located on a prime site of two square kilometres at West Chandkati. It is said the factory siren could be heard from as far away as Barisal.[2]

But in 1975 the factory went bankrupt and the site is barely recognisable – it's a parcel of open land hosting a few families of squatters.

By the riverfront in town meanwhile, are the ghats and godowns, which are still used. The laneways beyond are littered with car-tyred trolleys for ship unloading – on a Friday the scene is draped in an eerie quiet, as though symbolising the passing of a much busier trading era. There are decorative mercantile-looking villas, most often wanting a little attention.

Traders once grew affluent in Jhalakathi aboard that dream ship of history that stowed the promise of Jhalakathi becoming the next Kolkata.

"We have the *Koli* but not the *kata*," the locals say and it's true – those days are gone but there's still a lot going for the nowadays clean, petite town.

Boat engineer Dalilur Rahman's voyages are not at an end. He travels to and from Kutubdia Island near Cox's Bazar three times each month bringing salt aboard his locally crafted vessel. It's a 3,200 maund cargo when full and profit runs at 15–20 thousand taka per trip.

Salt also reaches Jhalakathi from Moheshkhali Island and the coastal regions of Chittagong. It's a year-round product with a peak season from February until May.

The journey's principal peril is pirates, Rahman says, and the sometimes ten-foot waves in the Boishakhi month. He's been robbed three times in his twenty-five year shipping career.

His cargo is brought to one of the several salt mills still in operation along the bank of West Jhalakathi's modest Bashanda River. Until 1950 salt was refined by hand; before the diesel engine took over.

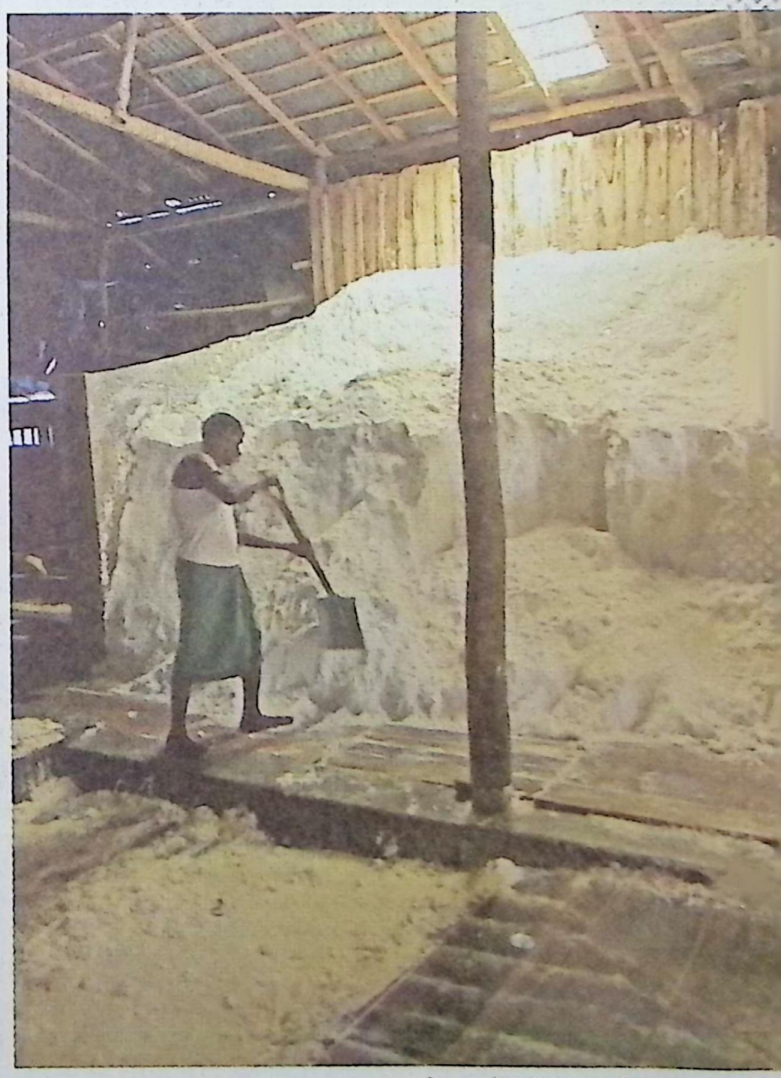
There's an up-plank and a down-plank from ship to shore. In the sunshine a parade of stevedores in lungee and gumchha carry salt in rough sacks on their heads towards the mill door. Each sack weighs about 74 kilograms. Unlike with N., there's no uncertainty over how they step – it's a kind of shuffle, a waddle under the weight's strain – and they walk fast.

On the boat meanwhile is the salt measurer known as Dalim. He works as a *koyel*, as they call it on the wharves, calculating quantities; and with his additional responsibilities he can earn up to 3000 taka per day when a ship comes in. "I've had many jobs," he says, "I sold nuts on the street and rode rickshaw, but I always earned less than 20,000 taka per month. This job is better."

In the mills the salt is cleaned with salt water, dried for a few days and iodine is added before packeting and reloading onto market-bound ships. As the stevedores bring the neat sacks of finished product – of either fine or coarse salt, they are handed a small stick to drop into a basket beside the wharf. It's a novel way of sack counting.

But the salt trade isn't as straightforward as it once was.

Back at the Channel is the iconic Gabkhan Bridge: the pride of Jhalakathi. It's the highest bridge in Bangladesh, designed to accommodate large ships passing beneath. Ironically, the bridge also symbolises the rise of the road transport age.



In a salt mill, West Jhalakathi.