers and caregivers in Bangladesh to co-develop healthcare plans.

Advocacy and Policy Work in Healthcare

At home and abroad, Tanjir has worked tirelessly to establish eHealth systems. Alongside his work in mental healthcare, Tanjir has also been an active campaigner for the rights of young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other forms of neurodiversity. According to a recent study conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF, 60% of children with disabilities, including ASD, are not enrolled in any education. Research has observed that a lack of awareness and understanding of autism amongst teachers and school authorities leads to them refusing to accept children with autism. Tanjir notes that children with disabilities in Bangladesh remain subject to stigmatisation and prejudice, and systemic injustices result in difficulties accessing mainstream schooling:

'In Bangladesh, children with different forms of disabilities suffer a lot. Their parents encounter lots of issues, including systemic and societal discrimination. Sometimes children are forced to leave their school due to their disabilities. Sometimes teachers are unwilling to allow the admission of students with disabilities at a normal school.'

Tanjir was involved in the development of a policy to address this:

'I contributed in the drafting the Integrated Disability Inclusive Education Policy, which is now transforming the education system for individuals with disabilities in Bangladesh, ensuring a more inclusive and supportive environment.'

The policy was also extended to include initiatives designed to support access to healthcare:

'I feel really good about the fact that people are benefiting from the policy. I was also engaged in disability-friendly hospital initiatives in Bangladesh through my contribution to the development of guidelines and I conducting training. In this policy, we make sure that whenever a person with disability visits a hospital, all the services should be accessible for them. Most of the times, people with disabilities face a lot of difficulties in seeking health care in our hospitals.'

Beyond this, Tanjir has also worked as a technical expert supporting the development of national guidelines for the treatment of substance abuse disorders in Bangladesh:

'As a digital health expert, I emphasised on how we can actually use technologies to facilitate and support the management of substance use disorders and their related challenges.'

Tanjir identified improving access to mental health care through digital technologies and contributing to drafting disability inclusive policies in Bangladesh as the most significant changes he brought to his community:

'When I began my Master's in Global eHealth, there was virtually no access to expert mental health professionals in the remote areas of Bangladesh, as most psychiatrists and clinical psychologists were concentrated in urban centres. Recognising this gap, I initiated MindTale, the first mobile-based mental health call centre in Bangladesh, with the support of a leading tech company. Over the past seven years, this call centre has served more than 20,000 people, providing much-needed mental health support across the country.

In 2019, I founded the Telepsychiatry Research and Innovation Network Ltd. (TRIN) and later NiHealth Ltd. in 2022, further expanding access to mental health care through innovative digital platforms like Moner Daktar and Moner Jotno. Research indicated that over 90% of the population was previously deprived of mental health care. Today, thanks to these efforts, access to mental health services has vastly improved, allowing people from any part of the country to receive expert care.

I also contributed to disability friendly healthcare policies and guidelines. These changes have significantly advanced mental health care and disability-inclusive education and healthcare facilities, contributing to the development of the community and the country as a whole. Now, the schools are more willing to welcome the students at their schools due to the new polices.'

Academic Supervision

Alongside his work as a psychiatrist and entrepreneur, Tanjir remains active in the world of academia. His Commonwealth Scholarship has been of help to him here; through a connection established whilst on his award at the University of Edinburgh, Tanjir was put in touch with a PhD student in Rwanda, which faces many of the same healthcare challenges experienced in Bangladesh. As a remote PhD supervisor, Tanjir has been able to support his student as they pursue their PhD, and share the lessons he has learnt throughout his career:

'I supervised him on how technology can be used to improve the learning of the children with autism spectrum disorders. The student has successfully completed his PhD, defended it, and now he's working as a lecturer for the University of Rwanda. Currently, I am also supervising a PhD student at the University of Warwick through our NIHR-funded project.'

Distance Learning through the Commonwealth Scholarship

Tanjir feels, throughout his career, he has benefitted from the prestige associated with his Commonwealth Scholarship. He reflects on the shared experiences of Commonwealth Alumni, and the mutual trust and respect that this engenders:

‘Interestingly, on several occasions during international conferences or professional meetings, I've discovered that the person I was speaking with was also a former Commonwealth Scholar or Fellow. This shared experience creates a sense of connection and mutual understanding. It's always fascinating to realize that we have this common background, and it definitely enhances the conversation. Being a Commonwealth Scholar not only opens doors for professional recognition but also fosters these valuable connections.'

‘I should thank the Commonwealth Scholarship, all my fellow classmates, all my faculties, and all of my people who actually worked for me, and those that are still working with me. Because without that support, it might not be possible for me to do that.'

The Distance Learning programme was also hugely beneficial to Tanjir. Whilst he wanted to study at a UK university, he was not willing to leave Bangladesh due to his commitments to both supporting his family and maintaining the growth of the business he had established. Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship, therefore, offered the best of both worlds; Tanjir was able to complete his MSc whilst remaining at the side of his family and community. Tanjir identifies that the scholarship enabled him to bring about significant change in his community:

‘I think the biggest change is the feeling that I can contribute to my community. I can serve the community. Completing the Masters's at the University of Edinburgh convinced me that I can work for the community, that I can serve them. I got the theoretical understanding and learning from a reputed university, and I have sufficient practical experience of more than 12 years in Bangladesh working in digital health.'

Looking Ahead

In the future, Tanjir hopes to further expand the mental healthcare provision in Bangladesh to ensure that even more people in the country have equitable access to healthcare facilities:

‘I still dream that everyone in Bangladesh will enjoy evidence-based mental health care, and that they will get the access to mental health care at any time at an affordable cost from anywhere in the country. But it's definitely still a very big challenge. Very big challenge!'

Furthermore, he hopes that the successful model of care that he has contributed towards in Bangladesh can be rolled out in other low- and middle-income countries around the world.

Find out more about Tanjir's work:

Access the Telepsychiatry Research and Innovation Network Ltd. Website: https://trin.healthcare

Read about Tanjir's work on depression: https://depression.drsoron.com

Learn about Tanjir's work on Autistic Spectrum Disorder: https://asd.drsoron.com

Find out more about the TRANSFORM project: https://transformresearch.net

Access the digital mental health platforms MonerJotno and NiHealth Ltd.: https://monerjotno.net https://nihealth.care

Read some of Tanjir's publications:

Digital mental health in Bangladesh "MonerDaktar": caring seniors during COVID-19: https://digital-library. theiet.org/content/books/10.1049/pbhe039e_ch9

Development of a Mobile App to Improve Numeracy Skills of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder: Participatory Design and Usability Study: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34463629/

Suicide on Facebook - the tales of unnoticed departure in Bangladesh: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32742670/

The hope and hype of telepsychiatry during the COVID-19 pandemic: https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(20)30260-1/fulltext

Evaluation of the TRANSFORM Pilot Training Program for Community Health Workers and Traditional and Faith-Based Healers in Bangladesh: https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2024.231

COMMONWEALTH SCHOLARSHIPS