

FORGOTTEN ON THE COAST

The Jaldas caught between two disasters



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The arduous daily routine of the Jaldas fishermen begins before dawn on the mudflats of Charchandia, Sonagazi of Feni district.

PHOTOS:
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A fishing village on the seashore. The village is repeatedly submerged by tidal waters. It rises again, and work resumes. But the people remain in crisis year after year. Disasters, declining fish stocks in the sea, and social inequality are intensifying the economic crisis of the fishermen. Families are carrying the burden of debt.

"The sea is taking our village back. We repeatedly face loss and damage. We came here for safe shelter to escape disasters. But the struggle for life here is more difficult. We are losing the fight against all adversities. We can no longer bear the burden of debt." — These are the words of Josna Rani Jaldas, a resident of the Jaldas fishing village on the seashore near Chittagong city.

During the conversation, Josna was sitting next to Bishwambhar Jaldas. Bishwambhar added, "We could not live in our original home, Sandwip, due to cyclones, tidal waves and river erosion. We repeatedly face crises. We took refuge on the Patenga embankment in Chittagong more than 30 years ago for safe shelter and livelihood. But the crisis has not left us here; it has followed us here too. Where will we go now?"

More than three hundred Jaldas families live outside the embankment in the Akmal Ali Road area of Ward No. 39 of the Chittagong City Corporation. Their livelihood depends on fishing in the sea. Many took refuge here over 30 years ago in search of shelter and work. Since then, their houses have been burned down in fires, exposed

to sea erosion, or relocated due to infrastructure development, including the construction of a marine drive. Most recently, these families were displaced by Cyclone Sitrang in 2022.

The sea was once about two kilometres away from the homes of Bishwambhar and Josna Jaldas. A forest stood between the village and the shoreline. Over time, natural disasters have pushed the sea closer. The forest has disappeared. The village is now exposed. A fragile embankment stands along the shore, but it offers little protection. Even during normal tides, water enters homes. Like this village, many Jaldas settlements along the coast of Bangladesh face increasing risk.

From Kattali to Koralia

Jaldas families live across the eastern coastal districts of Bangladesh, including Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Noakhali, Feni and Lakshimpur. According to the Uttar Chattala Coastal Fishermen Jaldas Cooperative Welfare Federation, around 600,000 people from this community live in about 100 villages.

The federation's president, Mr Liton Jaldas, said, "The people of this community survive by constantly fighting nature. No Jaldas village is free from hardship. New crises are emerging due to climate change."

This reporter visited at least ten Jaldas villages across Chittagong, Sandwip, Sitakunda, Hatia, Feni and Lakshimpur. The findings reveal a pattern of displacement, environmental degradation and economic hardship.

In Salimpur fishing village in Sitakunda, development activities have created obstacles to movement towards the fishing pier. Most families here face a housing crisis and live in unhealthy conditions. In nearby Shitalpur, the expansion of factories has encroached on the village, threatening lives and livelihoods. Many residents came from Sandwip after losing their homes to river erosion. Here, they face new challenges. Gas lines are being laid, walls are being constructed, and settlements are being disrupted.

Kumira, another large Jaldas village in Sitakunda, faces similar risks. Residents have lived there for generations, but coastal erosion has forced parts of the village to retreat by more than a kilometre. Industrial activities, including shipbreaking, have increased pollution in the sea and rivers. As a result, fish stocks have declined sharply.

Further south, in Sonagazi Upazila of Feni district, two Jaldas villages lie along the Feni River. Once rich in fish, the river now yields almost nothing. In Koralia village in Hatia Upazila of Noakhali district, there were once around 100 Jaldas families. Today, most have left due to repeated crises.

Community facing adversity

The Jaldas community is a small, marginalised group living in one of the most climate-vulnerable regions of Bangladesh. Traditionally dependent on fishing, they have sustained themselves from the sea and rivers for generations. Today, that way of life is

under threat.

Cyclones, tidal surges and river erosion displace families year after year. Many are forced to relocate repeatedly within the country. Climate change has intensified these challenges, placing the community under extreme pressure.

Economic hardship is deepening. Declining fish stocks, environmental degradation and industrial activities have reduced income opportunities. Many families are being forced to abandon fishing altogether. Some have migrated to neighbouring India in search of work.

As a Dalit community, the Jaldas also face entrenched social discrimination. They are often excluded from government support and development programmes. The combined burden of poverty, marginalisation and climate vulnerability has left them in a state of chronic insecurity.

Social inequality further limits their ability to respond to these challenges. Low literacy rates and widespread poverty restrict access to information, opportunities and public services. As a result, they remain on the margins of mainstream society. For generations, they have been labelled as backward, reinforcing a cycle of neglect. This persistent exclusion has deprived them of basic civil rights.

Gaps in disaster preparedness

A study titled Inequitable Information

The study calls for bridging the digital and geographical divide in disaster communication to ensure inclusive risk reduction and better protection for marginalised communities.

'We demand justice'

Mr Harishankar Jaldas, a novelist from the community, emphasised the role of poverty in holding the community back.

"The main reason for the backwardness of the Jaldas community is poverty. This is why education is not progressing. They need to be encouraged and given incentives. The importance of educating children needs to be explained. Then they will be able to progress," he said.

Dr Mohammed Mamun Rashid, a researcher on Jaldas community issues, pointed to structural challenges.

"The Jaldas community has been living in chronic, multidimensional poverty from generation to generation. Now they are among the first victims of climate change. Moreover, commercial fishing has an adverse impact on their lives and livelihoods. Therefore, donors, humanitarian organisations and the Government of Bangladesh should treat them with dignity and take special initiatives through comprehensive planning and proper implementation," he said.

The demand from the community is clear and consistent.



Driven by economic hardship, Jaldas women endure strenuous outdoor labour alongside men in Charchandia village, Sonagazi of Feni district.

Flows and Disaster Resilience Among Traditional Marine Fishers (Jaldas) in Bangladesh highlights another dimension of vulnerability. It found that people in remote fishing villages receive cyclone warnings much later than those in urban areas.

In North Salimpur, fishermen can access early warnings through electricity, television and mobile internet. In contrast, fishermen on South Dhurung Island in Kutubdia depend on traditional methods, including announcements by Cyclone Preparedness Programme volunteers. This delay increases their risk during disasters.

"Inform the head of government about our plight. We want to live normal lives after overcoming the crisis. Do us justice. Rehabilitate us." — This call is echoed by many, including Bishwambhar Jaldas, Josna Jaldas and Hari Jaldas.

For a community that has spent decades moving from one fragile shelter to another, the question remains unresolved: where will they go next?

Rafiqul Islam Montu is an award-winning independent journalist focusing on environmental issues, climate change, and coastal communities.

Life along a dying Teesta

S DILIP ROY

The Teesta, once the vibrant pulse of northern Bangladesh, is fighting for survival. Where strong currents once promised prosperity, the river has largely withered into a narrow, knee-deep stream or vast, barren sandbars. This ecological collapse has plunged millions living along its banks—farmers, fishermen, and labourers—into deep uncertainty.

Flowing 115 kilometres through 13 upazilas in Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Nilphamari, Rangpur, and Gaibandha, the river now hosts 123 riverine islands, or chars, home to nearly 500,000 people. For these residents, the riverbed is no longer a waterway but a daily obstacle, requiring long treks across scorching sand to reach the mainland.

Sekendar Ali (70) a farmer from Char Kalmati in Lalmonirhat, remembers when the river sustained multiple harvests a year. "The Teesta's water used to be our lifeline," he said. "Now, during the dry season, we don't get enough water for irrigation. It was once a blessing, but now it has become a curse. It overflows during the monsoon, causing floods and erosion, then dries up when we need it most."

Residents along the Teesta say that reduced water flow is not only affecting agriculture and livelihoods but also threatening the entire ecosystem. The disrupted natural flow is reducing fish breeding, destroying aquatic habitats, and lowering groundwater levels. If this continues, parts of northern Bangladesh could gradually face desertification.

The economic toll is widespread. Fazal Mia (65) a farmer from Aditmari, says the lack of water has forced a costly reliance on groundwater. "My 20 bighas of land are in the riverbed, covered with sand. We cannot cultivate properly," he said. "The dried-up Teesta has made our lives miserable. If it survives, our agriculture and livelihoods

survive too."

For those who relied on the river for transport, the reality is equally bleak. Abdar Ali (60) a boatman from Kurigram, is now effectively unemployed. "People cross the river on foot. Boats are no longer needed," he said. "Hundreds of boatmen have left the profession. We can only earn for four or five months a year; for the rest of the time, our boats sit tied to the bank."

Fishermen face a similar decline. Nirmal Chandra Das (50) from Rangpur, notes that the iconic bairali fish, once a local staple, is nearing extinction. "We used to catch 10-12 kg of fish daily. Now we don't even get half a kilo," he said. With 25 fishing villages along the banks struggling, many families have abandoned their ancestral trade for day labour.

The Bangladesh Water Development Board attributes this to massive sedimentation. Roughly 20 million tonnes of silt accumulate annually from upstream.



Once a vibrant waterway, the Teesta has reduced to narrow channels and vast sandbars.

Without regular dredging, the riverbed has risen, destroying its capacity to hold water.

Amitav Chowdhury, Executive Engineer of the Dalia Water Development Board, confirmed the dire state of the river. "In



A farmer uses a shallow engine to extract groundwater for irrigation as the Teesta riverbed remains dry and sandy.

PHOTOS: S DILIP ROY

the dry season, the Teesta turns into a dead canal with several channels, none carrying sufficient water," he said. "Dredging is urgently needed to restore a single, functional channel. Downstream of the barrage, there is hardly any water because all 44 gates remain closed during the dry season."

The environmental impact extends beyond immediate livelihoods. Residents warn that the loss of natural flow is lowering groundwater levels and threatening to turn northern Bangladesh into a desert.

SM Shaiful Islam, president of the 'Save the River, Save Teesta' movement, warned that the river is on the brink of death. "People have been protesting for years, but apart from promises, no real action has been taken," he said. He argued that by dredging

the river and narrowing its width from the current 6-9 kilometres back to 1 km, vast tracts of land could be reclaimed and the river restored.

Hope now rests on the proposed "Teesta River Management and Restoration Project", or the Teesta Master Plan. Sarfaraz Banda, Chief Engineer of the Water Development Board's Rangpur Division, said the plan includes dredging 115 kilometres of the river, embankment construction, and the recovery of 171 square kilometres of land. "If implemented, employment will increase, and agricultural land will be restored," he said, though he noted that the project remains a high-level government matter.

Experts argue that infrastructure alone is insufficient. Dr Tuhin Wadud, a professor at Begum Rokeya University and director

of 'Riverine People', stressed that a fair water-sharing agreement with India is very important. "Infrastructure development is not enough, ensuring the natural flow of water is," he said.

Residents along the Teesta shoal held a series of protests last year, including human chains, sit-ins, and torch processions, to demand the implementation of the Teesta Master Plan. Led by Asadul Habib Dulu, then the chief coordinator of the Teesta River Protection Movement and now the Minister for Disaster Management and Relief, the demonstrators even spent nights on riverine chars to voice their demands.

During these protests, representatives from the interim government's water resources ministry and PowerChina met with activists to exchange views. Although the interim government initially pledged to begin the project in January 2026, the deadline passed without action. The water resources adviser later clarified that the plan is under further review and will be left for the elected government to implement.

Disaster Management and Relief Minister Asadul Habib Dulu, who led the Teesta River Protection Movement, insists the current government is committed to the project. "The Teesta is the lifeline of nearly two crore people," he said. "The crisis of the Teesta is the crisis of an entire region. I have briefed the Prime Minister in detail about the master plan. Our government has started working on it."

For those living on the shifting sands of the chars, the wait continues. As Didarul Islam, a farmer from Kaunia, put it: "Our demand is simple—there should be water in the river, crops in the fields, and boats on the water. We want life to return to normal."

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