

# The Vanishing Fishermen of TEESTA

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

"In the last 15 years, I had to change homes 11 times. During every monsoon, Teesta swallows my residence and most of my belongings. My forefathers used to cultivate these lands and fish in this river and in the Shutungar *beel* (large lake-like wetland). I have heard from my grandma that fish was so plenty in this river that we used to sell only those of considerable size and weight. She used to feed our dogs and cats with small fries and catches of undesired species such as *Gajars* (Large Snakehead), *Gechhua*, *Bain* (Mud-Eel) etc. These are stories from bygone years. At present, Teesta means nothing to us except destruction," says Mohammad Lal Mia, a resident of South Kharibari village under Dimlaupazila of Nilphamari district.

This village, situated along the course of the Teesta River, has been

heavily affected by two major dams built on both its sides; in the north Gajoldoba barrage established by the Indian government and in the south Teesta barrage, built by the Bangladesh government. In 1990, the Bangladesh government completed the construction of the Teesta barrage to provide irrigation to drought-prone districts of North-Bengal during dry seasons. However, in 1996, the Indian government established the Gajoldoba barrage, bigger than the Teesta barrage, on the upstream of the river for the same purpose. As the Indian barrage withdraws water during every dry season, Teesta River in Bangladesh turns into massive *chars* (tract of land formed by siltation and surrounded by river). Bangladesh's Teesta Barrage can do little to irrigate the lands due to intense water shortage.

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Abu Bakar (centre), now an occasional fisherman, lost 35 bighas of arable land due to the expanding chars of Teesta Rivers.

PHOTO: MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN



Accumulation of sediment on the downstream of Teesta river is choking the freshwater ecosystem.

PHOTO: ANIMESH PRAKASH



Large tracts of dry, sandy chars have replaced once mighty flow of Teesta and its surrounding fertile croplands.

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