

Dhalchar: Melody of Erosion and Hilsa Revenue

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In the late afternoon, Md. Zafor Mia (60) stood on the bank of the river staring at the waves. When he was a child, as a resident of Bhadrappara in Dhalchar, he used come here with his father. Home, family, agriculture, business and plants, everything was here; however, he would not be able to stay there until the last day of his life as he moved to the mainland of Char Fasson. How he would remember Dhalchar? The question seemed to resurface the pain that Zafar Mia had been trying to conceal. The gist of his sudden outburst of cry and what he said in the local language was: 'What was not here? Everything was here. I was born and raised under this ambience. I have a family and made my home here. As the opportunities for agriculture decreased, I started fish business though it was a loss project. Even if I lose everything and leave this place, will the memory of Dhalchar ever be erased from my heart?'

When someone walks along the Meghna River bank, the sound of erosion and the sound of mourning come to the ears. Many relatives gather by the river to bid last farewell when one of the village members leaves the island. And maybe they will not return. The sun rises, the sun sets, people return to thousands of works; but the erosion never stops. The intensity of erosion increases in the rainy season although the erosion continues in winter as well. The silent catastrophe continues throughout all the seasons. People are just moving from one place to another. If the condition is good today, there is no guarantee that tomorrow will be the same. Signs of destruction are everywhere in the island. People are always busy to remove houses, sheds, trees and the fences. It is the story of Dhalchar- an emerged island at the estuary of the Meghna river. Therefore, it is time to take

initiatives to prevent erosion and to rehabilitate the poor people.

At the Tower Bazaar Ghat in Dhalchar, I saw all the furniture was being loaded in the trawler. The trawler will leave shortly for its destination. Women and children are also onboard. All the belongings of the house of Nurul Islam, a native of Dhalchar, were loaded in the trawler. Later his wife and children got into the trawler. I saw they were wailing at the dock during the moment of departure. I could hear the sound of weeping from both sides of those who were leaving by trawler and those who were on the shore. Saiful Hague Haji (67), a respected person of the area, without whom there would be no arbitration meeting, was the owner of 5 houses. He had a huge agricultural land. His two sisters left Dhalchar with their family members two days ago. Therefore, his mind is burdened with the thought that he will not be able to stay here either. He has to go somewhere in Char Fasson. He had a market here named after him— 'Haji Market'. There is a mosque next to the market. He changed the location of the mosque many times due to the erosion. Now there is no place to shift it.

Faruk Bathan (44) was running a small tea stall at the last mark of Haji Market. He made everything in Dhalchar. Now he is a destitute. His back is stuck against the wall. Hence, he built tea stall in the hope to earn for survival. Now, he is going to abandon this tea stall. He has a plan to leave this place and his

arrangements are all complete. Faruk Bathan sighed as he was asked how many times he had relocated his shop. He answered that at first he had a big grocery shop in Dhalchar Pura Bazaar. Later, he came to the tower market. After that, his shop was shifted to the Ayub Patwari's market. When he changed the location for the fourth time, he shifted his shop to Haji Market and for the fifth time, he built his shop to another end of the same market. With the change of locations, his shop became smaller. There is no end to such stories in Dhalchar. The terrible erosion of the Meghna has pushed the wealthy people on the street. Here, a family changes its location of business and homes for seven to eight times and finally it leaves Dhalchar.

Dhalchar is located at the mouth of the sea. This island is in the southernmost part of Char Fasson Upazila (sub-district) of Bhola district. Once, three wards of Kukri Mukri Union were under Dhalchar. Later in 2010, Dhalchar got the status of a separate union. However, settlement started here in 1962-65. The island became almost uninhabited after the 1970 cyclone. Only 80-85 people who took shelter in a building survived. However, by 1973, the population started to grow again. According to an estimate, once there lived about 17,000 people under 3,500 families. The area of the settlement was 12 square kilometres. The island has been shrinking since 2003 due to heavy erosion. Now, the area is only three and a half square kilometres and

accommodating only 10,500 people from 2,000 families, who are surviving near their roots in Dhalchar.

Severed communication and isolation from the main land have kept the public life of Dhalchar far away from civic amenities. At this moment, I can remember that Abdur Rahman Biswas, a resident of Char Fasson, got on a trawler that was going towards Dhalchar from Kachchhapia Ghat and gave a status on Facebook—"going out of the network". It is hard to believe that people go out of the network by announcing their status even in this age of modern information technology. That is what the Dhalchar is. When the night falls, the island becomes stranded. The only way to reach Dhalchar from Kachchhapia Ghat is by boat. Though a small launch transports passengers and goods, it is not much bigger than a trawler. As a result, the danger remains. Yet people have to go to Dhalchar. That's where their business, trade, relatives and lands are.

I am recalling the events from four years ago to write this story of the last days of Dhalchar. The place was much bigger then. Those Howlader Bazar, Tower Bazaar and Board Office Bazaar are no more. The Mighty Meghna River has swallowed it. I first went to Dhalchar, it was most likely in early 2016. The activities of the Union Parishad were carried out in a rented hours in Howlader Bazar. Even there was an accommodation at the backside, which was my place of stay.

At that time, the work of Union Parishad building was nearing completion. It had not been handed over to the authority yet. After few days later, the building was handed over and the office just sat for a while. In the meantime, the new building had to be demolished due to erosion. I took the pictures of the new building on my camera and also got a chance to capture the scene of the demolition and the skeleton of the building. I and my camera have witnessed many more such incidents in Dhalchar. My notebook contains those details. When I open it, I hear the yell of a destitute.

I recollect the memory of Jebel Haque who is around seventy years of age. He donated 40 percent of the land for the construction of a very old government primary school, Satyen Primary School, in Dhalchar. Standing on Mujib Killa, this very old man who lost everything said to me, 'where will I stay now? Please try to provide a room for me in the school.' I could not answer his question. However, the government primary school building, Mujib Killa and the surrounding houses— everything is gone under water. The government planned to build a lighthouse-cum-radio station here. Land boundaries were demarcated and the signboard was hung. Those pictures, captured by my camera, are still with me. Now, the project area no longer exists. To continue education service, several schools are gathered in one place, and the place is situated in front of the house of Union Parishad Chairman Abdus Salam Hawladar.

Government primary schools, madrasas, high schools and rural phone towers are all in one place now. This particular area is close to the forest. If the erosion continues to that place, Dhalchar will no longer exist.

Now, Dhalchar is almost on the verge of absorption. It is spending its last days. Yet, the importance of Dhalchar still remains. It may not be known to many that the country gets at least BDT 200 crore of hilsa from the island every year. One hand, the government is earning revenue from fishing; on the other hand the people of Dhalchar expect to sustain with fishing as a livelihood, and they also want a place to live. Yes, there is still hope. And the residents of the area including Dhalchar Union Parishad

Chairman Jb§us{Salam Hawladar are living with such hope.

About 3,000 acres of non-arable khas land laying next to the forest can be used to solve the settlement crisis in Dhalchar. This treeless land has been used for decades. The land could be a way to rehabilitate ie the land less and poor people of this island. There is a cannal beside the Khas land, which can be used for hilsa fishing trawlers. That is what the people of Dhalchar want. Many people are of the opinion that there will be no harm to the operation of the Forest Department if settlements are built on the fallow land or if the trawlers crowed in the canal. Rather, the poor people of Dhalchar can get their good old days back with a bright hope of survival.

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