

Navigating Adversity: Dreams of Resilience Along Bangladesh's Vulnerable Coast

Rafiqul Islam Montu



Bangladesh's coastal areas have endless potential. The livelihood of millions of people is based on fish resources extracted from sea and rivers. Many live and earn their living in various income-oriented activities, including salt farming, dried fish production, crab farming, and shrimp farming. The expansion of agriculture on the coastal islands' alluvial soils has changed many people's fortunes. Many people have changed their economic status by growing soybeans, Capsicum, and other cash crops. Mineral sand on the beach is another possible name for the coastline. The tourism sector also has endless potential along the coast. These potentials of the coast can be further expanded by developing the blue economy. Meanwhile, the government has taken multifaceted steps to develop the blue economy.

The 710 km coastline along the southern coast of Bangladesh has endless potential, but multifaceted obstacles have limited the opportunity to develop that potential. Natural hazards are significant obstacles to that potential in coastal areas. The effects of climate change are already visible in the region. Sea

level rise is disrupting people's lives and all their livelihood activities. Many potentials of the coastal region are not being developed due to a lack of proper and scientific initiatives. The coastal region has a lot of agro-based industrial potential. The list includes shrimp farming, crab farming, salt farming, dry goods production, oyster farming, pearl farming, and even cattle and dairy farming. As there can be area-based agricultural development projects, there can also be agro-based industries. There is also potential in transport and tourism. Just as there is potential for mineral sand on the beach, there are endless resources under the sea. These industries indicate great potential not only for the coast but also for Bangladesh.

Field observation revealed that the coast's soil is continuously becoming fertile due to the accumulation of sediments from the sea and rivers. Various crops are grown on the islands built on the banks of the river. Different classes of people are developing agriculture-based projects on their initiative for livelihood. Some are taking risks, like shrimp farming and fish

farming. Farmers have demanded proper government and NGO cooperation in developing these fields where marine science and technology can play a vital role.

Speaking about the potential of the coast, Anwar Hossain, a resident of Rahmatpur village of Chittagong's ancient island of Sandwip, said, 'The silverfish in the sea brings smiles to the fishermen's faces and brings economic prosperity to their homes. The golden rice of the field brings joy to the farmer's house. Coastal people have developed a close relationship with nature. Overcoming the wall of a thousand fears, the struggling people of the coast seek a livelihood amid all possibilities. But step by step, they face danger.' Khalilur Rahman, a fisherman of Dakshin Sakuchia village of Dwip Upazila Manpura in Bhola district, said, 'People who survive fighting with nature only look for possibilities. Join in trying to get one meal for the family. But the people moving upstream are constantly suffering. People here have little chance to live well using natural resources. The government should pay attention to this. Initiatives should be taken to develop the potential of the coast.'

A similar picture emerges from conversations with professionals at various levels about the coast's potential. During the discussion, many questioned whether proper planning is needed to raise the potential. But it doesn't look like that. Laws and policies made in this regard are not being implemented. Many say that despite a lot of information and technological investment at the government and NGO levels about the endless potential of the coast, there is less chance to develop the potential.



Figure 1: Every Year, The Accumulation of Sediment on the Coast Creates Many New Land Masses

It is known that, more than 1 million people on the coast are directly and indirectly involved in fishing. However, the existing obstacles in fishing are challenging to overcome. There are technical problems in sea fishing and financial problems for fishermen. Natural hazards create more obstacles to people's income-oriented activities. Sikandar Ali, a fisherman from Kalapara, said, 'We have to go fishing in the sea with advance money from the people whereas there is no guarantee of my

return home. No one will take responsibility for my family if I get caught in a storm while fishing in the sea. But to repay the moneylender's loan ignoring all fears, we are forced to risk our lives fishing in the sea or river.

People Who Lost Everything Also have Dream

Seventy-five-year-old Solaiman of Sandwip stood on the river's bank, raising his fingers and trying to draw the boundaries of new pastures. His house, plants, pond, farming land, everything is drowned in this river. He chased the river and retreated. At the last age of Solaiman's life, he hopes to see new pastures in that river. He remembers the old story again. It is the story of the Rahmatpur area on Meghna Bank west of Dwip Upazila. Known as an erosion-prone area, the erosion of this area has stopped, and now new pastures have been found. At low tide, one can walk far over the silt. According to the locals' idea, this char is about 20 kilometers long. Many people of this area are weaving new dreams of life like Solaiman around this char.

The island and the entire coast have a pattern of erosion and formation. New chars are emerging in various areas, including Hatia, Manpura, Maheshkhali, Kutubdia, Char Montaj, Rangabali, and Galachipa. The land area is increasing. Although these new chars are supposed to be given to the real landless people, these chars usually go to the dominants. Landless people wait for grazing land for years. But their names do not appear in the list of land that has been awakened. Somewhere, the new land comes under the control of the forest department. There is a dispute between the forest department and the residents. But proper distribution of this land among the landless can help develop the coast's potential.

It can be seen in different areas of Sandwip that erosion is coming, and one dam has disappeared. People moved their houses and built houses next to the new dam. The people here are seeing the mango or coconut trees planted as a hobby, the ponds and ghats built with great care, and the graveyards of relatives are all disappearing. During the conversation, the devastated people said that no one comes to inform them of the indescribable misery that has descended on their lives due to shifting houses several times a year. There was no place for a piece of head, so they took shelter on the side of the broken dam. They try to survive somehow. They will get back the lost land; this is a story of hope.

Another picture is from Manpura in Bhola Dwip district. Having lost their ancestral wealth, some are trying to make a living in small businesses on the banks of the river. Some lost their homes and took refuge in boats. Sleeping, eating, drinking, or fishing for livelihood is done there. Even after moving 8-10 times due to an adverse environment, stability did not come into their life. Their eyes are towards the land that has risen on the new island far away. But another war must be fought to get a piece of land there. Even after getting the land documents, many people do not find a place in the new pasture. In Bhola

Dwip Upazila Manpura, Char Nizam and Char Kalatali do not have accommodation for self-employed people. Due to erosion, people of different areas, including Andirpar, Ramnewaz, and Sakuchia, live their days with extreme hardship. They changed houses a maximum of 14 times in one life. However, stability did not come. Refugees who are threatened by multifaceted disasters have nowhere to go. Those with some money can buy land and build a house elsewhere, but those who do not have that ability are lying here.

Due to various natural calamities such as river erosion, floods, rising tides, and cyclones, many people in the country's coastal areas have lost everything and are looking for shelter here and there. Experts identify them as climate-displaced. According to a study conducted by the Association for Climate Refugees (ACR) and Young Power in Social Action (YPSA), about 6 million people have already been displaced in the country due to climate change. These refugee people of Manpura belong to them.

There are new forages in different areas of the coast. The area's people dream a lot about the new char; they pay the outstanding government fees and keep the land documents in order. The development potential of the coast may change if the people of the coast get absolute ownership of the newly awakened islands. Temporary people can't conduct any activities permanently. They can't engage in any particular work where there are many problems with life and livelihood. Mohammad Shahjahan, team leader of the YPSA HLP program, a private development organization working on the rights and rehabilitation of climate-displaced people, said that it is essential to help Bangladesh government to take climate action properly. What is standard today is that climate

adaptation plans and programs are opaque and prone to corruption. It is essential to resolve these issues as soon as possible. He said civil society can be an active observer in this field. Regional and international groups, especially donor countries, should support efforts to eradicate corruption and bring transparency. Funding alone is not enough to implement policies and programs on climate displacement. Oversight of funds is imperative, and proper implementation of activities is required to be ensured.

Massive Potential for Agriculture in Alluvial Soil

A new scenario, field after field of Capsicum (sweet pepper) in fertile alluvial soil! Actually, a bumper crop is coming with a reasonable price. The return on investment is also satisfactory. And so farmers are becoming interested in capsicum cultivation along with other crops. They claim that if the price of seeds is reduced and the import of Capsicum from outside the country is stopped, there can be a revolution in the cultivation of this crop. It is just a story of the island district Bhola. There are thousands of such success stories in agriculture along the coast.

The crops seen in the cities, the farmers in the villages knew their names, are now grown by the farmers on the coastal islands. Many crops like Capsicum grow in the fertile soil of the coast. The coastal region has shown great potential in multi-purpose agriculture, including rice, chili, soybean, watermelon, wheat, maize, almonds, mustard, sesame, pulses, various pulses, and vegetables. Farmers in coastal districts Bhola, Patuakhali, Pirojpur, Laxmipur, Noakhali, Chittagong Cox's Bazar, and Barguna are benefiting by planting new crops.



Figure 2: Many Crops are Grown on the Fertile Land of the Coastal Islands

Those involved in coastal agriculture said that coastal land is suitable for all types of agriculture. But in this case, natural disasters and lack of necessary sponsorship are the biggest obstacles. Even if the farmers plant with risk, they usually cannot bring the crop home. Crops are damaged yearly due to various calamities, including the untimely rise of tidal water, increase in water salinity, river erosion, and cyclones. Coastal district Lakshmipur leads in the cultivation of cash crop soybeans. In just a few years, about 75 percent of the total soybean production in the country is being produced in this district. Due to this success, Lakshmipur became known as 'Soyland.' However, aside from Lakshmipur, soybeans are being produced in different coastal districts: Noakhali, Chandpur, Barisal, Bhola, Patuakhali, and Noakhali. Farmers demand support from the government to expand soybean cultivation and get fair prices.

Many places in the coastal region have a reputation for rice production. One of the known areas is Subarnachar in Noakhali. This area has been identified as an economic area as a rice production area. Different varieties of rice are grown in this area. During the paddy harvesting season, many people from different areas come to Subarnachar to work in paddy harvesting. But farmers in Subarnachar, known as a paddy area, are counting losses. It is difficult for them to get through the year by cultivating paddy. If there is a bumper yield, the paddy-rice market will decrease, and if the price is slightly better, the yield will not be good.

Inadequate fertilizer and seeds, irrigation crisis, and lack of proper advice are added to the hostile nature. Farmers complain that although the soil of Subarnachar is very fertile for paddy production, there is a lack of adequate effort regarding the facilities of the farmers. Most of the farmers in the whole upazila are small, and most do not have their land. The number of farmers cultivating their land is very few. Small farmers take land from owners and cultivate it. The small farmer himself bears all the expenses during cultivation. But the owner of the land has to pay half of the produce. As a result, small farmers can never benefit. The island area of the coast has excellent potential for watermelon and almond cultivation in fertile land. Over the past few years, this possibility has developed even more. Farmers benefit from growing these profitable crops on the island's newly fertile land. However, the farmers claim that this profitable crop is facing various risks.

On the one hand, there is natural antagonism; on the other, there is the risk of not getting a fair price in the market. In addition, there is the violence of business people's syndicates and extortionists. However, farmers can benefit more if the potential for coastal watermelon and almond cultivation is developed.

Salt Production is the Survival Dream of Many Families

Let's start with clay. A small amount of salt particles were present in the soil. Salt was made by taking mud from the field. That situation has changed. Now, the shiny white salt is

available in the field. There have been many changes in the farming process. Production volume is increasing year by year. Farmers try. This is where proven salt farming potential is enormous. But what if there is a possibility? There is no initiative to develop potential. The salt sector has been neglected for years. Such is the tone of regret in the words of the salt farmers of the Chakra area of Cox's Bazar. They say there is no lack of effort and no end to Khatuni. Farmers are willing to pay more labor. But the government's attention is needed first of all. Appropriate initiatives should be taken to implement laws and policies. If necessary, new policies should be made. The salt sector should be saved not only for the sake of the farmers but also for the sake of the country.



Figure 3: There are Many Problems in Salt Cultivation, Yet Salt Cultivation is the Dream of Many People on the Southeast Coast

During the season, field after field of shiny white salt can be seen in the remote villages of Chakra, Maheshkhali, and Kutubdia of Cox's Bazar. Farmers prepare to store salt before the onset of monsoon. Some store salt under the ground, while others wrap it in polythene on top of the ground. Due to a lack of fair price, the salt remains in the field for years without being sold. The coastal areas of the country, especially Cox's Bazar and Chittagong areas, have been producing salt using the 'natural solar system' for a long time. However, planned salt production started in 1961 as a government initiative. Since then, under the overall supervision of the Ministry of Industry, Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BCIC) has been responsible for monitoring the salt production situation as the only central institution of the government. The quality of salt produced in the country has increased. The country has achieved self-sufficiency in salt production. Even a situation like the export of salt has arisen. And in this regard, BCCI has various initiatives. However, this sector faces severe changes daily due to not being able to pay fair prices to the farmers. The salt policy was made in 2011 to expand the salt sector and increase farmers' opportunities. It alleged that a group of profiteers are plotting to destroy this industry by violating many clauses of this policy, including salt farmers.

Farmers said that more and more farmers in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong region are cultivating salt due to the polythene method of salt production. As a result, the amount of salt



Figure 4: The Production of Dried Fish Employs Many Coastal People

production is also increasing. Minimal salt had to be imported in the past. Day by day, that demand has come down to zero quota. Salt farmers believe that it is possible to benefit the farmers by adequately marketing the salt produced in the country through the farmers. The people concerned complain that despite the vast potential, there is no interest from the government or the private sector in this salt sector. The government has recognized this industry as an industrial product rather than an agricultural one. As a result the farmers are deprived of the subsidy given at the agricultural level. In the natural calamity of 1991, the interest on the loans of self-employed salt farmers was not waived. Declaring salt farming as an agricultural product, salt farmers have demanded all kinds of agricultural subsidies as farmers. They said salt farmers face various kinds of calamities every year. The scale of disasters due to climate change has increased significantly in the last few years.

Salt traders said that at least 360 salt mills have been built in different parts of the country for refining and marketing the produced salt. Among these mills, at least 50 small and big mills have been established in the district, including 40 mills centered in Islampur, the BCIC industrial city of Cox's Bazar Sadar. At least half a million farmers and their families are involved in this profession. However, the manufactured salt and salt mills have become hostage to the six mill owners in the country. Farmer's labor is not evaluated correctly. Due to this, farmers have lost interest in salt farming. To save the country's potential salt sector, the people associated with salt

farming raised eleven-point demands, including implementing the salt policy. The Bangladesh Salt Growers Association leaders said saving the salt sector only by implementing government-approved salt policies is possible. And if the salt sector survives, about two million people in this industry will survive. Sources of the Salt Growers Association say that although the government approved the National Salt Policy in 2011 to develop the potential of the salt sector, including domestic salt cultivation and market expansion, protecting the interests of salt growers, the farmers are not getting any benefit. In violation of the policy's provisions, the profit-making mill owners indulged in importing salt from abroad, causing a salt shortage.

'Blue-Economy' Will Bring Back Good Days

There is enormous potential for a blue economy based on marine resources all along the coast. Marine resources can enrich the entire economy of Bangladesh through appropriate initiatives and measures. This possibility has expanded after the settlement of maritime boundary disputes with Myanmar in 2013 and India in 2014. Bangladesh can carry out resource extraction activities in a more than 1 lakh 18 thousand 813 square kilometers marine area. Extensive research is needed to unlock the hidden potential of the ocean floor. Various steps have already been taken to develop the blue economy.

Experts say that marine resources will play a significant role in the economic development of Bangladesh. Proper use of marine resources can increase the national economic growth

to double digits. But for this, we have to move forward by formulating integrated plans.

The correct and appropriate use of the potential of Bangladesh's sea resources has been opened through the victory of the sea. In 1994, Professor Gunter Pauli proposed the Blue Economy as a sustainable and environmentally friendly model to outline the economy of the future. Countries worldwide seek ocean resources to meet their current and future needs.

According to research sources, the world's population will be around 9 billion in 2050. The sea must be looked to to provide food for this vast population. The ocean economy continues to contribute manifold to the global economy. Between 3 and 5 trillion US dollars of activity occurs around the oceans annually. Marine fish, plants, and animals provide 15 percent of the protein for the world's 430 million people. 30% of the world's gas and fuel oil is supplied from various gas and oil

fields on the seabed. By increasing the knowledge of marine biodiversity, developing a marine medicine industry is possible.

According to various sources, the economy has become popular around the world. This issue was at the center of discussion in the international conferences held in the past years. Among them, Rio+20 in 2012 and the Asian Conference on Ocean Affairs, Food Security, and Blue-Growth in Bali in 2013 are particularly noteworthy. Economy is also at the root of the development strategy of various international organizations, including the Economic Aid and Development Organization, the United Nations Environment Program, the World Bank, FAO, and the European Union.

Future planning should focus on the resources and potential of Bangladesh's coast. Planning should emphasize the ground level while also reflecting the people's voice.

Writer: Rafiqul Islam Montu is a Coastal Journalist.
Email: ri_montu@yahoo.com



Hilsa shad, Tenualosa ilisha or Ilish is the National Fish and declared as the Geographical Indication (GI) product of Bangladesh. The fish comprises the most important and largest single species of the open water fishery of the country. It currently contributes about 12% of the total fish production, 27.5% of capture fisheries production and 1% of national GDP.