

HOW SALINITY CORRODES the lives of Sundarbans women



Momotaj and her daughter are carefully pouring out the final drops of precious rainwater from a plastic container — their only remaining reserve amid the relentless water crisis caused by acute salinity in the coastal region. In their quiet struggle for survival, every drop is a lifeline.

MD RAHAMATULLAH

Every morning, as soon as the sun rises, the struggle for drinking water begins for 40-year-old Momotaj Begum. A resident of Chalkbara village in Gabura Union, she lives with her family of four. Her day starts with fetching water for the household from a neighbour's pond, located nearly a kilometre away from her home.

On a typical day, Momotaj fetches water twice. "Early in the morning, I go to my neighbour's pond to collect water for cooking and drinking. After finishing the household work, I fetch water again in the late afternoon. This is my regular routine," she says. She adds, "Water is everywhere, but there is an acute scarcity of safe drinking water due to salinity. Salinity is a curse for us. I feel a sense of relief during the monsoon season, as the rainwater provides drinking water that lasts for about three to four months."

Gabura is an island union located in Shyamnagar Upazila of Satkhira district. Like other coastal districts, Satkhira is one of the areas most affected by salinity, where both surface and groundwater are increasingly saline. Salinity is further exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. As a result, the scarcity of fresh drinking water has become much more severe than before. Each year, groundwater levels drop rapidly due to erratic rainfall, prolonged dry seasons, and excessive water extraction.

In addition, being a coastal district, saltwater intrusion caused by natural factors — such as sea-level rise, tidal surges, and cyclones — has a significant effect on freshwater sources. Scientific findings and ethnographic research suggest that, alongside these natural causes, the cultivation of shrimp and, more recently, soft-shell crab farming are notably intensifying salinity levels in both water and soil.



An abandoned tubewell stands as a silent witness to the region's deepening water crisis — rendered unusable by high levels of salinity, arsenic, and iron.

PHOTOS: MD RAHAMATULLAH

no longer an individual problem; rather, it has become a serious concern across the coastal area of the Sundarbans.

Salinity is now no longer confined to physical or climatic phenomena. It has become a social stigma in the coastal belt. Momotaj said, "People from freshwater areas are not willing to marry off their daughters here due to the water crisis caused by salinity. They are also reluctant to marry anyone from this area. Like others, I am worried about my daughter." She continued, "Even my relatives who stay in the freshwater area often avoid visiting my home. They say, you don't have fresh water. Where will we bathe? Saline water will darken our skin." In the coastal area, salinity has become a curse.

The women of the Sundarbans are paying the highest price for salinity. The use of saline water damages their hair and skin. Their bodies are turning darker. The signs of ageing on their skin tend to appear at a faster pace than in other parts of Bangladesh. Late marriage costs a large amount of dowry. Thus, parents always try to arrange an early marriage for their daughters.

Today, in the coastal areas of the Sundarbans, salinity and the scarcity of safe drinking water create the greatest divide between the people — the people of saline water and the people of freshwater. Most affluent households are migrating to urban areas in order to build a better and more secure life. But for people like Momotaj, who have nothing left, how do they survive?

Unless the nation listens to these voices and acts with urgency, the salt that seeps into their water will continue to seep into their lives, hardening lines of suffering for generations to come.

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I have to collect water every day. After carrying the water, my body and legs often start to ache. Even during my menstrual period, I have to fetch water to run the family. I do not have any option to skip it."

Sometimes the scarcity of fresh drinking water forces them to use saline water. It has diverse negative impacts on all, though pregnant women are at increased risk of high blood pressure, miscarriage, and premature birth. Research reports say that saline water is

Encroached and evicted

The vanishing Rakhines of Bangladesh

MIFTAHUL JANNAT

For centuries, the Rakhine community has called the shores of Patuakhali and Barguna home. They were the first settlers there, long before the area became part of the former Bakerganj district, and later Barishal. The very land that the Rakhines once regarded as their mark of existence is now shrinking from under their feet.

Their villages are vanishing, their temples and burial grounds are being seized, and their lands are increasingly claimed by ruthless encroachers. What was once a thriving population of over 50,000 in the area, has dwindled to barely 2,500, leaving behind a legacy of dispossession and a future hovering on the edge of extinction.

RAKHINE'S ANCESTRAL LEGACY

Before the arrival of the Rakhines on the southernmost coastal belt of Barishal in 1784, the area was an uninhabited, dense forest teeming with wild animals. They transformed this region into arable farmland. Whatever land they cleared and cultivated was officially recognised as their own property by the government at that time.

Gradually, in the coastal, silt-laden lands of what are now Patuakhali and Barguna districts, particularly in Galachipa, Kalapara, Amtali, and Barguna, the Rakhines expanded their settlements. During the period between 1908 and 1930, Rakhine leaders established many important Buddhist structures to spread their faith and develop the region's infrastructure, turning it into a prosperous Rakhine-inhabited area.

Under the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950, the Rakhines of Patuakhali were recognised as indigenous people under the term "Mag" of Bakerganj, and Section 97 of the Act was included specifically to safeguard their interests in land transfer.

Yet, according to various records, today more than 90% of Rakhine families living in this area are landless. Looking back, before the Partition of India in 1947, only 20–25% of them were landless. Today, that figure has swelled, encompassing almost the entire community.

Even with legal records of ownership, influential land-grabbing groups have repeatedly dispossessed them of their land — using forged deeds, intimidation, legal loopholes, and endless lawsuits.

Sanjeeb Drong, General Secretary of the Bangladesh Indigenous People's Forum, said, "Kalapara, Taltoli, Kuakata, Amtali — these areas were once entirely Rakhine. There were water bodies and forests, and no one else was here. Over 250 years, the population should have grown, but instead, it has drastically

decreased. Many returned to Arakan, some moved to Dhaka, and others were lost to floods and natural disasters."

Once a thriving community across 237 villages, today there are only 44 villages remaining — 27 in Kalapara, 13 in Taltoli and Barguna Sadar, and 4 in Rangabali. Caritas research estimates roughly 2,500 Rakhines now live in these areas, but most of their villages are dominated by Bengali settlers.

forged documents to withdraw around 3 crore BDT. The actual owners never received a single taka," Maung added.

Aung Cho San, a member of Kalachan Para Rakhine Palli, illustrated how deep this forgery runs: "The headman of our community, who served until 1996, had his name left on records even after he was removed. He passed away in 2001, but a case was filed against him in the local

their cultural and spiritual practice. "Ponds are sacred and they keep the water holy," explained Drong. "Temples can be simple tin-roofed structures, but they are vital. Cremation and burial grounds are also required. Without these, the Rakhines



A partially encroached burial ground of the Rakhines.

PHOTO: SOHRAB HOSSAIN/THE DAILY STAR



Much of this Rakhine burial ground in Kuakata's Latachaplee area has been encroached upon by local influential land grabbers under the guise of tourism expansion. This is not an isolated case — numerous lands belonging to the indigenous community in Kuakata and Barguna have faced the same fate. The photo was taken in May 2022.

PHOTO: STAR

UNYIELDING GRIP OF LAND GRABS

Land grabbing has become rampant, often sanctioned by the powerful or facilitated by legal loopholes. "Due to various kinds of forgery and document fraud, 90–95% of the Rakhines have lost their lands," said Maung Miya, Land and Case Monitoring Officer at the Caritas Barishal Regional Office. "Among the existing Rakhine Pallis, the ownership of land in nearly 26–27 Pallis has been forged."

He cited the eviction of six families from Chho-Ani Para for the construction of Payra Port as an example. "The compensation they were promised for their land was claimed by someone else — a non-Rakhine who produced

land office as if he were still alive." Legally, no case can be filed against a deceased person, yet through forgery, a verdict was obtained in favour of the occupiers.

"Later, another headman died in 2019, but in 2021 a case was filed against him, and the court ruled in favour of the occupiers. We were not informed until the union land office called a meeting about the transfer — only then did we realise what had happened," added San.

SACRED SPACES UNDER THREAT
For the Rakhines, land is more than property — it is sacred. Each village traditionally requires a temple, a holy pond for worship, and a burial ground. These sites are essential to

cannot maintain their community — and soon, there may be none left."

Myenthein Promila, an Adivasi human rights activist, echoes Drong's concerns. "Many Rakhine villages now have only one or two families. They're barely able to maintain their traditions." People from surrounding areas are planting crops on their cremation grounds. Temples and ponds are being encroached upon or polluted.

THE LEGAL VACUUM
The State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 applies to the Rakhines, but enforcement is weak. Families with legal deeds still face eviction, and cases drag on for decades.

Ordinary courts cannot resolve these cases in a timely or just manner, and no special tribunal exists for them either. Families often have to sell dispute-free land just to fund ongoing legal battles.

"The occupiers change with power, but the tendency to occupy does not," said Promila. "Almost all families have on average at least two land-related cases ongoing, some stretching back 40–50 years, passed down from their grandparents. This is causing the Rakhines immense financial and emotional strain."

ACTION OR EXTINCTION

Experts and activists agree that special interventions are urgently needed:

- » Establish a special tribunal to resolve land disputes efficiently and fairly.
- » Protect sacred ponds, temples, and burial grounds.
- » Implement social development packages for economic and cultural support.
- » Enforce land rights with consistent monitoring to prevent encroachment.

Maung Miya of Caritas Barishal emphasised the importance of local oversight in land matters: "Before any case reaches the court, the local administration has a responsibility to investigate. There are multiple layers — Zila, Upazila, Parishad, and Union Parishad. For transferring land, Rakhines must first obtain a succession certificate from the Union Parishad, then approval from their Rakhine union, and finally permission from the UNO. If these protocols were properly followed, fraudulent transfers could have been detected long before cases reached the courts."

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