

# Where getting drinkable water is an everyday struggle

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Women from the Vamia village waiting to collect their household drinking water from the nearest PSF.

Scarcity of fresh groundwater is causing misery for the local people in the Sundarbans area

Safe drinking water crisis in the south-western coastal area of Bangladesh, especially in the Sundarbans region has become a constant problem due to the groundwater salinity. Besides, the freshwater aquifers in this area are not available at reasonable depths and the surface water is profoundly saline and turbid (Islam et al, 2014). Arsenic and saline contamination make troubles for providing consumable water to the underprivileged individuals of the country. The destitute and poor individuals cannot bear the cost burden of water innovations due to the financial crisis.

Over the years, shrimp and crab farming has gradually increased the salinity of the area. In the aftermath of cyclone Aila in 2009 as the coastal areas were damaged by the storm surge, a vast area in that region was inundated with saltwater and remained water-logged; affecting both surface and groundwater levels in the area. That is why the locals have to rely heavily on rainwater harvesting, pond sand filters (PSF), deep tube-wells, and pond water for drinking purposes. However, due to the less rainfall and the fact that the pond sand filters are far away from the area, every family has to struggle to store that potable water every day.

As a part of the TAPESTRY project, we had to travel to Shyamnagar, an area near the Sundarbans. We have found that potable water is a scarce resource in Sundarbans as the rivers and shallow groundwater are saline and fresh groundwater is not easily accessible, causing daily misery for the local people.

We visited some villages of Shyamnagar and got to know that they have to collect potable water and preserve them through lots of hardship. As fresh groundwater is not accessible everywhere, the whole village depends on a short number of tube wells. Besides, there are PSF in several villages of Shyamnagar. People from 2 to 3 villages collect water from a single PSF.

So, people, especially women have to go a long way to collect water. Most of them travel at least a kilometre on foot to fetch water. Sometimes they have to pay for it. For example, people

from Purbo Jelekhali village in Shyamnagar collect water from a PSF (constructed by the Red Crescent) for Tk100 a month.

*"In the aftermath of cyclone Aila in 2009 as the coastal areas were damaged by the storm surge, a vast area in that region was inundated with saltwater and remained water-logged"*

In some houses, the villagers have been collecting rainwater in large earthen pots for a year. Many also have proper rainwater harvesting systems. However, due to lack of money, many people cannot afford to buy large pots or tanks to collect rainwater for year-round use. Nevertheless, they have received training from various NGOs on how to collect and preserve rainwater to use it throughout the year.

Many are now digging ponds and canals to collect rainwater, which they use for drinking, cooking, agriculture and other daily activities. They were dealing with salinity in this way and were moving towards a better life. But the environmental and social disaster has thwarted their efforts and success once again. They are not able to collect enough rainwater as the rains are not regular due to climate change.

Also, due to the increase in the amount of cyclones in the area the river bank is not strong enough, the area is often inundated by saline water; affecting all the freshwater bodies. Last year, cyclone Amphan and coronavirus attacked together, causing them the worst sufferings. They had to collect water from a distant PSF as their stored rainwater became saline.

*"One can survive without rice but not even a day without water," said one woman from Vamia village of Shyamnagar*

But due to the lockdown situation, the police would take issue whenever they came out and would fine them money. Moreover, when the people of one village went to fetch water from another village, the people of that village did not want to let them enter the village for fear of Covid-19. So, they secretly went far away to collect water.

*"One can survive without rice but not even a day without water," said one woman from Vamia village of Shyamnagar. "Even though we have plenty of water around here, everything seems to be poison to us. Drinking this water regularly is sure to cause illness and death. We have a serious shortage of drinking water," said another woman from Datinakhali.*

Getting fresh water to the residents of Shyamnagar is a big challenge. As they do not know when or how their suffering will end, they are hoping that the government and/or NGOs will help them get portable water facilities.

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