

Pillars of Displacement

Communities Fighting for River Justice in Dhaka

Changing Rivers in an Urbanizing Country

Bangladesh is a land of river systems, networks of waterways twisting throughout the country. In this deltaic region, the boundaries between land and water have been in flux. River beds swell and redirect waters over time with the rhythm of seasons, erosion, and sedimentation. The dwellers of Bangladesh's shifting riversides have

lived with these changes, some beneficial and others damaging. Dwellers depend on the riverways for travel and for nourishing monsoon inundations (borsha) when the rivers bring fine silt from the Himalayas and create and recreate a fertile delta. Dwellers also face devastating floods (bonna) that ruin crops and settlements. Colonialism brought about significant changes to Bangladesh's riverine landscapes. Transportation infrastructures - roads and trains - gradually disrupted wetlands and water routes and replaced river networks for transportation. In independent Bangladesh, the pursuit of modern (read: western) development continues to shape an intensifying urbanization that pollutes and encroaches on rivers. Rampant water pollution by unregulated industries has significantly harmed river-based livelihoods and communities. The rivers still swell and shift, though the suffering of both has heightened under the current regime of water management. Powerful politicians and industrialists vie for land to site their exploitative industries through violent and unjust means. Riverside dwellers struggle to hold on to their productive and affective relationship with the river as pollution, eviction drives, and a stunted river economy drives them away.

River-Killing Urbanization in Dhaka

Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, sits on the north-bank of the Buriganga River. Dhaka is surrounded by a river system comprising the Buriganga, Balu, Turag, Tongi Khal and Shitalakhya. A number of water channels (khals) run across and around the city, linking the capital with the hinterlands. Since the establishment of Dhaka, the rivers facilitated the city's development as primary water supply, drainage outlet, and flood control for the city's inhabitants. After Bangladesh's independence in 1971, Dhaka has expanded and urbanized at an accelerated pace. Dhaka's canals, wetlands, and rivers and the communities that rely on them for livelihoods and everyday needs bear the burden of

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Sites Mentioned in Hossain's Oral History

Dhaka's urban development. Multiple research reported that Dhaka's wetlands and rivers have been encroached and polluted at an alarming rate. Although the state undertook conservation initiatives, these efforts often marginalized riverine communities and reinforced the deep inequities that underpin Dhaka's urbanization.

River Activists Fight Back

The pollution and encroached waterways have had detrimental effects for Dhaka's residents but especially for riverine communities. From poisoned water, fish, and plants to worsening floods to disruption of river accessibility and transportation to displacement from riverside, urban riverine communities face multiple environmental injustices of land grabbing, livelihoods destruction, and harm to health. Riverine communities have also resisted river-killing urbanization and fought for their right to live with rivers. In this project, developed in conversation with community activists and environmental organizers, we highlight the narratives of riverside dwellers who organize, advocate, and create change for their communities.

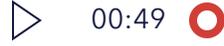


Manik Hossain (Image Courtesy: RDRC)

Manik Hossain is a river defender. His ancestral home is situated along the Buriganga River. His family has lived here for generations and the Buriganga has been an integral part of Hossain's childhood and adult life. A brick seller by profession, Manik Hossain has been a longtime river activist, particularly working with Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon. In the oral history segments below, Manik

Hossain narrates his experiences and organizing efforts to defend the Buriganga River and its adjacent communities against developers, politicians, and state officials.

What Was and What Is



প্রায় ৩০০ বসর আগে থেকে এখানে আমাদের বসবাস। নদীর পারে আমাদের অনেক স্মৃতি জরায় আসে। বুড়িগঙ্গা নদী নিয়ে। এই নদীকে কেন্দ্র করেই আমাদের বাপদাদা পূর্বপুরুষ কৃষি কাজ করতো। নদীর পানি

We have lived here since around 300 years ago. So many of our memories are tied to the banks of the river Buriganga. Our fathers, grandfathers and ancestors used to work the land around this river. We brought goods to and fro on



আসলে আমরা জন্মগতভাবে নদীর সাথে জড়িত। নদীর পারে আমাদের বসবাস। নদীর পারেই আমরা ছোটবেলায় বেশির ভাগ সময় কাটাইসি। যেমন বৈশাখ মাস আসলেই নদীতে নুতুন পানি আসতো। চারদিকে পানিতে ভরে যেত। সারাঞ্চণ আমরা নদীতে সাঁতার কাটতাম, মাছ ধরতাম, খেলাধুলা করতাম। এরপর যখন

Our lives are intimately tied to rivers since birth. We live by the river. We spend most of our childhood time by the river. In Baisakh [month], new water would actually come into the river. The river would be filled with water on all sides. We would swim in the river, fish, and play. Then as I grew up, I witnessed how the river was slowly destroyed in front of us.



Activities on the Buriganga River: boatman taking a bath (left), Manik and his children going on a boat ride (center), ghat where boats await passengers (right)

River as a Way of Life

▶ 01:50 🔴



এই নদীকে কেন্দ্র করে অনেক জেলে পরিবার সারা বছরই মাছ ধরতো। কিন্তু এখনতো মাছ বর্ষার মধ্যে কিছু পাওয়া যায়, আর শীতের সিসনেতো পানি একদম নোংরা হয়ে যায়, মাছ পাওয়া যায় না। অনেক জেলে পরিবার জেলে পেশা ছেড়ে অন্য পেশায় চলে যাচ্ছে। নৌকার মাঝিরা, অনেক মাঝি ছিল।

Many families used to fish on this river throughout the year. But now only some fish can be found during borsha [season], and during the winter season the water becomes very dirty, no fish can be found. Many fisherfolk families are leaving the profession and moving to other jobs. There were many boatmen. There were many famous boatmen families - these

▶ 00:40 🔴



স্মৃতিতে অনেকই আছে।
 নদী নিয়া স্মৃতি তো
 অনেক। অসংখ্য স্মৃতি
 আছে। আমরা এই বর্ষাশী
 দিনে নৌকা নিয়ে
 বেরোতাম। আমাদের
 বাড়ির পাশে একটা বিল
 আছে। যেটা আসলামুল
 হক ভরাট করে আরিশা
 ইকোনোমিক জোন তৈরি

There are many
 memories, there are
 many memories about
 the river. We used to go
 out with boats on
 borsha [season] days.
 There is a beel [lake-like
 wetland] next to our
 house. Aslamul Huq
 filled that beel and



Arisha Economic Zone: 2010 (before) & 2023 (now) [Source: Google Earth]

Encroachment & Displacement



Eviction by Demarcation Pillar

Photo: building demolished during BIWTA eviction drive

▶ 01:55 ○



মানিক: ২০১৮ সালের আগে আমি শুনেছি - শরীফ জামিল ভাইয়ের মুখে শুনেছি - যে নদীতে সীমানা পিলার বসানো হবে এবং সুন্দর্য বর্ধনের জন্য ওয়াকওয়ে তৈরি করা হবে। তখন তাদের দাবী ছিল যে নদীর জাগা নদীকে ফেরত দিয়ে নদীর সীমানা, নদীর ফরশোর, নদীর কুল, এগুলার সীমানা ডিমারকেশন করে

Manik: Before 2018, I heard from Sharif Jamil bhai that boundary pillars will be installed in the river and walkways will be made for beautification. At that time, the [environmentalists] demanded that the encroached land should be returned to the river, and the river's foreshore, banks, and their boundaries should be demarcated. But in reality we saw that without looking at

[Image Courtesy: RDRC]



Demarcation Pillars

The demarcation pillars have a trapezoidal base with cylindrical pole extending up. A bright orange line wraps around the top of the base and the pole. This pillar has a demarcation sign put up by BIWTA (Bangladesh Inland Water and Transport Authority).

[Image Courtesy: RDRC]



Bosila Government Primary School

Photo: view from bridge of the Bosila Government Primary School to the left. Notice the two demarcation pillars and imagine all that existed beyond the line they marked on the land.



মানিক: এবং আমাদের একটা স্কুল আছে বসিলাতে। বসিলা পুরাতন সরকারি প্রাথমিক বিদ্যালয়। এটা আপনার স্থাপিত হয়েছে ১৯৩২ শনে ব্রিটিশ আমলে। আমাদের স্কুলে জমি আছে আপনার স্কুল ভবন থেকে পশ্চিম দিকে ৫৫ ফিট। বর্তমান সিটি জরিপে পর্যন্ত জরিপ করা আছে। যখন তারা সীমানা

Manik: We have a school in Bosila. Bosila Old Government Primary School. It was established in 1932 during British rule. The school has 55 feet of land westward from the school building. Even the present day city survey recognizes this. When they put the boundary pillars, they put the boundary pillars against the wall of our school. That is, they put 55 feet of land

[Image Source: Google Maps]



Unregulated Indiscriminate Land Snatching & River Filling

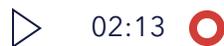
Photo: Manik standing on the site of 100 year-old watchtower that was demolished by BIWTA. Notice the top of a demarcation pillar behind the tractor.



কিন্তু যারা জলাভূমি, নদী,
খালবিল ভরাট কইরা হাউসিং
তৈরি করলো তাদের
কাউকেই এরেস্ট করা হয়
নাই। এই এলাকাভিত্তিক যে
হাউসিং আসে – আপনার
ধরেন ২০০ পাখি, ৪০০
পাখি, ৫০০ পাখি – এরকম
বিঘা নিয়ে তারা হাউসিং
তৈরি করতেসে। মানে
জমিগুলা অন্যের, তারা বালি
ভরাট করতেসে। তার ভিতরে
সরকারী খাল-বিল নদী, খাস
জমি অনেক আছে। সব

But those who, on the
contrary, filled up the
wetlands, rivers, canals
and built their housing,
have not been arrested.
The housing projects in
this area are taking many
bighas,* like 200, 400,
500 pakhi.* The land
belongs to others, but
they fill the area with
sand. Khas [government]
land, canals, and rivers
are in there too. All of it

[Image Courtesy: RDRC]



মানিক: যারা ভূমি দস্যু, নদী দখল করছে, যেমন আমিন মমিন বসিলায় একটা বিশাল নদী দখল কইরা রাখসিল, তখন পুরোটাই আমি সহযোগিতা করেছি। তারা কিভাবে দখল করলো, কতটুকু দখল করলো। ফারজানারে আইনা আমি দেখাইসি, ফারজানা রিপোর্ট করছে। রিপোর্ট করার পর থেকেই ওখানে আপনার তদন্ত

Manik: I organized and supported actions against land grabbers like Amin Momin who grabbed a huge river in Bosila. I brought Farzana [journalist] and showed her how Amin Momin occupied the river, and how much they occupied. After the report, there was an investigation and it was proven that they did occupy a river. They

Police Harassment & the State

State Intentions vs. Results

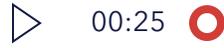
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সরকারতো অনেক আন্তরিক নদীকে বাঁচানোর জন্য। সরকার চেষ্টা করতেসে। কিন্তু ভুল সিদ্ধান্তের কারণে - যারা সরজমিনে

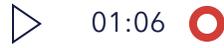
The government is very sincere about saving the river. The government is trying. But because of the wrong decisions of those [officials] who decide on the

Police Harassment & Slander



দুবার আমাকে পুলিশ
এরেস্ট করে নিয়েছে।
এক বসর আগেও নিসে।
তখন পুলিশকে বলা হলো
কেন ধরসেন? তখন

The police arrested me
twice. Even as recently as
a year ago. We asked
them why they arrested
me. The police said, “you



ইফাদ: কিন্তু কোন লিখিত
কমপ্লেইন নাই?

Efad: But there was no
written complaint?

মানিক: না।

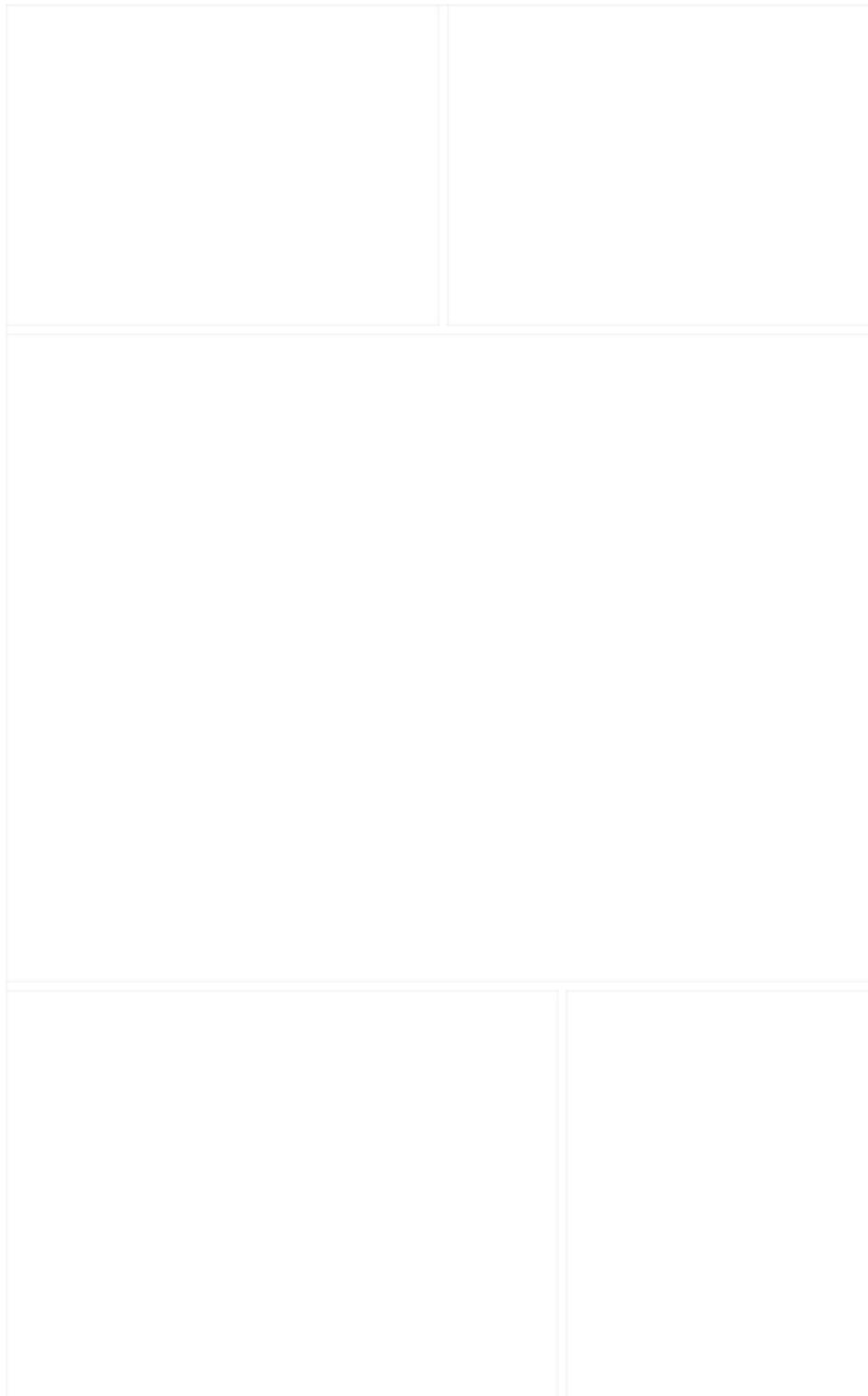
Manik: No.

ইফাদ: এবং দুইবার কি
এটা পর পর? কয়দিন পর
পর এটা হইসে?

Efad: And was it twice in
a row? How many days
between them [the
arrests]?

মানিক: একবার এই যে
আপনের ডিসেম্বরের ২
তারিকে, ২০২১-এ। আর
এর আগে দেব বসর আগে
নিসে একবার। এরাতে
হঠাৎ কইরা আসলো। আমি
বইসা রইসি। ধইরা আমারে
বকাঝকা করলো। সিভিলে
ছিল তারা। তখন আমিও

Manik: It happened just
last December the 2nd.
In 2021. And before that,
a year and a half ago.
Some people
approached suddenly. I
was in Bosila. They
started scolding me.



Manik's community of Bosila. *From top left to bottom right:* Manik and his family; Manik and a neighbor at the demolished watchtower site; demarcation pillars and markings put up by BITWA; government demarcation pillar constructed in the river; house in the community that is as old as the demolished watchtower (over 100 years old).

From the News Archives



Aslam's controversial power plant

Daily Sun [2017]

"A power plant owned by Aslamul Haque MP at Bosila in the city's Mohammadpur area has sparked controversies as it is alleged that the ruling party MP grabbed the land of general people in the name of building power plant."

[Read the news article here](#)



River commission becomes 'enemy' for exposing encroachment

Prothom Alo [2020]

"The river areas cannot belong to anyone. Even if a government institution had handed him these areas, they have no authority to do so."

[Read the news article here](#)



Shipping ministry urges caution when buying riverside flats in Dhaka

Dhaka Tribune [2019]

"During eviction drives, it has been observed that many private housing societies allotted plots or flats to leases after grabbing land by rivers."

[Read the news article here](#)

About the Project

“Pillars of Displacement” StoryMap is part of **Mapping Delta Defenders** project, an engaged research and educational initiative dedicated to co-creating narratives of struggles for social-ecological justice in the eastern Bengal Delta (presently Bangladesh). Our goal is to document, narrate, and share activist and organizing stories in collaboration with communities. We are organizers, researchers, students, and volunteers who map voices and places that are often sidelined in contemporary portraits of urbanization and development trajectory of Bangladesh.

Mapping Delta Defenders was conceived and initiated by Efadul Huq, faculty of Environmental Science & Policy at Smith College, and Mohammad Azaz, chairman of River & Delta Research Center (RDRC), Bangladesh.

Student Researchers & Volunteer

Erica Li (2022-2024): Undergraduate student researcher, Environmental Policy & Science major at Smith College. Li is passionate about environmental justice and community resilience.

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Title Art Work Statement

In this title artwork, the river Buriganga weaves through a patchwork of river life, fishing with a suspended net and a boat. These details are only revealed upon a closer look. Amongst it all is a demarcation pillar from Hossain’s neighborhood in grayscale, sat in the crook of the river. After a year spent compiling this story, I created this title artwork as the final component. Through cutouts from photos and the general outline of the river from GIS mapping, I hoped to let the imagery tell their own stories. This artwork is my

collage of these stories, a visual reflection of these pillars of displacement. ~ Erica Li

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