

# Climate-Related Natural Hazards: The Struggle for the Livelihood of the Coastal People of Bangladesh has Become More Difficult

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"I had five houses of my own here. I had 20 acres of land for cultivation and many buffaloes. There were many trees and plants in the houses. I spent my life's savings there. Now I am destitute. This Meghna River has taken everything away from me. Now I am searching for a new place to settle down."

While saying these words, Saiful Haque Haji (65) wipes his tears. His house is in Charfasson upazila of Bhola district, an island in the southern part of Bangladesh. He is one of the ten thousand people who have migrated from this island to elsewhere. The island of Dhalchar, where he used to live, is facing various natural disasters, such as river erosion, salinity, excess water from the sea, and cyclones,

which have caused severe damage to the people living on the island.

The residents of Teliarchar Island in Ramgati Upazila of Lakshmipur district, including Jharna Begum, shared similar stories. This woman, who has faced natural disasters several times, said, "I have changed my house five times. I have no savings. After losing the government-funded housing in the river, I built a house on the river bank. That house was also destroyed. In the rainy season, the house sinks in the water of the high tide. The saltwater destroys the crops. We are surviving through these fights against natural disasters."

When she told her own story, Jharna Begum went back almost a decade. In her

imagination, she saw the cows grazing on the fields, the pond, the gardens, the houses, and all the wealth they had. But where did it go? Alauddin Master (49), Abdul Karim (60), Mafiz Uddin (75), Abdullah (64), and many others were waiting on the island of Teliarchar, hoping for a better tomorrow. They were residents of the Char Abdullah Union. This union was once connected to the mainland of Ramgati Upazila in the Laxmipur district. But almost a decade ago, the entire union was submerged in the river. About 30,000 people lived in the union, most of whom have now scattered and migrated to big cities. Only 8,000 people remain in Jharna Begum's village.

### **The Same Picture of the Entire Coastline**



Once a prosperous settlement for those who had lost everything to river erosion, the island of Dhalchar is now facing its disappearance. Settled in the 1960s by those displaced from other parts of the coast of Bangladesh, the island suffered extensive damage during the 1970 cyclone, leaving only a handful of survivors. Despite this, the island's population grew after Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, and it became a Union Council. The island's hilsa fishing industry flourished and brought prosperity to people's lives.

However, in 2003, the Meghna river began to erode the island at an alarming rate, causing the inhabited area of 12 square kilometers to dwindle to just two square kilometers. Many lost their homes and

livelihoods, and the island's population decreased significantly.

The island was renamed Char Abdullah, though its history is more complex. The indigents who settled in Telirchar, which was then renamed Char Abdullah, destroyed the forest and took refuge there. Telirchar, in turn, also faced erosion, and more than half of the island has already disappeared. People were left with uncertainty regarding their habitats.

Interestingly, the old island of Char Abdullah, which disappeared in 1991, has risen again in the middle of the river as a new island. While a few people have started to settle there, most of the island's population has dwindled to just 7,500 people living in Telirchar. Many others have fled to nearby cities for shelter and livelihoods, while some have settled in nearby villages.

The story of Dhalchar island is a poignant example of the impact of extreme weather on coastal communities and the challenges faced by those who must constantly adapt and rebuild their lives.

### **The Number of Displaced People is Increasing**

Once a prosperous region, coastal cities on Bangladesh's lost islands are now confronted with an increasing number of people displaced by climate change. The erosion of these islands has resulted in families losing their homes and being forced to become day laborers to make ends meet.

A 2019 study by Young Power in Social Action (YPSA) revealed that 15,000 people in Banshkhali and Qutubdia alone had been displaced by climate change, with 60% of the displaced community earning only 5000-6000 taka per month. Many now live temporarily on embankments and

roadsides, while others have had to change their occupations to earn a living.

The lack of safe drinking water has led to increased diseases, and those who remain in their original habitats face a higher risk of disaster due to climate change. The YPSA survey also showed that 25% of people have had to change their old occupations due to displacement, while 90% are accustomed to unsanitary sanitation, leading to various infectious diseases.

According to the Environmental Science Department of Jahangirnagar University, from 1980 to 2017, 570,000 people were displaced from the islands of Kutubdia, Sandwip, and Maheshkhali due to various natural disasters caused by climate change.

To address this issue, Mohammad Shahjahan, deputy director of YPSA, emphasized the importance of collecting and analysing data on displaced people due to climate change. He also suggested that awareness should be raised and technical education should be ensured for the displaced people and that they should undergo sustainable and community-based planned resettlement. This should include land, housing, agriculture, and alternative employment opportunities that align with the changing climate.

While the Bangladesh government has implemented various projects to rehabilitate landless and poor people, including housing projects in coastal areas, many families are still forced to move to cities to earn a living.



In reality, the displacement of people due to climate change in Bangladesh's coastal areas has profoundly impacted their livelihood and housing. With the increasing number of displaced people, it is crucial to address the issue through sustainable and community-based planned resettlement and alternative employment opportunities that align with the changing climate.

There was a time when the people of the islands off the coast of Bangladesh lived a simple and peaceful life. But as the sea and river raged on, their lives were suddenly uprooted. Cyclones and saltwater destroyed their homes and crops, leaving them with nothing. Being displaced and hopeless, they sought refuge in the cities.

Many of them flocked to Dhaka, the capital, for livelihood. But their lives in the city were far from easy. They were forced to live in slums, deprived of basic needs such as shelter, clean water, sanitation, education, and medical care. Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions made survival difficult, and the disease risk was high. Dhaka had become uninhabitable, yet every year, 4-5 lakh climate refugees were residing in its slums.

One day, a reporter visited the Kallyanpur slum in Dhaka to learn more about the people who had lost their homes and taken refuge there. The slum dwellers shared their heartbreaking stories of loss and struggle. Many had come from vanished villages on the banks of the Meghna in the island district of Bhola. Others had come from Patuakhali, where salt water had destroyed their crops. They had first built tiny houses near the barrier, hoping to stay in the area, but had eventually sought shelter in the slums of the district and upazila cities. Finally, they had come to Dhaka in search of work and food, forced to leave their homes due to natural disasters.

The situation in Dhaka is dire. The Global Livable Index 2019 listed it as one of the least livable cities in the world. The climate-displaced people were facing even more danger in the city. A survey conducted jointly by Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (NSK) and Change Initiative (CI) showed that nearly 50% of the people living in the slums of Dhaka had only taken shelter there after losing their housing and livelihood to cyclones in Barisal, Noakhali, Bhola, Khulna, and Satkhira. About 93% of them had lost their livelihood, and 52% had sought shelter in the slums of Dhaka. The number of these people was constantly increasing at an alarming rate.

The survey also revealed that only 10% of people in Dhaka had formal jobs. The rest were living a low standard of living. As the pressure increased on the densely populated city, the IDPs longed to return to their home areas if guaranteed safe housing and work facilities.

Zakir Hossain Khan, Executive Director of Change Initiative, suggested that coastal cities should plan compact townships to benefit and rehabilitate people displaced by climate change. Capacity-based training should be provided, considering the

capabilities and needs of the vulnerable population. Funding should be collected internationally, including from own sources and green climate funds, to create micro-entrepreneurs.

Eskander Ali Molla, President of Kalyanpur Basti Punarbasan Oikya Parishad, added that 95% of the people in his slum had their homes in different coast districts of Bangladesh. They had come to Dhaka after their native land was washed away by the river. The slum was built in 1998 with only 5 houses, but the number of people has increased. Despite assurances from the government to rehabilitate them, no initiative had been taken.

Many people like Saiful Haque of Dhalchar, Begum Begum of Teliarchar Jhorna, and Merina Begum of Kutubdia Island struggle to control their lives amidst the turbulent sea and rivers. Many more people like them are in the islands of Bangladesh's coastal region. They are fighting against natural disasters and are still surviving. Many of their fellow inhabitants have lost the battle and their lives. They are still fighting, but for how long?

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