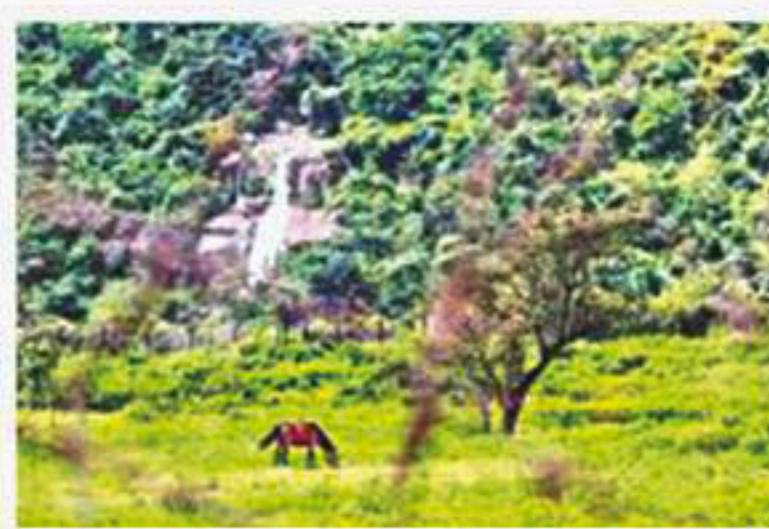


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ONCE IN A BLUE MOON

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How long can we ignore the crying needs of our enchanting haor areas?



The beauty of a full moon shines upon us every month and is ubiquitous in poetry and music. A blue moon, however, rarely happens—hence the expression “once in a blue moon”—and is barely alluded to in the arts. But when it does appear, it becomes the centre of attention of aesthetes and scientists alike.

We enjoyed that rare occasion in Tanguar Haor when the Blue Moon appeared on the night of July 31st 2015. As the next one would be seen in 2018, I thought it would be a good idea to watch the beauty of it from the haor region of Bangladesh. So on July 29, I along with my colleagues and friends, hopped on a Sunamganj-bound night bus. When we reached the north-eastern district in Sylhet division, we saw a rainbow shining through the windows of the bus.

It was surreal watching the rare appearance of the moon and the bright reflections of its light on the Haor. The remote fishing boats bobbed up and down on the water while a mischievous moon blissfully played hide and seek with the clouds. As our trawler rowed through the water, I read aloud a few lines from my favourite poet Jibanananda Das’ “Chandnitye”: “Babylon kotha haraye giyechhey/ Mishor oshur kuashakalo/ Chand jege achhey aajo opolok/ Megher palokey dhalichhey aalo” (Babylon had passed into oblivion/ Egypt is shrouded in dark mist/ Yet the moon is wide-eyed/ pouring light unto the feathers of the clouds).

We dived into the rippling waves of the Tanguar Haor and viewed the panoramic sunset in the Meghalaya Hills from Barikka Tila and tasted freshly fried fish. Meanwhile, the blue moon appeared on the eastern horizon in a celestial blue.

It was a three-day tour on a trawler and we enjoyed all the untainted beauty of monsoon with clouds flying over the hills of Meghalaya beside Laur Gor, an ephemeral rainbow over the Jadukata river, startling sunsets, clattering raindrops at night, midnight flashes of lightning at Tahirpur, rain-drenched fresh greenery, bathing in the warm water of Laur Gor fountain and much more.

One of the lasting impressions is feasting on *Khichuri* with freshly fried fish of Tanguar Haor. The haors are replete with fish and other forms of aquatic life. Most residents of the region are busy fishing during the rainy season. We started trawling for four days in a row from Kalmakanda ghat, Netrakona and visited Shonir Haor, Maityar Haor, Faishyar Haor, Alir Haor, Tanguar Haor, Barikkya Tila, Bangal Bhita, Borochhora, Takerhat, Laur Gor and Tahirpur Upazila of Sunamganj district.

This region could be a hub of tourism if proper infrastructure like road links, accommodation and other facilities are offered to the tourists. It could be a theme of ‘Visit Bangladesh 2016’ campaign launched by the government.

“Borshakale nao ar shuknakale pao” (a boat in the monsoon and on foot when it’s dry) is a popular saying among the people living in the haor regions of Bangladesh. Though the country has made significant progress over the past few years, very little of that is visible in these areas, home to some two crore people. The haor region falls in 47 upazilas of seven districts. Usually, the haor

region remains under water for six months with the onset of the monsoon, while lush green paddy fields along with a large number of migratory birds prevail in the other half all throughout winter. And at least 11 of the upazilas, inhabited by well over two million people, virtually have no road network and remain under water for over six months of a year.

But the haors play a pivotal role in keeping ecological balance and harnessing bio-diversity of the region. The Tanguar Haor, the biggest and the richest among all the haors of the region, symbolises the overall nature of the country’s wetlands and is home to fifty one beels (water body).

Of the 264 species of freshwater fishes in Bangladesh, no fewer than 130 can be traced to Tanguar Haor. When you bring in other factors such as migratory birds and a broad canvas of flora and fauna, it really makes no sense to leave it in such neglect.

Tanguar Haor is now being preserved and protected through a community approach for

for around six months a year.

The localities sent proposals to the government during the past several years to arrange boats for schoolchildren but to no avail. The number of educational institutions in the haor region is very low as well. According to a study, the rate of primary school enrollment in haor areas was 71 percent while the national average is 97.7 percent.

And things get worse when it comes to their access to emergency medical care. During the rainy season, if a pregnant woman faces any complications, how can the family manage to reach hospital on time?

Once the roads are constructed, it will change people’s life. It would be better if the government could arrange some alternative livelihoods for these people. Also, the social safety net coverage for the haor people should be widened.

However, experts believe that the problems are so many and so complex that sporadic development projects would not bring about much changes unless the government includes



People have little access to education and healthcare services here.

its security and survival. Projects have been initiated towards ensuring an undisturbed existence of the haor, especially against a background of the many threats that Tanguar Haor is currently faced with. The threats come in the form of a swift degradation of natural resources; extreme exploitation of haor resources; and introduction of exotic fishes that ultimately could do more harm than good. High population growth, unplanned development projects, overuse of chemicals and pesticides in land are also responsible for the destruction of the environmental degradation and loss of bio-diversity of the haor area.

If people in these areas want to go somewhere, they either have to walk for miles of lowlands during the dry season or take a boat during the monsoon that turns the villages into tiny islets. School-going children are one of the worst sufferers during the monsoon as they have to rely solely on boats. And it’s not easy for them to get a boat when they need it. Most children do not go to school

the haor issues in its Seventh Five-Year Plan and implements the Haor Master Plan.

The government includes the Ministries of Education, Health, Food and Disaster Management in the advisory body of the Bangladesh Haor and Wetland Development Directorate. After the formulation of the Master Plan of Haor Area in 2012, Tk 50 crore was allocated for Haors in the next fiscal year but most of the money sat idle due to a lack of proper organisational structure in the administration.

The wetlands give Bangladesh a much-needed breathing space and, it is of critical importance that haors draw the attention of environmentalists and political quarters in the interest of its survival. A lack of proper coordination among government bodies is creating obstacles to ensure development of the region. The government must take pragmatic initiatives to bring positive changes in the life and livelihoods of the haor people.

The writer is a journalist of The Daily Star.