

The water business in the south west of Bangladesh

How standardised plans to ensure water supply all over the country are failing in the south-west region of Bangladesh

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There is a district in the south-west of Bangladesh which is at the epicentre of a drinking water crisis. A crisis that is being exacerbated everyday owing to the realities of climate change.

For 26-year old Jesmin Khatun, of Gautamkathi village in Jalilpur, Tala upazila of Sathkhira, the water crisis is one



Most water bodies in the area now have saline water.

PHOTO: JAHIN SHAMS/UTTARAN



The water in the bottle was collected directly from the tube well in Tala upazila of Sathkhira.

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that comes with both financial and physical constraints.

For starters, she has to walk 1.5 kilometres twice everyday to collect fresh drinking water. Not only does she have to walk the distance, but then has to spend money to buy the jars of clean water.

Each jar of clean drinking water costs around Tk 20 and the cost of the van fare, after she walks to the main road from her village, is Tk 10, which means Jesmin's family of six have to spend a whopping Tk 1,500 on water each month.

"My back hurts from having to carry these heavy water jars every day. Because this water is so expensive, we do not dare use this for any other purpose. So, for cleaning and other purposes, we have to use saline pond water," says Jesmin.

The story of Rupa Khatun of Shahid Ajj Shushil Palli in Jalilpur of the same upazila is much the same. She has to walk around 10 minutes, take a 15-minute van ride and then wait in line for 30 minutes, before getting the water. Added to the extreme physical labour is the economic constraint. Rupa's family has to spend a total of Tk 1,500 on drinking water containing yellowish heavy metal spewed out by the tube-wells in these regions.

Like Jesmin and Rupa, it is the women in the south-west region who are tasked with bearing the brunt of the drinking water crisis.

This story is about some of these people in Sathkhira, who spend a lion's share of their day and consequently their whole lives in search of fresh drinking water; and

who are now having to spend hard-earned money on sourcing a basic right. It is about a district, facing rampant industrialisation and the first attack of global climate change.

A district in the clutches of an acute drinking water crisis

A combination of tidal flooding, inundation by storm surges and saltwater intrusion has led to a rise in salinity in groundwater and in fresh-water ponds. As a result, in the coastal area of Sathkhira, potable water is a scarce and precious commodity.

As you roam the south-west zone of Bangladesh and study up on its topographical and hydrological data, you will come to realise the land structure is unlike any other area in the country. So, any standardised plan, such as installing deep tube-wells like in all other parts of the country, will actually not produce any fruitful results in this region. While in many parts of Bangladesh, establishing a deep-water tube-well at a depth of between 300 to 1,200 feet will give you access to water, in Sathkhira, that is not the case, says Jahin Shams, programme development specialist at Uttaran, an NGO working in the area.

"As you travel around the villages in most of the upazilas of Sathkhira, you will see there are many deep-tube wells that have been established to ensure drinking water for the villagers but they simply do not work," says Shahidul Islam, the director of Uttaran and a native of Sathkhira.

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