



SHIFTING LIVES IN THE HAOR

# A wetland losing ITS FARMERS

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On a humid July evening, I met Majed bhai at Chamtaghat, a small river port where boats jostle with auto-rickshaws at the gateway to the Haor wetlands. He was hurrying to catch a ride back to his home in Kurigram, some 200 kilometres north. Majed bhai drives an auto-rickshaw between Mithamoin and Austagram. But he was not always an auto-rickshaw driver. For two decades, he was a seasonal farmhand in the Haor, involved in ploughing rented plots, transplanting paddy, and harvesting in the brief, frantic window before the floods rolled in.

Floods are natural to the Haor region and a crucial part of its economic and ecological setting. However, flash floods are not. The cost of the globalised nature of development has been a complete misreading of the locals. These 'denatural' disasters have directly influenced the resilience strategies of people belonging to the Haor.

In 2022, after yet another flash flood submerged the ripening boro paddy overnight, Majed bhai left the fields for good. He still comes south each year, but now to drive a rented three-wheeler, ferrying tourists across newly paved roads that cut through the watery expanse. His passengers no longer carry sacks of rice but sticks and packets of snacks.

In Dhaka, rickshaw pullers speaking northern dialects are a common sight. But Majed's story is different — a man who migrates seasonally not to the city but from one rural area to another. When I asked him why he did not seek work in Dhaka or other larger cities like other northern migrants, he laughed.

"In Dhaka, I would sleep on the pavement and pull a rickshaw among thousands. Here, at least the air is fresh, and people come to enjoy the water. I can make more in one tourist season than I did in three harvests."

Majed's trajectory encapsulates the shifting currents of life in the Haor, where seasonal migrants once tethered their livelihoods to agriculture but now

increasingly find themselves absorbed into tourism, construction, and transport.

For centuries, the Haor basin—Bangladesh's vast bowl-shaped wetlands stretching across Kishoreganj, Sunamganj, and Netrokona—has sustained a fragile agrarian economy. During the dry months (November–April), the wetlands recede, exposing fertile land where villagers rush to plant a single crop of boro rice. But come May, torrential rains and upstream flows from Meghalaya refill the basin, turning villages into islands and fields into inland seas.

Landless labourers—once hired en masse for harvesting—find their services less in demand as mechanised harvesters spread. What was once a "hungry season" between crops has become, for many, a year-round state of uncertainty.

One elderly farmer in Austagram told me: "In my father's time, we feared storms, but we trusted the land. Now, we fear both the sky and the market. A single sack of fertiliser costs as much as a month's food. How can the poor survive on this land?"

Environmental degradation has accelerated this collapse. Roads and

Majed who trade in sickles for steering wheels.

If floods and market forces are the push, government policy has been the pull— redirecting the Haor's workforce into new, informal livelihoods.

The emblem of this transformation is the 29.7-kilometre all-weather road inaugurated in 2020 between Austagram, Mithamoin, and Itna. At a cost of over BDT 874 crore, the road was presented as a vital link for connectivity and development. It quickly became a tourist magnet, with families from Dhaka driving four hours just to cruise through "Bangladesh's Venice."

One tea-seller in Mithamoin explained the change vividly: "Before, my husband worked as a day labourer in harvesting. We would wait for the season. Now, every Friday, people come with cars and boats. I set up a stall by the road. I sell tea, fried hilsa, and snacks. In two days, I earn what we once made in a whole week of farming."

For peasants, the road has created an alternative to farming. Men who once harvested rice now drive auto-rickshaws along the asphalt. Young men act as tour guides or rent boats. Tourism has, in short, informalised the rural economy, spawning jobs that are seasonal, precarious, but immediate.

Yet the same road has exacerbated flooding. Constructed without adequate drainage, it blocks natural water flows, leading to waterlogging that destroys crops and fish. Although environmentalists warned of such consequences, their concerns were largely ignored.

A fisherman in Tangar Haor told me with frustration: "The road brings people with cameras, but it stops the fish from moving. Our nets come back empty, but the tourists eat fried fish by the roadside. Who benefits?"

This paradox—of infrastructure simultaneously enabling livelihoods and undermining them—is emblematic of what scholars call neoliberal development: policies that prioritise growth, connectivity,



A digital rendering of a section of the Haor road in Kishoreganj — built to lift livelihoods but leaving many underwater. For locals, progress has meant fewer fields, more floods, and a new struggle for survival.

It was always a risky cycle, but it used to work. Now, it is unravelling. Flash floods arrive earlier and with greater force, sweeping away crops before harvest. In 2017, one such flood destroyed over 850,000 tonnes of rice, triggering local food shortages. Farmers speak of "the water coming two weeks early"—a small shift with devastating consequences.

The rising costs of agricultural inputs compound the problem. Fertiliser and diesel prices eat into razor-thin margins, while middlemen capture much of the profit.

embankments built to protect fields often obstruct natural water flows, intensifying floods rather than preventing them. The Haor's hydrology—once a delicately balanced rhythm of inflow and outflow—has been disrupted by infrastructural interventions that privilege connectivity over ecology.

Economic theory calls this process de-peasantisation—the gradual erosion of smallholder farming as a viable way of life. In Haor villages, it is visible in abandoned paddies, pawned ploughs, and men like

they even reach the gate.

For visually impaired voters, the Representation of the People Order (RPO) requires them to take a companion of their choice to the booth. That is the only provision. And even that comes with risk.

"For the visually impaired people you have to take a companion with you to vote," Bashair said.

"Sometimes the political party members take advantage of this situation and act as their companion. Whether the vote went according to the participant's wish is not clear."

Anonymity—a basic right of voting—is not guaranteed. "What the EC needs to ensure is that persons with disabilities, especially those who are visually impaired, can cast their vote in secret. Because you know how the political parties in our country operate, if anonymity is not ensured, they will live in fear," he said.

Talukdar Rifat Pasha, a policy officer at the Institute of Wellbeing Bangladesh, echoes this fear. "I became eligible to vote in 2009. Nobody came to me and I didn't have any

information about my voter number and how I, as a visually impaired person, was going to vote," he said. "2014, 2018 and 2024 were also the same."

"As a citizen of a country, you have the right to vote. But we don't feel like a citizen, because we are not ensured of our right."

Bashair and others have been telling the Election Commission the same message for years. "We have always talked about accessibility rights of persons with disabilities to the Election Commission, we have sent them countless messages, memoranda, but they didn't really think of it as an important issue."

None of the solutions are beyond reach. Both Rifat and Bashair believe Bangladesh needs stronger political will, sustained advocacy, and practical tools such as EVMs equipped with tactile or Braille systems. They also suggest simple yet effective measures—SMS alerts before election day, dedicated transport, trained polling officials, public announcements, and a helpline for voter assistance.

Bangladesh already issues disability identity cards and sends disability allowances through mobile banking. The state knows where many of these citizens live. What is missing is intent.

Election expert Badiul Alam Majumder said, "The visually impaired or the people with disabilities are also a citizen of this country and they have the right to vote." He believes responsibility begins with the Election Commission, and collaboration with disability rights groups can help mitigate this problem.

Some NGOs like BPKS and ADD International have tried to work on disability-inclusive elections, but most ended when funding dried up. Like Litan's project in 2008, they appeared for one election and disappeared before the next.

There is talk within the Constitution Reform Commission of recognising voting as a fundamental right. If that happens, citizens could take legal action when that right is denied. But should it take a court room to remind us that democracy does not belong only to the able bodied?

Rifat's words stay with you: "We talk about participatory election; political parties only talk about inclusive voting but they don't mean it. It may be inclusive from the perspective of the political parties but we don't feel inclusive, we feel left out."

The upcoming national election is expected to usher in a new chapter for Bangladesh, yet it appears poised to repeat the same old mistakes. Decades of neglect by policymakers and the Election Commission have left a deep flaw in the voting system—one that continues to exclude large numbers of citizens by making it difficult for them to exercise their rights. What the nation truly needs now is commitment and effective implementation of accessibility measures for voters with disabilities, especially those who are visually impaired.

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# Will visually impaired voters be able to cast their vote?

YSTIAQUE AHMED

The excitement in the recent Chittagong University Central Students' Union (CUCSU) polls faded quickly for a group of students who had come to vote for the first time. Although there were 60 to 70 visually impaired students, there was no Braille ballot, no tactile guide, and no arrangement that allowed them to vote on their own. They were told to bring someone along — a friend, a teacher, anyone who could help them. Their enthusiasm turned into silence.

Rajshahi University Central Students' Union (RUCSU) was no different. No arrangement, no discussion, and no accountability. That silence echoes the problem. We often champion disability rights through speeches and seminars, yet they seldom take shape in real, functioning systems.

This raises a serious concern for the upcoming national election. Bangladesh has nearly one million citizens who are completely blind and over six million with some degree of vision loss, according to the Vision Atlas of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness report. If things

remain the same, most of them will quietly sit out another election — not by choice, but because the system isn't built for them.

Litan Baruri, currently a movement liaison at ADD International, told TDS that in 2008 he worked as a project coordinator with the Election Commission to monitor accessibility for disabled voters. "The problems I faced then still persist today," he said. There were no accessibility systems — only companions assisting voters with disabilities. The project didn't continue due to funding issues.

Bashair Al Hossain, a programme manager at the National Grassroot Disability Organisation (NGDO), told TDS, "I was involved in almost every aspect in a couple of elections. I was a member of the National Election Monitoring team in 2001 and 2008 under UNDP and some international organisations as their representative."

He described the recurring problems: "The ballot boxes are sometimes on the second or third floor of a building, which makes it difficult for voters with disabilities to reach. The entry to the election centres is not very accessible. Most of the transportation systems are shut down during election time," leaving most voters with disabilities stranded before



A visually impaired student casts her ballot with assistance during the CUCSU election, where many others left without voting due to the absence of Braille or tactile facilities allowing them to vote independently.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN