Between Uncertainty and Hope: Disaster, Displacement, and Livelihoods on Onishchit *Char* in Bangladesh

Mohammad Altaf Hossain

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Head of the Department: Dr. Abdullahi El-Tom

Supervisor of the Research: Dr. Chandana Mathur

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Abstract

There has been growing literature in disaster studies, which has argued that natural disasters exacerbate people's current socio-economic vulnerabilities. However, a question remains: what are the specific stories that can be told about people's different perceptions of disasters and the dynamics of their creative actions to face the uncertain consequences of the disasters? This study applied the multi-sited ethnographic method to understand people's perceptions and everyday experiences regarding disaster-induced displacement and livelihood strategies. For this study, the sites include a temporary river island (*char*), an embankment populated with islanders in Gaibandha district, and a shantytown and two rickshaw garages in Dhaka. An important aspect of this study has been to examine how disaster-induced vulnerabilities are linked with social structures. For example, land disputes, land grabbing, and corruption in regard to these issues are lived through the practices of multiple actors, such as peasants, landlords, and functionaries in the land administration.

People exercise their agency in making their living in multiple ways including growing crops, raising cattle, participating in development projects, and moving to different places in search of a "better" life. They practise their agency without losing sight of the consequences of the extreme events and the social constraints in which they have been living over the generations. They make some practical choices in order to survive. For the poorer households, the choices they make are narrow, and to a certain extent the choices are humiliating, whereas the richer households calculate the hazard risks and stay on the islands in order to raise cattle and cultivate corn. Living with precariousness, both poor and rich still hope to see new land. This study argues that portraying the islanders simply as "vulnerable" disregards the differences among them and disregards their everyday adaptive capacities in the context of the hazards they face.

Although this study shows that disasters create precarious livelihoods and habitation for the islanders, it does not mean that the catastrophes are solely responsible for their vulnerability, which was already created by the socio-economic structure. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of the island villages are not just suffering subjects, vulnerable victims and passive aid receivers. They practise their agency, albeit *limited*, to

utilise their limited resources (land, livestock, and social capital) in order to survive in such a fragile but fertile environment.

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Glossary of Acronyms and Non-Bengali Terms

AAA	American Anthropological Association
adi or *barga*	share-cropping
adhunik prajukti	modern technology
ail	narrow land boundary between agricultural plots of land
Allah	the God in Islam
Allah jaane	only Allah knows, or we have no ideas
amin	government or self-trained land surveyor
apa	sister or madam
auto	auto-rickshaws which are powered by rechargeable batteries, locally called *auto*
Baishakh	the first month of Bangla Calendar that starts at mid-April and ends at mid-May
bangal	people living on the mainland or less vulnerable place
banna	flood
bap-dada	parents-grandparents
bap-dadar shompotti	inherited land property
bargadar	share-cropper
bari	home or house
borsha	shallow flood
BDO	Business Development Officer
beadop	those who behave inappropriately
bepari	trader
bedesh	abroad

bedeshi	foreigner
bigha	a unit of land measurement, 3 bigha equals to an acre, so a bigha is one third of an acre
bir	stable land or mainland
biri	handmade cigarette
bok	osprey
boro-sir	high-ranking officers in government administrations or teachers in college or university
boro banna	long staying flood
boro bepari	big trader or buyer
BWDB	Bangladesh Water Development Board
CBC	Chars Business Committee/Centre
char or balu char	uncertain river islands formed from sedimentation
chatal	rice mill
chotolok	uncultured; lower class
choto banna	short-term or small flood
chula	handmade cooking stove, which is made of clay
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CLP	Chars Livelihoods Programme
dakhkhin	South
dalal	middleman; broker
dam-dhara	sharing livestock or collective ownership on domestic animals
dapot	domination
DC	Deputy Commissioner
deshi	local
deuan	community leader or spokesperson or headman, the same as

	matbar
DFID	Department for International Development
dhanchiya	sort of long and thin plants, which is usually used as firewood in rural areas
dharma	characteristic; religion
din-majur	day labourer
duniar khela	inevitable fortune
Durga Puja	one of the biggest Hindu festivals
durgati	wretchedness
durjog jhuki	hazard risks
durjog	hazards or disasters
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Office
etihas	history
fapor	indecision
GBM	the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna
GCCTF	Global Climate Change Task Force
gerostho	relatively wealthy farmer
ghar	house; room
ghar-vangon	displacement
ghat	boat terminal
ghorer dud	milk from family's cattle
goala	milkman
gobeshok	researcher
goru-bachur	cows and calves
GUK	*Gana Unnayan Kendra* or a community led development organisation

gur	jaggery
gusthi	lineage
hal khata	new account
hok	legal rights
IDS	Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University, England
ijaradar	lessee
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
jajabar jibon	nomad life
jamir dalil	land document
janashona	social network
jhamela	trouble
jiban	life
jiban-jibika	lives and livelihood
jibika	livelihood
jolbaiu paribartan	climate change
joma	rent
joreep	survey
jotedar	wealthy farmer
jua	gambling
jubok	young men
kal basishakhi jhor	violent thunderstorm or nor'wester
kalo	black
kam-kaj	employment
kamla	day or wage labourer
kashia	wild grasses, which is naturally grown at the bank of rivers or in dry sandy land

kayem	stable land or mainland
khajna	revenue
khala	maternal aunt
khamatar jal	web of power network
khari	firewood, such as dried leaves and branches
khas jomi	state-owned land
khichuri	a nutritious food item cooked with rice and various types of lentils with different spices
kisti	instalment
kot-kachari	receiving services of police and judiciary administration
krishok	peasant
kukur	dog
kuligiri	carrying loads, usually on head, from one place to another
lakh	one hundred thousand (100,000)
latapata	green leaves
lungi	traditional long garment for men for lower part
mafiz	poor or unsophisticated people
mal	product
mancha	a higher platform, which is made of wood or bamboo, in rural house for keeping utensils, cooked food, crops and piles of firewood safe
manush	literally it means human being; take care of children
mashjid	mosque
matbar	community leader, headman or spokesperson
mauza	plot or block
monga	seasonal food insecurity

motataja	fatty
mukto batas	fresh air
mula	radish, also the term is informally used for referring to false promise
murubbi	elderly person
nabanna	new crops
nadimatrik	land or rivers
nadi-vangon	riverbank erosion
NARRI	National Alliance for Response and Risk Reduction Initiative
onishchit	uncertain or temporary
ostad	who teaches how to drive vehicle
ovab	poverty
owaz	Islamic sermon
paan	betel leaf
paikar	big trader
parishad	council
pashchim par	the area around Balashi *ghat* or boat terminal
photowala	photographer
poli mati	black sediment which is quite fertile compare to other kind of soils
provabshali	influential people
puccar matha	the end of Balashi road at the Balashi *ghat* or boat terminal
punji	capital
purush	male
Rangpuria	distorted form of Rangpur, a division of the northern Bangladesh
rickshaw-wala	rickshaw-driver or rickshaw-puller
RMG	Ready-Made Garments

rongdhonu	rainbow
roti	flat round bread
sada bhat	boiled rice
samaj	society
sarbanasha	disaster
sardar	foreman
shalis	customary court in village level to resolve conflicts
shangram	struggle
SKS	*Samaj Kallayan Shangshta* or Organisation for Social Welfare
SLF	Sustainable Livelihoods Framework
SMC	School Management Committee
sona	gold
sudaru	traditional moneylender
supari	betel nut
taja khabar	fresh food
taja mach	fresh fish
thakur	priest
thok	sneaky person
ujan	upstream of river
UNFCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
unnayan	development
unnayan karmi	development activist; development worker; development volunteer
UP	Union *Parishad* or Union Council, a body of local government
uthan baithak	open-yard community meeting
uttar	north

uttar banga	northern Bangladesh
vai	brother
valo-valo kotha	good words
valo samparka	good relationships; good connections
vati	downstream of river
vatia or *choura*	islanders or the people who live in island villages or *char*
vindeshi	outsider; foreigner
VSLG	Village Savings Loan Group
VTC	Vocational Training Centre
WAPDA	Water and Power Development Authority
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Program
Zamindars	landlords or landed aristocracy formed under the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 in the British colonial period in the Indian subcontinent, they owned a large land with full proprietary rights and used to collect revenue from the peasants

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background and Research Problem

This study, like most research studies, begins with a story, to which the context of the research belongs. This study takes place during the flooding season, in 2015, on a temporary river island called *Onishchit* (pseudonym), the primary site of this study. The Bangla word, *onishchit*, means uncertain or temporary, denoting the uncertain or temporary nature of the river islands in Bangladesh. Momen, the head of my host household, his three young sons, and I were eating a meal and talking about the adversities triggered by annual flooding and riverbank erosion. Momen suspected that the Brahmaputra river would inundate the island, where he had been residing for five years. Before going to bed, we noted that the river water had just breached a cornfield located a few yards away from Momen's house. Babul, the youngest son of Momen, and I shared a tin-shed hut and, in the middle of the night, we heard the sound of flowing river water in the room. Babul was looking for his torchlight, while I was looking for my mobile to turn on the flashlight to see what was going on. When we both powered on our lights, we found that the floodwater had entered the room, with the bed's legs a few inches deep in the water. As I was looking for my slippers, eventually finding them floating in the water, I remember thinking that this was my first experience of seeing a flood so closely.

Although I worriedly looked at the floodwater in the room, my hosts were not worried about the situation, as it was not a new event for them. Babul was laughing, seeing my nervousness, and he suggested me not to panic, saying: "It is very normal on *chars* [river islands]". Once, they stayed day and night on their bed for weeks during the flood, whereupon his mother transferred a *chula* (handmade clay cook stove) from the kitchen to the bedroom. "We had to protect the stove from the floodwater. My mother kept the stove just next to her

pillow," Babul added. In the present, Babul's father had now called for him to assist in moving their cattle to a higher place near the house.

The female members of the family (Momen's wife and his daughter-in-law) were tying up the firewood (dry leaves, corn plants, and branches) and keeping those on a higher structure in the kitchen to protect them from the floodwater. They started making breakfast in the kitchen, with the floodwater touching their ankles. The elder son went out to borrow a boat from their neighbours, which he eventually managed, and went out to open his grocery shop in the next neighbourhood. Momen, his two sons, his little granddaughters and I were watching a man catch fish just behind Momen's house, where the level of the water was just up to the neck of the fisherman. The fisherman was making jokes about how the fish were playing with him. It seemed as if we were watching a live comedy show because he made the neighbours laugh. In the meantime, one of Momen's neighbours jumped into the water to rescue some bundles of grass that were piled behind his house. Momen called to the fisherman to show us what fish he had caught. Babul asked me if I wanted some pictures of the fisherman, as he was aware I was staying in the island village for study purposes. The fisherman made me comfortable by saying, "Brother, take as many pictures as you want. Let the world know how we *shangram* [struggle] with floods." We saw two little boys were passing the fisherman, riding on a raft made of banana trees. Babul asked them where they were heading. The boys replied that their parents had sent them to see if the flood had damaged their uncle's house.

The fisherman asked Momen whether they would move to somewhere else or not. Momen and his sons wanted to wait a few more days to see what level the floodwater would rise to, as Momen presumed that the floodwater would decline quickly. He suggested his middle son buy a boat as soon as possible for their daily use. As the first serious precaution, he advised his elder son to reserve a boat to take his wife and little daughters to his father-in-law's house on the mainland.

Momen, in his early sixties, had been island to island his whole life and did not want to leave the island permanently. He stated: "My land is like a son to me, I bought the land with my whole-life-savings. I do not want to leave the char." He thinks he could not adjust to the lifestyle on the mainland. He wants to live in the island communities, where he feels

comfortable. Although he prefers to stay in the island village, he has given liberty to his sons to move to the mainland to escape the floods permanently. He added, "I spent my whole life on the chars. My parents spent their lives on the chars. My mind does not want to leave the *bap-dadar shompotti* [inherited land]. I depend on Allah. He will surely save us."

The case of Momen's household is one of many in the char villages. The char people have been living through uncertainties triggered by annual floods and continual riverbank erosion. Knowing such uncertainties, many households still live within char villages. The majority of them are poor and landless. Regardless of their socio-economic positions, they find the char environment a source of ample opportunities of land-based livelihoods and temporary accommodation. Questions, however, remain: Do these people consider the chars hazardous? Do they want to leave the chars permanently? There are no straightforward answers to these questions for char dwellers. They live between uncertainty and hope in the char environment. In this context, a strict dichotomy between land and water cannot be drawn, as the same char remains either under water (during the flood season) or used as agricultural land (during the dry season) in the same year (Lahiri-Dutt & Samanta, 2013). Similarly, a dichotomy between vulnerability and invulnerability cannot be drawn either for the char dwellers, as the char environment gives them destructive floods on the one hand, and fertile land in the dry season on the other hand, in the same year.

This feature of char inhabitants' lives has implications for the concepts and literatures that have been used in this thesis. If flooding happens every year, can we regard it as a disaster, and is it useful to examine such hazard-prone areas using the writings on disaster studies? Against that, it is important to remember that though floods do come every year, their intensity can never be predicted. Moreover, in the era of climate change, this unpredictability is on the rise. The inhabitants of Onishchit island are frequently and unpredictably exposed to extreme events such as flooding, riverbank erosion, cyclones, storm surges, tsunami, and so on. Such extreme events affect every aspect of their existence. It is therefore necessary to consult the considerable amount of literature that has been published on vulnerability to natural hazards (e.g., Wisner et al., 2004; Oliver-Smith, 2009). These authors argue that people's vulnerability is not only created by hazardous events, but also triggered by "social, economic and political processes that influence how hazards affect

people in varying ways with differing intensities" (Wisner et al., 2004, p. 7). However, the question still remains: is that all, or are there more stories to tell about people's different perceptions of hazards or disasters and the dynamics of their creative actions in facing uncertain consequences from such disasters?

Anthropologist William Torry (1979, p. 527) writes, "Disaster vulnerability is ingrained in routine events." The "routine events" can be translated into the everyday cultural behaviour of human beings in a given society. This study hypothesises that inhabitants of the island village are not simply vulnerable, powerless, and passive victims. Instead, they can practise their agency, as an actor (an individual or group of individuals) capable of making choices. Take Momen's household as an example: he was living in a hazardous place, knowing that he and his family members, homestead, agricultural land, and cattle were at risk. He had applied his previous experiences to predict the intensities of disasters and had distributed responsibilities among his sons to face the potential flood. In the case of Momen's household, the actors (Momen, his wife, sons and daughter-in-law) were showing their agency in the immediate situation – by not being nervous, moving cattle toward the higher place, hiring or buying a boat, keeping firewood safe, and taking children and women to a safe place on the mainland. Like Momen's household, many households have adopted multiple strategies to reduce disaster vulnerability. The longer-term strategies include earnings from multiple sources, participating in development projects, and in-migration. Existing disaster vulnerability studies are mainly informed by political economy analysis, attributing the root causes of vulnerability to social, economic, and political arrangements of a given community (e.g., O'Brien, 1985; Oliver-Smith, 2009; Pelling, 2001; Susman et al., 1983; Watts, 2013; Wisner, 2003; Wisner et al., 2004). It would enrich and extend that work to ethnographically focus on people's agency in the context of disaster vulnerability, as my study aims to do.

Many people assume that, in finding no "better" options, landless and poor people are forced to settle on these uncertain river islands temporarily. The sustainability of these islands is uncertain or temporary because the river "erodes the islands in one direction and form the islands in other," a common saying on the islands. The islanders also use another common saying— "We are king today, beggar tomorrow"—to describe the rapid changes of their

socio-economic conditions due to disasters. The islanders hope that new islands will re-emerge, places where they can re-settle. Therefore, they live in two moments: *uncertainty* and *hope*.

1.2 Local Effects of Global Climate Change

Many people live in climate-sensitive areas. For the inhabitants of those places, "climate change is not something that may happen in the near future but is an immediate lived reality that they struggle to apprehend, negotiate and respond to" (Crate & Nuttall, 2009, p. 9). Recent anthropological works on climate change show how it is one of the primary forces that changes local ecologies and cultures (Crate & Nuttall, 2016).

The concept of climate is not a new phenomenon to be studied in anthropology; it has been immanent in ethnographic accounts since the early days of the discipline (Hastrup, 2016). Many anthropologists in the twentieth century—for example, Malinowski (1922), Evans-Pritchard (1940), and Richards (2004 [1932])—described the relations between climate (or environment) and subsistence economy; hunting and gathering, fishing, herding, and agriculture (Dove, 2014). In fact, Margaret Mead (1977) was the first anthropologist to talk about climate change. In 1975, Mead convened a conference with William Kellogg to consider the fate of "the ultimate international commons", namely, the atmosphere (Fiske et al., 2014, p. 14); the conference focused on dust, smoke, smog, and other forms of particulate pollution, all of which were burning issues at the time.

It is widely accepted that contemporary climate change is real and primarily human-driven (Crate & Nuttall, 2009). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines climate change as "any change in climate over time, whether due to natural variability or as a result of human activity" (IPCC, 2007, p. 6). The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) (UN, 1992, p. 7) writes: "Climate change means a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods." The AAA's Global Climate Change Task Force highlights that political, sociocultural, and economic processes and forces are directly and

indirectly driving climate change; the key drivers include, for example, expanding consumer culture, land use, sources of energy and population growth (Fiske et al., 2014, p. 24).

The recent anthropological focus on transnationalism, globalisation, and neoliberalism has addressed many more drivers, like migration and remittances, the growth of megacities, the construction of dams, roads, other capital-intensive infrastructure, and energy projects, which are linked to the key drivers (Fiske et al., 2014). Chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer popularised the term "Anthropocene" to argue that human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Steffen, Crutzen & McNeill (2017, p. 12) explain further the idea of the Anthropocene:

> [T]he Earth has now left its natural geological epoch, the present interglacial state called the Holocene. Human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary terra incognita. The Earth is rapidly moving into a less biologically diverse, less forested, much warmer, and probably wetter and stormier state.

Crate (2008, p. 569) argues that "anthropologists are strategically well placed" to interpret the interrelation between climate change and culture. There have always been extreme events, and "there is already a wealth of anthropological knowledge on how people deal with these disruptions to their lives" (Milton, 2008, p. 57). Crate and Nuttall (2016) note that anthropologists nowadays consider global climate change to be a most persistent human problem, and they have been making scholarly observations on associated spheres of human activity; for example, the vulnerability and resilience of the community (e.g., Hastrup, 2016), the political ecology of disasters, hazards, and population displacement (e.g., Oliver-Smith, 2009), and the social construction of climate change and climate change knowledge, in terms of decision making, politics, and power (e.g., Pettenger, 2016).

Crate's (2008, p. 570) account of the rural Viliui Sakha of north-eastern Siberia shows how local people perceive and experience changes in the winter season, which is the most challenging season for them. They personify winter in the form of a white bull with blue spots, huge horns and frosty breath. The bull of winter is a legendary Sakha creature whose presence explains the turning from the frigid winter to the warming spring. The legend tells that the bull of winter, who keeps the cold in winter, loses his first horn at the end of January

as the cold begins to let go and transition towards warmth. Then, his second horn melts off at the end of February. Finally, by the end of March, he loses his head, as spring has now arrived. It seems that perhaps now the bull of winter will no longer be, due to global warming.

Crate and Nuttall (2009; 2016), like other social scientists, argue that climate change threats are the result of both local and global processes: "On a temporal scale, the effects of climate change are the indirect costs of imperialism and colonization—the "non-point" fall-out for people who have been largely ignored" (Crate & Nuttall, 2009, p. 11). Scholars argue that, in most cases, groups vulnerable to climate change make less of a contribution to creating the effects, but they still are forced to go through unprecedented changes (Crate & Nuttall, 2009). It is estimated that global warming may increase or decrease rainfall in some areas and increase the melting of glaciers in the Himalayas. As a result, the timing and duration of flooding are changed. Thus, while some places would be inundated, other places would experience drought.

The ethnographic method provides a ready-made toolkit to understand the perceptions and behaviours of people living in climate-sensitive areas. Of course, cultural behaviours include indigenous knowledge of climate change and local or hybrid ways of adaptation and resilience to global climate change. It is noticeable that climate application research has moved from a "technology-adoption" paradigm to a broader perspective on vulnerability and adaptation (Roncoli, 2006).

Crate (2011) notes that contemporary culture and climate studies can be categorised into two areas: place-based community research and global negotiation and discourses. The former is focused on how place-based people observe, perceive, and respond to the local effects of global climate change (e.g., McDonald et al., 1997; Krupnik & Jolly, 2002), while the latter focuses on advocating that global climate change is a human right and human security issue (e.g., Wisner et al., 2007; Crate, 2008a; Checker, 2009). Krupnik and Jolly (2002) show that Arctic residents witness far-reaching changes in their environment and that they are ready to create partnerships with scientists, to document their observations and to make their voices heard. In the old days, local people could predict the weather by observing the stars, the sky, and other events. Elderly people could once predict weather patterns for a few days in advance also, but not anymore. They find that the "Earth is faster now," and their

predictions do not work anymore (Krupnik & Jolly, 2002, p. 7). Roncoli et al. (2009, p. 88) stress understanding climate change through ethnographic work, considering:

> how people perceive climate change through cultural lenses ('perception'); how people comprehend what they see based on their mental models and social locations ('knowledge'); how they give value to what they know in terms of shared meanings ('valuation'); and how they respond, individually and collectively, on the basis of these meanings and values ('response').

Crate (2011, p. 185) calls for "climate ethnography," which refers to "the development of a new multi-sited, critical collaborative ethnography" that explains people's "perceptions, understandings, and response by both modifying resilience/adaption frames and further developing cultural models." Climate ethnography can, arguably, depict local-global connections with respect to climate change; therefore, the approach can be described as an "ethnography of the world" (Crate, 2011, p. 185). Thus, Crate (2008; 2011) calls on climate anthropologists to highlight the perceptions and interpretations of climate change on the part of local people, those who face the local effects of global climate change.

Scholars argue that human activity or agency is responsible for global climate change. Hassan (2009, p. 39) argues that the consequence of any climate-driven event "depends on the local ecological setting and the organisational complexity, scale, ideology, technology, and social values of the local population." In the 1990's and onwards, a new question appeared: how do human beings adapt to extreme environmental changes or disasters that leave such human beings and their environments vulnerable? Crumley (1994, p. 240) reminds us: "Throughout their history, human populations have both affected and been affected by environmental changes." Thus, in the event of changes or disasters, humans attempt to mitigate the effects of adversity. Consequently, mitigation practices improve the resilience of societies in the face of catastrophes (Oliver-Smith, 2016). As such, there is a consensus in anthropology that people have intimate knowledge of their environments that allow them to employ available resources in order to survive and adapt to environmental changes (Oliver-Smith, 2016).

1.3 Climate Change in Bangladesh

In 2015, the United Nations conference on climate change agreed to keep the rise in temperatures below 2°C, as "climate change is a common concern of humankind." A significant amount of research has shown that climate change is one of the great threats to nature and humankind in the future. Climate scholars have documented the ten hottest years since the last decade of the twentieth century (Adger & Kelly, 1999), with the warning that climate change will exacerbate hazard-induced risks (IPCC, 2007; 2014). Scientists also estimate that rising temperatures result in frequent rainfall and disasters, such as floods, droughts, storm surges, and riverbank erosion. By the 2080s, millions of people will likely face flooding every year due to the sea level rising, with people living in low-lying areas being particularly vulnerable (IPCC, 2007).

Every part of the world faces effects from climate change, but low and middle-income countries, such as Bangladesh, could experience more severe damage. Bangladesh has appeared as a poster child for global climate change (Finan & Rahman, 2016). As a low-level deltaic country, Bangladesh has been vulnerable to global climate change and associated hazards, such as cyclones, drought, flooding, cold spells, and riverbank erosion.

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world; the area of the country is 56,977 sq. miles or 147,570 sq. km., a little larger than the State of New York. According to a report on the population census of 2011 conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the population of the country is about 150 million. The United Nations (UN) estimates the current population of Bangladesh to be more than 165 million, as of April 2018, which is 2.18% of the total world population. Bangladesh shares borders with the Indian States: West Bengal on the west, Assam and Meghalaya on the north, and Tripura and Mizoram on the east, while the southern and south-eastern parts of the country are attached to the Bay of Bengal. On the south-eastern side, the country shares sea borders with Myanmar, and the country is situated in the combined delta of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GMB) river system. These rivers originate in the Himalayas, the highest mountain range in the world. From the Himalayas, the Ganges (the Padma in Bangladesh) and the Brahmaputra (the Jamuna in Bangladesh) flow across India and enter western and northern Bangladesh, respectively; these rivers then empty their waters into the Bay of Bengal. There

are many rivers, which have 230 tributaries; these rivers deposit heavy silt during the rainy season (BBS, 2017). This geographical condition has greatly shaped Bangladesh's environment and rural economy over the millennia (Schendel, 2009).

The fourth release of Maplecroft's Climate Change and Environment Risk Atlas includes a new Climate Change Vulnerability Index (CCVI), which analyses the climate change vulnerability and adaptation capacities of 193 countries. The CCVI rates 30 countries at "extreme risk," and Bangladesh ranks second, followed by Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Madagascar, and other nations. Kreft et al. (2015) have rated Bangladesh to be sixth in the ten most affected countries for nearly twenty years (from 1995 to 2014). According to Maplecroft, those countries with a high level of poverty and population density face climatic disasters, with the poorest people most exposed to the effects of climate change and least able to adapt to the impact.

The World Bank's (2010) climate change report states that 154 cyclones, including 43 severe storms and 68 tropical depressions, struck Bangladesh between 1877 and 1995; the country experienced one severe cyclone every three to five years. The country receives 40% of the impact of the total storm surges in the world (ibid.). Recent global discussion on global warming and climate change concludes that communities and livelihood strategies will be severely affected by riverbank erosion, floods, droughts, and excessive rainfall. It is estimated that potential impacts from climate change in Bangladesh will exacerbate social and economic vulnerabilities; especially for poor people in the Southern region of the country, who are expected to face food insecurity and lose lands due to the sea level rising (ibid.). Finan's (2009) study about the vulnerability of shrimp aquaculture livelihoods in coastal Bangladesh shows that the region is densely populated and highly susceptible to coastal floods due to the sea-level rising. The vulnerability of the coastal populations is produced, not only by climatic disasters, but also by prevailing social and economic factors. Finan (2009, p. 178) has identified the following social and economic factors in his study on coastal Bangladesh:

> the high level of resource concentration, pervasive social inequality, lack of political voice and representation, embedded corruption, high rates of illiteracy, alarmingly low

> levels of child nutrition, widespread exposure to arsenic toxicity in the drinking water, and the social exclusion of women from public life.

Bangladeshi floods can be categorised into two: normal or shallow floods (*borsha*) and abnormal or big floods (*banna*) (Rashid & Paul, 2014; Shaw, 2014). Growing certain types of rice (e.g., *aman*) requires enough water, which is provided by shallow floods; even *aus*, another kind of rice, can survive in shallow floods (Shaw, 2014). However, abnormal floods can severely damage crops and rural homesteads. As such, researchers argue that climate change has increased the destructiveness of flood disasters in Bangladesh (Rashid & Paul, 2014), and those who live in floodplains are most vulnerable. As Susman et al. (1983) argue, disasters often force marginalised people to live in environmentally insecure places. This argument implies that a disaster is linked with economic and social processes, which are mainly responsible for increasing vulnerability.

During severe floods, women are more vulnerable than men in Bangladesh. As Shaw (2014, p. 229) argues, based on her studies of the flood of 1988 in Bangladesh, "for women and men there is a duality to floods". Women's mobility, particularly in impoverished households, is restricted, and they are considered a "burden", to the extent that wives are left behind by their husbands in abject poverty (Shaw, 2014, p. 299). Like Shaw (2014), Bern et al. (1999) show, in the context of the 1991 cyclone of Bangladesh, that women are less capable of making adaptive strategies than men.

The most detrimental effects of climate change in Bangladesh are severe river floods and tropical cyclones, with their connected storms surges (Rashid & Paul, 2014). Tropical cyclones and their associated storm surges, river floods, and droughts are the three main climatic disasters that Bangladesh regularly experiences, with riverbank erosion being another major climatic hazard (ibid.). The floods of 1988, 1998, and 2007 substantially affected most of the regions in the country. Two consecutive cyclones, *Sidar* in 2007 and *Aila* in 2009, struck the low-lying coastal areas, killing hundreds of coastal inhabitants, damaging houses, and displacing thousands of families.

No matter what type of climatic disaster occurs, people living in the floodplain and low-lying lands have been climate change victims and refugees for a long time. The consequences of disasters vary between rich and poor, men and women, and rural and urban

dwellers (Shaw, 2014). Current Bangladeshi practices, such as mapping risk-prone areas, impact assessment, emergency planning, and construction of permanent settlement shelters in the coastal regions, pay less attention to the socioeconomic dimensions of climatic hazards and vulnerability and, as a result, oversimplify the socio-economic reality (Zaman, 1999).

1.4 Char-Lands

The term 'Char-lands' refers to alluvial islands that have newly emerged from the riverbed. Such islands are characteristically uncertain and regularly exposed to natural hazards: river floods and riverbank erosion. The longevity of the islands varies from one to several years. In general, landless peasants end up settling on uncertain islands, with no guarantee that an island will remain forever. From 1980 onwards, many native scholars have illustrated the char people's vulnerabilities due to climate-driven hazards (e.g., Haque & Zaman, 1989; Baquee, 1998; Zaman, 1991; Elahi, 1991; Adnan, 2013). Their work depicts the consequences of natural hazards -- for example, population displacement, temporary settlement, uncertain livelihoods, and land disputes. Like on the mainland, uneven access to land and unequal power relations are prominent on the chars. The char elites, consisting of landowning classes, public representatives, and absentee landlords, dominate the local power structure.

The islanders have been in constant search of higher ground and seek support from the local social network, which is their main adaptive strategy for surviving (Zaman, 1989). They highlight the uncertainties of the islands and their lives and livelihoods by saying, "*Allah jaane*" (only God knows, or we have no idea) (Baquee, 1998). Although the islands are categorically uncertain, millions of landless people find such a hazardous place to be the only option for survival.

Figure 1: A Char or River Island in the Brahmaputra River. Source: Collected.

Figure 2: Riverbank erosion. Photo by researcher.

No specific data can be found concerning the size of the chars and their inhabitants, as the rivers erode the chars and the inhabitants always move as a consequence. The dynamics of the river course annually erodes between two to three thousand kilometres of riverbank line (Islam & Islam, 1985). The first national convention on char, held in 2015 in Dhaka, stated that at least six million people live in the remote char villages in Bangladesh. According to the 1992 dry season Landsat image, the Brahmaputra river contained more than 50 large chars, and each was longer than 3.5 kilometres (Hutton & Haque, 2004). Frequent floods, heavy monsoon rain and riverbank erosion led the char people to acclimatise to multiple livelihood strategies, including farming, raising livestock, fishing, and seasonal migration. However, despite this, they find it difficult to escape from poverty (Elahi et al., 1991), with the islanders being the most disadvantaged and impoverished members (Samanta & Lahiri-Dutt, 2005).

Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2013) call the char landscape "hybrid environments, not just a mixture of land and water, but a uniquely fluid environment where the demarcation between land and water is neither well defined nor permanent" (Kindle Location 195, emphasis in original). In the context of char-land, the boundary between land and water cannot be drawn because such landscapes are composed partly of land and partly of water (Lahiri-Dutt & Samanta, 2013). Char people's poverty, vulnerability, marginalisation, and uneven access to resources, particularly land, are formed through economic, political, and social processes. Looking beyond char-dwellers' hazard-induced vulnerabilities, there are more stories to be told, such as their everyday struggles, their hopes despite uncertain resources, their adaptive strategies, and individual and communal resilience.

In a study on Char Nalsonda in north-central Bangladesh, Lein (2009, p. 98) argues that the islanders cannot simply be labelled as "the poorest and most vulnerable." They also consider the island to be a potential place "to obtain a decent and sustainable livelihood" (Lein, 2009, p. 110). In a similar study on people's agency and adaptability in river islands in northern Bangladesh, Indra (2000) argues that the island dwellers are not simply poor and displaced, but rather they creatively recreate space under precarious conditions. Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta (2013) argue that char-dwellers live with risk, and, as such, their state of living is beyond vulnerability. These works provide insights into understanding the char people's

everyday lives. However, scholars pay less attention to local people's perceptions and observations about climate change, which has made their lives still more uncertain. In addition, the recent social and economic changes on chars have not been ethnographically explored yet.

Recently, char people have gone through changes in their agricultural practices. In the past, they used to cultivate various crops such as paddy, jute, wheat, lentils, and so on. Nowadays, they predominantly cultivate corn. Several agricultural companies, locally known as corn seed companies, encourage the char farmers to utilise char-lands as much as possible. They suggested the char farmers should produce corn on their land. However, this monocropping forces them to overexploit every plot of agricultural land on the chars, and, according to many char farmers, this monocropping is partly responsible for riverbank erosion.

Nowadays, their lives have been noticeably transformed by NGOs. The NGOs have implemented several development programmes, which include women's empowerment and livelihood development. Therefore, locals have been going through socio-economic changes brought on by external actors: namely, the capitalist agricultural companies and development organisations. How do the local people respond to the external actors (e.g., NGOs) in such hazardous places in the age of climate change? This ethnographic study goes beyond existing work to focus attention to human agency in the context of such transformations.

1.5 Theoretical Framework: Vulnerability, Social Practices, and Agency

Anthropology does not have a long tradition in disaster studies on uncertain islands, but has long been engaged in exploring cultures and social systems in remote islands in oceans (e.g., Malinowski, 1922; Radcliffe-Brown, 1922; Mead, 1928). This study selected Onishchit island to examine people's perceptions and experiences of "vulnerability," be it hazard-induced or human-made, through the lens of the concepts of "human agency" and "social practices," which are important thinking tools of practice theory. As noted earlier, disasters (floods and riverbank erosion) affect every aspect of their existence. This study deals with three key issues: a) the islanders' experiences of displacement and practices of emplacement;

b) their livelihoods in and outside of the island; and c) the recent socio-economic changes generated by development projects.

Like other concepts in social science, there is no single definition of vulnerability. However, it commonly refers to "the state of susceptibility to harm from exposure to stresses associated with environmental and social change and from the absence of capacity to adapt" (Adger, 2006, p. 268). The Global Climate Change Task Force (GCCTF) of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) provides a more precise definition of vulnerability, in a sense that is relevant here:

> Vulnerability refers to the relationships between people and the total environment, including the physical setting and the socio-political structures that frame the conditions in which people live, and that place them at risk of harm from natural or technological hazard impacts. (Fiske et al., 2014, p. 12).

Recent perspectives in anthropological research define a disaster as a process or an event that involves destructive agent(s) from natural or human-made hazards, and a population in a socially and technologically produced condition of vulnerability (Oliver-Smith, 1996). In social science, the concept of vulnerability has developed under various theoretical perspectives, including, for example, the biophysical, human ecological, political economic, constructivist, and political ecological (McLaughlin & Dietz, 2008). Each of these perspectives provides valuable insights. However, "none of them provide an integrated theoretical framework which gives proper weight to the role of social structure, human agency, and the environment in either producing or mitigating vulnerability" (McLaughlin & Dietz, 2008, p. 108). The authors emphasise human agency as human-environment relations, in which vulnerability is unevenly distributed in any given society.

My study sees vulnerability as "openness to risk," which is not always accidental but systematic as well. Extreme environmental events are not new for the char dwellers; they have been experiencing risks in every aspect of their lives over the generations. Everyone—including the state, media, mainlanders, islanders, the locals, and international development organisations—are aware that hazards severely affect their resources and social systems. It happens every year and leaves people vulnerable, no matter how poor or wealthy they are. As such, the state has not taken effective steps to address the extreme events on the islands

yet: “It seems that the state does not count us. They [public representatives] only need us when they need votes from us” (Field notes, 2015).

It is important to note that the extreme events affect, not only the natural environment, but also the socio-economic environment. Thus, focusing on the influence of people’s actions in producing vulnerability provides spaces for focusing on people’s agency. In hazardous contexts, environmental resources and people’s lives and livelihoods are vulnerable, with victims taking multiple actions to reduce present and future losses. They have developed their frameworks embedded in their culture to perceive disaster vulnerabilities and to take practical actions to reduce such vulnerabilities. However, they have also internalised some development vocabularies (such as “lives and livelihoods,” “empowerment,” and “poverty-reduction”) to address their social and economic conditions. Their actions in facing disaster vulnerabilities include everyday adaptations and resilience to risks, and everyday negotiations, be they intentional or unintentional, within the social, economic, and political environment.

This study finds that islanders, who are undoubtedly susceptible to hazard risks, have the capacity to reduce vulnerabilities. As “social actors” who have agency, their adaptive practices include not only the search for higher ground, but also maintaining “good connections” or “good relationships” with influential local individuals, living with kin groups, strategically utilising state-owned land, temporary migration to cities, and participating in the NGOs’ development projects. The study documents the islanders’ agency in their actions aimed at recovering from losses; for example, their various perceptions of hazard-risk, their practices of strengthening capital (economic, social, cultural, and political), their daily negotiations with persisting social systems, and their choices relating to external development projects (e.g., livelihood development projects).

The exploration of human agency is mainly associated with the writings of Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Anthony Giddens (1979), and Marshall Sahlins (1981).[1] Ortner argues that anthropology “expands” (1989) and “upgrades” (2006) practice theory, although she has proposed that it is “a symbol” (1984, p. 127) in anthropological theories. She notes that “a

[1] See Ortner (2006)

new key symbol of theoretical orientation is emerging, which may be labelled "practice" (or "action" or "praxis")" (ibid.). Ortner (1989) defines practice theory: "a theory of the relationship between the structure of society and culture on the one hand, and the nature of human action on the other" (p. 11). The definition stresses three key concepts: "structure of society," "culture," and "human actions," which are interconnected in the web of complex relations in every society; "Practice emerges from structure, it reproduces structure, and it has capacity to transform practice" (Ortner, 1989, p. 12). Although human actions are central to practice theory, the actions are "never considered in isolation from the social structures that shape them" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 117).

This study's main issues include temporary habitation, livelihood, and development. The thinking tools (practice, structure, actor, and history) of practice theory provide the theoretical underpinning to examine how disaster-induced vulnerabilities are linked with social structures and practices on the island. For example, issues of land-dispute, land grabbing, and land-corruption are lived through practices of multiple actors, such as peasants, landlords, and the people involved in land administration.

This study deals with the rural economic structure, which is influenced by the broader economic and political structure of the state. The rural economic structure is inherently connected to other structures such as household or family structure and community structure. In addition, analysing women's vulnerability and women's agency in rural Bangladesh, be it on the mainland or the remote islands, requires focusing on the patriarchal structure. All structures (agrarian, household, and patriarchal) are lived through practices, be they active or passive; be they voluntary or involuntary.

> The fundamental assumption of practice theory is that culture (in a very broad sense) constructs people as particular kinds of social actors, but social actors, through their living, on-the-ground, variable practices, reproduce or transform—and usually some of each—the culture that made them. (Ortner, 2006, p. 129)

The idea of "agency" liberates social actors or agents, that is to say, it emphasises humans' capacity to think, make choices, and negotiate in their life. Human agency relates to the idea of "power" and interrelationships between the social agents (individuals or groups of individuals) and social systems. Agency refers to "the socioculturally mediated capacity to

act" (Ahearn, 2011, p. 112). Although actors have agency, they are not completely free, as they are involved in webs of relations of power, inequality, and competition (Ortner, 2006).

In practice theory, agency is culturally and socially constructed. It implies that the question of agency is not isolated from broader political, economic, and historical processes, but rather is a constitutive element of these processes. Bourdieu's (1977) idea of habitus links agency and social structure, with habitus meaning an actor's dispositions, or tendencies, or routinized actions, which are socio-culturally influenced. As such, habitus is "the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78).

Giddens' (1984) "theory of structuration" elaborates upon the question of agency and structure. Giddens (1984) argues that human agency and social structure are not opposite to each other, but, rather, are in dialectic interaction. According to structuration theory, actors' actions and social structures are produced and reproduced, and the process of structuring is not stable, but rather ongoing. Social actors are structuring the social fabric through their practices. Structure exists through actors' actions, and repeated actions regulate structure. The actors not only experience constraints in society, but are also creatively able to make their choices. As such, structure means, "Rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. Structure exists only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledge ability, and as instantiated in action" (Giddens, 1984, p. 377).

Ortner (2001) provides two modalities of agency: one is closely related to "ideas of power," and the other to "ideas of intention, to people's projects in the world and their ability to both formulate and enact them" (p. 78). Agency as power means people's ability to work, influence other individuals and events, and lead, to a larger or slighter extent, their lives (ibid). Agency is "almost always unequally distributed—some people get to "have" it others not; some people get to have more and others less" (Ortner, 2006, p. 151).

> Agency in this [agency as power] sense is relevant for both domination and resistance. People in positions of power "have"—and are authorized to have—what might be thought of as "a lot of agency," but the dominated too always have certain capacities, and sometimes very significant capacities, to exercise some sort of influence over the ways in which events unfold. Resistance then is a form of "power agency" [e.g., everyday forms of peasant resistance described by James Scott (1985) in his

> ethnographic work in Sedaka, a Malaysian village] …The agency of (unequal) power, of both domination and resistance, may be contrasted however with a second major form of agency, agency of intentions—of projects, purposes, desire. (Ortner, 2001, pp. 78-79)

Bourdieu's thinking tools "agency," "field," and "social capital" are all interconnected. According to Bourdieu (2005), understanding "social space" or "field" explains why humans behave in a certain way in a given space and time. A field is "a field of forces within which the agents occupy positions" that shape the positions they take in the field, "these position-takings being aimed either at conserving or transforming structure of relations of forces" that is a constituent element of the field (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 39). A field consists of different agents (people or institution) who occupy different positions, competing with co-agents, and contributing to the constraining structure. Actors' positions in the fields vary according to their access to different forms of capital. Bourdieu's idea of social space can be thought of as just a small world (Thomson, 2012). Every field has its autonomous sub-fields, and a field can be referred to as the battlefield of power, which is composed of different forms of capital. Bourdieu defines the social world:

> The social world is, to a larger extent, what the agents make of it, at each moment; but they have no chance of un-making and re-making it except on the basis of realistic knowledge of what it is and what they can do with it to form the position they occupy within it. (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 734)

On Onishchit island, landlords, tenant peasants, day labourers, sharecroppers, moneylenders and traders are the constitutive elements within the social field of agriculture. They all are relationally interconnected in the web of social and economic structure. The islanders' economic and social vulnerability or "helplessness" or "misfortune" can thus be understood through social practices in the field or social space of agriculture.

This study examines the islanders' agency in the various fields such as agriculture and development projects. Can they exercise their agency and, if so, to what extent can they practise it? Understanding the space of human agency is not solely limited to highlighting social actors' active actions. It also investigates how social processes constrain actors' agency. To identify indigenous people's limited societal and individual agency, Kosko (2013) describes the idea of "agency vulnerability": "the risk of being limited in our ability

to control the social and economic forces that affect us" (p. 293). Similarly, the study investigates to what extent the inhabitants of Onishchit can practise their agency in the fields of agriculture (internal) and development projects (external).

Bourdieu's idea of "social capital" provides insights into understanding the livelihood practices of the inhabitants of Onishchit. Small peasants maintain "good relationships" with influential individuals for both material benefits (renting agricultural land) and security. In addition, the social network provides temporary shelter during severe crisis moments such as borrowing money for agriculture, and searching for employment and housing outside the island village. Bourdieu (2004, p. 15) argues that the social structure of the distribution of the various types of capital represents "the immanent structure of the social world":

> Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various sense of the word. These relationships may exist only in the practical state, in material and/or symbolic exchange which help to maintain them. (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 21)

As noted earlier, the islanders' various practices aimed at reducing disaster vulnerabilities (uncertain habitation and livelihoods) cannot be understood without focusing on their participation in the social systems, which are embedded in different kinds of social relations. As such, the study is interested in investigating to what extent the islanders have agency in reducing their vulnerability? Is their agency itself vulnerable? Does the social process equally distribute their agency? Have certain connections of powerlessness been responsible for exacerbating their vulnerability? In addition, how do they interact with the powerful actors (landlords and moneylenders)? Recently, local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have been implementing income generating and social development projects on the island. The study is also interested to see their agency regarding these social and economic development initiatives in their everyday lives. As such, do the islanders actively participate in the development projects and, if so, how?

1.6 Research Questions

In the islanders' everyday conversations, "floods and riverbank erosion" (*banna* and *nadi-vangon*), "displacement" (*ghar-vangon*), "employment" (*kam-kaj*), and "livelihood development" (*jibika unnayan*) are common topics. Moreover, recent development interventions have introduced associated vocabularies onto the island such as "raising plinth," "rearing cattle," "income generation," "lives and livelihoods," and "women and child rights". These terms are widely and frequently used on the island, and therefore, the islanders use the words as if they existed in their culture. I was frequently asked what I was investigating on the remote island, to which I replied, I was looking for how the island people have been surviving in such perilous places as their agriculture and houses were at risk. Some of them corrected my responses by saying: "You mean our *jiban-jibika* [lives and livelihoods]?", as they translate their living to *jibika*, which means livelihood. This is partly because the local NGOs have been implementing *char jibika karmashuchi* (chars livelihood programmes) since 2004. Thus, many interviews ended up with accounts of displacement history and everyday struggles in seeking out other ways of gathering income.

The central research question is as follows: *why do the people reside on the uncertain island while knowing that their lives and livelihoods are recurrently vulnerable to floods and riverbank erosion? What are the available alternatives?*

In addition, the study addresses a set of associated questions:

A. Hazards and climate change

How do the char inhabitants perceive floods and riverbank erosion in their everyday lives? What are their observations and perceptions of local effects of global climate change?

B. Displacement, movement, and emplacement

How do they recreate space on higher grounds (e.g., the nearby embankment, the neighbouring islands, and the mainland) while the disaster leaves them displaced, hapless, helpless, and landless? How do they recreate space in Dhaka, where many of them seasonally migrate for better economic opportunities?

C. Livelihoods and Development

How do they practise livelihoods in and beyond the river islands? What are the uncertainties, constraints, and the opportunities they face in practising their livelihoods? To what extent do they have access to livelihood capital (economic, social, and political)? How do they interact with livelihood development programmes in their everyday lives?

Investigating the questions mentioned above involves the use of ethnographic methods of data collection: participant observation, informal discussions, and case studies of families or households.

1.7 Methodology

As the islanders frequently move to higher ground to survive, and seasonally migrate to cities for better opportunities, this research required the researcher to track down the islanders' trajectories of mobility. That is why the study adopts the "multi-sited ethnography" method (Marcus, 1995). As Marcus (1995, p. 98) puts it: "For ethnographers interested in contemporary local changes in culture and society, single-sited research can no longer be easily located in a world system perspective." In the context of the capitalist political economy, "cultural meanings, objects, and identities" move across time-space (Marcus, 1995, p. 96), therefore, ethnographic studies tend to change from single site to multi-site. Thus, space is not merely a physical entity, but also socially produced. Like space or site, ideas, goods, people, and information are in a "constant state of displacement" (Falzon, 2009, pp.4-5). Similarly, the islanders do not live or work in the same place for a long period, as new livelihood opportunities make them move to different locations. This research has collected addresses from several sites, as well as mobile numbers of the in-migrants from interviewing the islanders, and it has selected two nearby rickshaw garages and a shantytown in Dhaka.

1.7.1 Location and Travel

The locations include Onishchit island village, an embankment located at Balashi boat terminal, a shantytown, and two rickshaw garages in the capital city of Dhaka (where the islanders both live and work seasonally). The embankment is considered a common place for taking shelter during severe floods. The duration of the fieldwork involved sixteen months

(March 2015-July 2016). The study collected data and information through participating in their everyday lives, such as travelling with them on a boat, harvesting crops, hanging out at public places (e.g. tea stalls, grazing land, and boat terminal), praying in the mosque, attending festivals (e.g., Bangla new year), and attending sports competitions at primary schools. However, I could not stay overnight for the full period of conducting fieldwork, except for a few nights. After staying a few nights with a host household, headed by Momen, I realised that some islanders might start thinking I was providing financial support to Momen's family. As a result, I avoided staying in research participants' houses; however, I had to stay in Momen's house once again because I had missed the last boat on one occasion. "Complete" participant observation would have required building a house for myself there, which was unrealistic both in terms of security and budget. As such, the "question of where, and how to live" during fieldwork, depends on "practical concerns in mind" (Fontein, 2014a, p. 71).

Moreover, an outsider staying on the char would have appeared suspicious due to the rumours that so-called Islamic militants use remote chars as hideouts. For example, after the Holey Artisan tragedy in Dhaka, law enforcers launched several drives on the remote island villages in the Gaibandha and Bogura districts to arrest such militants.

During the fieldwork phase, I rented a house in Gaibandha town. The embankment and Onishchit island were nearly 7 and 8 kilometres away, respectively, from the house I rented. It took about 15 minutes to arrive at the embankment by an autorickshaw, which has become the most popular transport in Bangladesh nowadays. From my living place, arriving at Onishchit took nearly 40 minutes, which involved a twenty-minute journey by autorickshaw to reach the Balashi boat terminal followed by a five-minute walk on the dry sandy riverbed and another five minutes journey by the boat headed to Onishchit. The islands at the boat terminal can be reached on foot on the dry riverbed, especially in the dry season (November-May); it took a twenty-minute boat journey to reach Onishchit during periods of flooding.

I regularly travelled to the embankment and Onishchit. I also sometimes travelled to Onishchit's neighbouring chars (e.g., Rasulpur, Chatarkandi, Manik Kor, and Kauabada), where some inhabitants of Onishchit had relocated during my fieldwork phase. I conducted some interviews at the boat terminal while the interviewees were there for shopping or

spending their leisure time. A small number of interviews remained unfinished since the participants lost their homestead due to riverbank erosion and moved somewhere else. As such, I could not trace them. This underlines the uncertain lives of the char inhabitants among whom I conducted fieldwork.

As noted above, this research also focuses on rural-urban migration. The island dwellers seasonally migrate to Dhaka, particularly during the lean period when they do not have many work opportunities in the village. As mentioned, the study selected two rickshaw garages in a shanty town in Dhaka in order to understand their practices of recreating spaces and looking for better economic opportunities. Again, it was not practically possible to stay overnight in the rickshaw garages. I used to take breaks from the fieldwork on Onishchit to travel to Dhaka. I stayed with one of my relatives in Dhaka while I travelled to the rickshaw garages and the shantytown located in Abdullahpur (Chapter 9 discusses this location further). The site is 14 kilometres away from my living place in Dhaka, and it took nearly 40 minutes to reach the area by a local bus. I stayed at the site from early morning to late evening, as the best time for talking to them was lunchtime and early evening.

1.7.2 Research Participants

This study collected data using one-to-one conversations in the form of structured, semi-structured, and unplanned informal discussions, with people from different backgrounds. The research participants included small peasants, middle peasants, wealthy farmers, absentee landlords, NGO-workers, public representatives at the village level, employees in the land office, volunteers for NGOs, primary school teachers, traditional land surveyors, day labourers, college students, corn traders, as well as boatmen. I studied 75 households (45 on Onishchit island, 15 around the embankment, and 15 in the shantytown). In addition, I talked to 12 NGO workers and 15 migrant labourers. In addition to the planned conversations, I had frequent unplanned conversations with many island dwellers, who resided in the neighbouring islands of the study village and many mainlanders at the embankment. The unplanned discussions took place when I was waiting for the boat at the boat terminal or hanging out at the tea stalls there. My “deep hanging out” (Fontein, 2014a, p. 77) at the boat terminal and the tea stalls in the village provided me with a fruitful opportunity to participate

in everyday conversations on common topics, such as the likely consequences of upcoming hazards and the market price of fuel and corn. I also interviewed several woman-headed households to understand their ways and struggles in the island village.

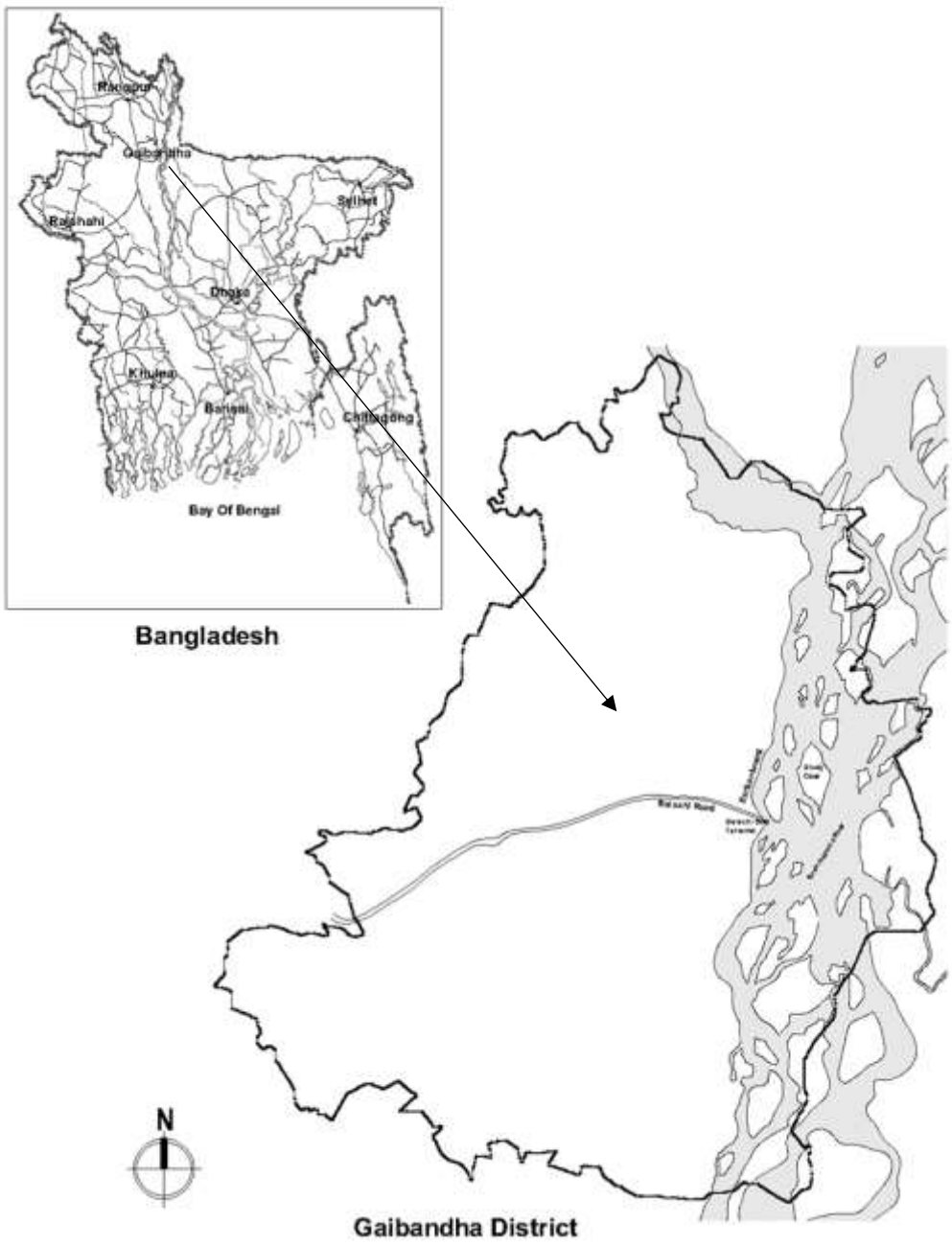

Figure 3: Map of Bangladesh and Gaibandha District.

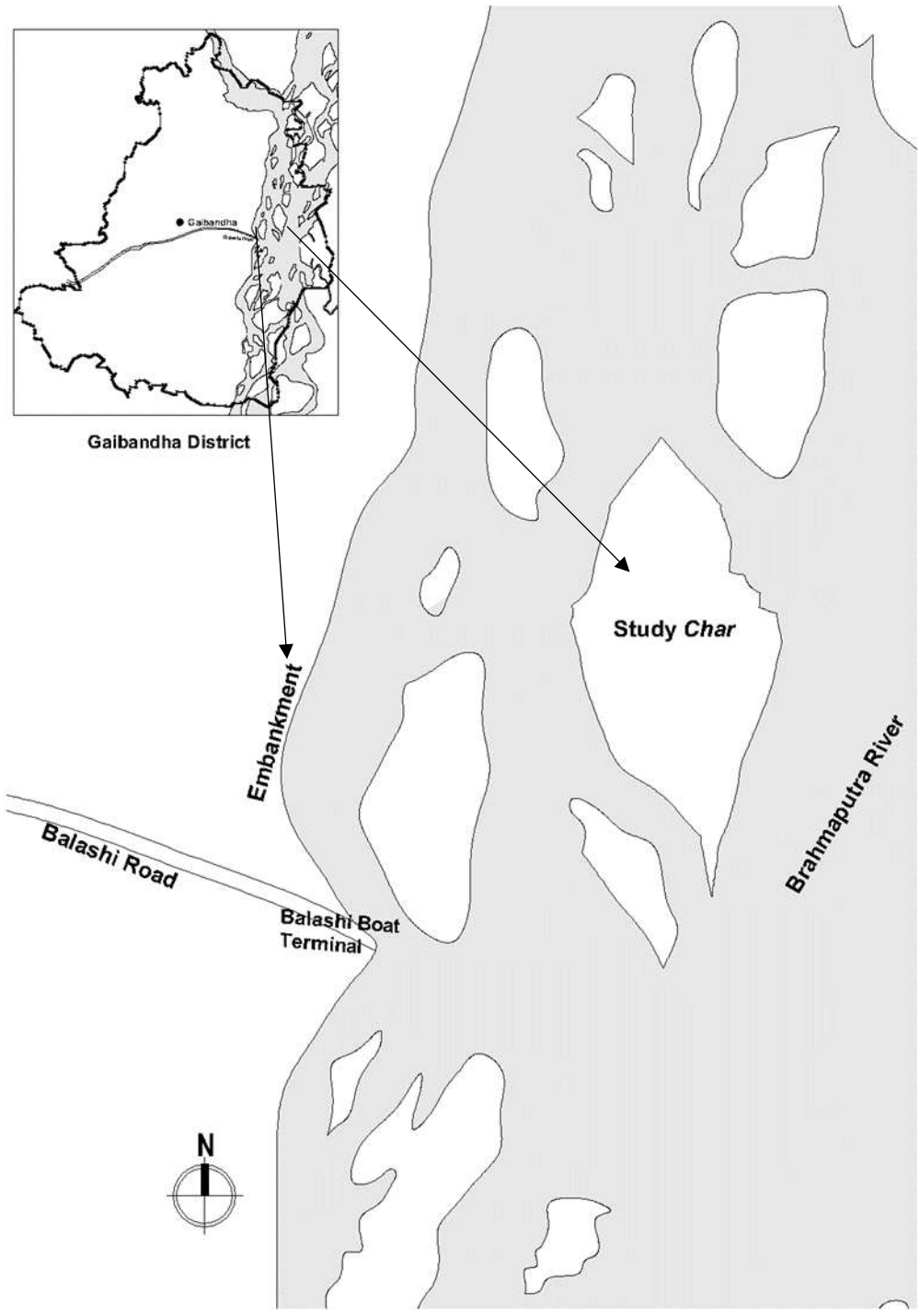

Figure 4: Map of Gaibandha District and this study's Char.

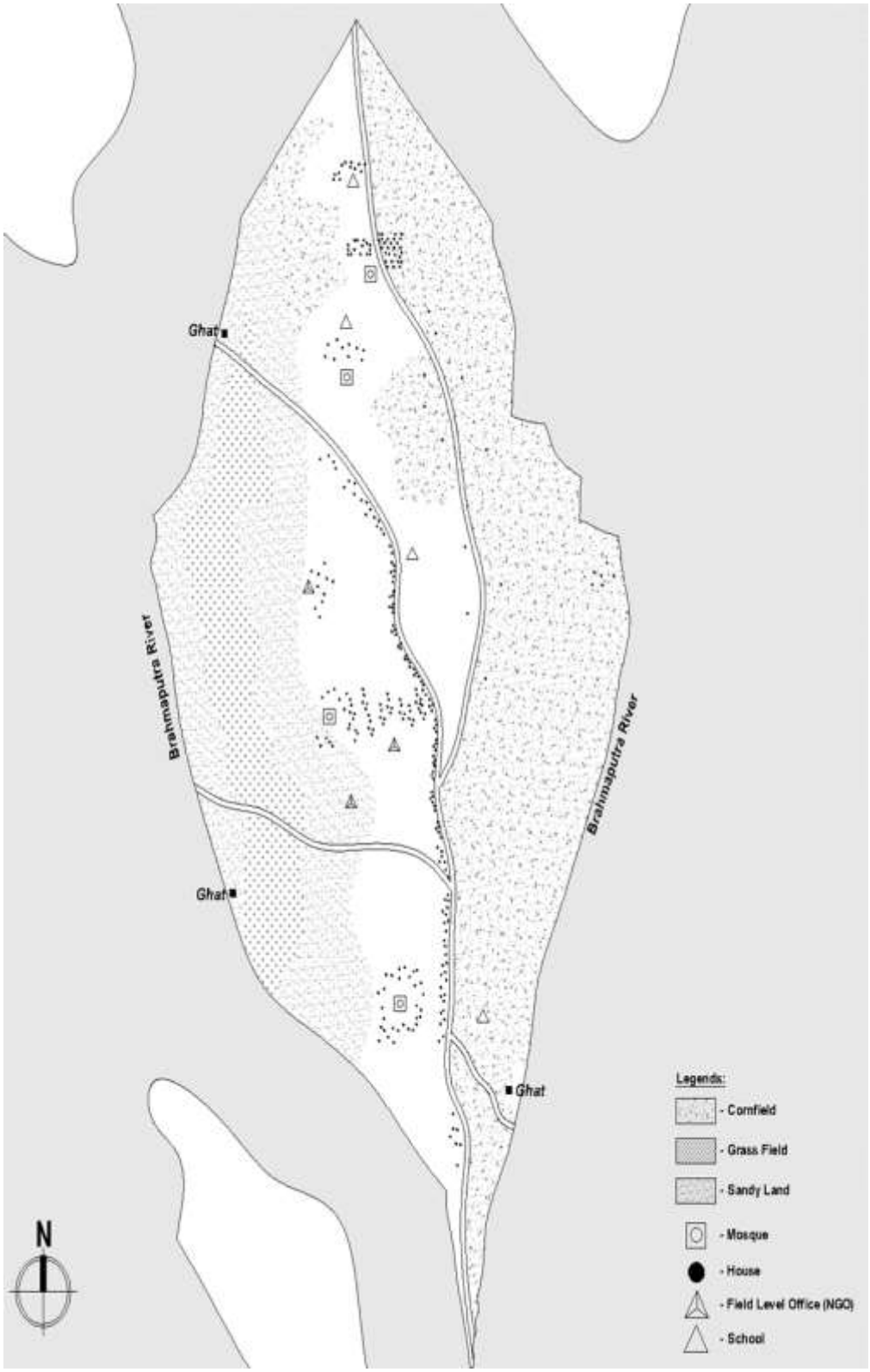

Figure 5: Map of settlement on Onishchit Char.

1.7.3 Research Assistants

I recruited two college students as research assistants for conducting an initial survey for a month. They and their parents have been living in the study island. The survey questionnaire consisted of a few questions, such as: how many neighbourhoods can be identified on the island, how many families or households have been living on the island, what are the primary and secondary means of livelihood for them, and how many times have they moved their houses in their lifetime? They are both well-known on the island on account of their educational and social status. One of the research assistants, named Hamidul, male, age twenty-four, teaches at an NGO's primary school on the island while attending college. A condition of his job is that he has to live there so that he does not need to be absent from the working place for hazard-related reasons; for example, a delay of boat service due to floods. He dreams of gaining a "good job," particularly in the government sector in the future. Meanwhile, living on the char provides him with the opportunity to consult and make the parents on the island understand the importance of sending their children to school.

After completing the survey, Hamidul frequently phoned me and asked whether I was around his neighbourhood. He invited me several times to join him for lunch during his regular lunch breaks. As I had to walk for nearly an hour on the sandy land to reach the neighbourhoods, I often took a short break at the school where Hamidul taught. He joined me in the intervals between teaching hours. Other reasons for stopping by at the school were that there was a tube well, from where I used to collect water for myself, and to use the common toilet at the school compound. Before entering the neighbourhoods, the school was my first stop on the island. He was aware that I was looking for life stories of the people, and he willingly shared some events that he had witnessed himself. It seemed to me that he enjoyed his survey job, and wanted to do more. For example, one day he phoned me and shared an incident about a land-dispute in his neighbourhood. He expressed his views on development:

> The poor people need three meals a day, and regular income opportunities rather than *valo-valo kotha* [good words] about development [spoken by NGO workers in community-level meetings] …the development is just like a two-wheeler. The NGOs

> and the char people are the two wheels. If one of the two wheels is punctured, the development-vehicle cannot move.

The other assistant, named Aisha, female, age twenty-two, has been working as a volunteer for an NGO called Friendship. She is one of only two young women who go to college in the entire Onishchit. As she arranges meetings between the NGOs and her neighbourhoods, she has easy access to the island families. Her assistance enabled easier access for me to women on the island. Her parents are considered influential individuals on the island because her father owns a large amount of land distributed over different islands. Moreover, her mother was elected as a member of the local government. During my first conversation with her, she used some widely associated terms from NGO literature, such as "development," "empowerment," "women's rights," "legal rights," and "child rights," partly because she was provided with pamphlets or posters of development projects for her voluntary services on the island, and because she had received training on how to convince people to attend meetings at the community level. I observed her while she was telling women about the importance of sending children to schools and about the legal rights of women. Her observations about women on the island were as follows:

> Char women are very hard working. They work both in the agriculture field and at home. They work from morning until evening. They take constant care of children during the floods, while the men go out for looking for jobs. They must save *khari* [firewood, such as dried leaves and branches] so that the floodwater cannot ruin it. Nonetheless, women are the unfortunate ones on the char. They get married at an early age when they have no idea what marriage is. Poor parents arrange marriages for their little daughters to escape from *ovab* [poverty]…but it is changing now. The NGOs are making us aware that early marriage is bad for women's health and for their children.

Both assistants shared their experiences growing up on different islands and their observations and experiences of displacement, seasonal joblessness, and the resilience of the island dwellers. In addition to the interactions between the ethnographer and the research participants, the research assistants functioned as a third eye for unpacking social relations here. In her ethnographic study in the social field of the informal economy in Cairo, Egypt, Elyachar (2005) acknowledges that the contribution of research assistants shifts the dyadic relationships between the ethnographer and the field to triadic ones, which provides

additional insights in her study, of the complex social networks within workshop communities in Cairo. Similarly, the assistants of this study contributed to a deeper understanding of the villagers' social structure and social networks, absentee landlords, and moneylenders.

1.7.4 Ethnographic Fieldwork

Ethnographic fieldwork is "an attitude" (Fontein, 2014, p. 57) that gives way to understanding research participants, through deeply observing their culture and participating in their everyday lives. Participant observation is the cornerstone of this study. The method includes systematic observation through joining routine activities of the people. My participation-observation included regularly waiting together with the villagers for the boat at the boat terminal; regularly taking the boat together, and participating in chitchat with them about their everyday issues. After getting off the boat, they usually walk fast toward their settlement, even with loads of fertilizer, seeds, cattle feed, and daily groceries on their head, shoulders, or slung over the wrist. Walking alongside them required me to quicken my pace. Sometimes they slowed their walking pace to maintain rhythm with my regular walking. It was a long walk during the dry season, and the opposite in the flood season. The topics of conversation during the walking included: my research topic, their agricultural activities, land-disputes, cattle robbery, seasonal migration, and NGOs' development projects. In addition, they were curious to know about my profession, salary, and the duration of my stay in the field.

I kept myself, as an ethnographer, open and accessible to the islanders. My frequent presence at the boat terminal, grocery shops-cum-tea stalls, mosques, and primary schools made the islanders curious about my purpose for visiting the islands. As such, they opened the door for letting me into their daily conversations at these common places. As Malinowski (2012, p. 71) puts it, "the Ethnographer has not only to spread his nets in the right place, and wait for what will fall into them. He must be an active huntsman, and drive his quarry into them and follow it up to its most inaccessible lairs."

However, participant observation requires ongoing negotiation between the researcher and the researched people. My social position as an "educated person" and "university

teacher," occasionally appeared to be a hurdle in attempting participation and observation. For example, a family (parents and their elder daughter) were taking a break under a eucalyptus tree in the courtyard of their house. In the morning, they had taken out a large pile of corn seeds to their field, spread them out on a large polythene sheet, and let them dry under the sun. It was lunchtime when I met them initially at their house. The parents and their elder daughter had come back to the house to drink cold water from the tube-well and take food from the house to the place where the corn seeds were spread out. My unfinished discussion at their house required me to stay with them longer. The daughter took a jug of water, the mother took a bowl of boiled rice and mixed vegetable stir-fry, and the father grabbed some betel leaves, ropes, and plastic sacks. They continuously discouraged me from joining them as they went to the open field under the hot sun (35° Celsius) because they thought I could get a fever. Once we reached the field, we sat together under a shelter they made with bamboo sticks and an old sari. I took out my lunch box from my fieldwork bag and offered food to them. We shared our food in the field and kept on eye on the corn seeds on the polythene sheet to protect them from cattle. The father repeatedly told me:

> We are ashamed that we offered you such tasteless, cheap food. We made you come with us in such a head burning, hot sun. We are ashamed of not taking proper care of you; you are a highly educated person. What would the people think, knowing that we offered you only *sada bhat* [boiled rice] and *latapata* [green leaves]?

After reassuring them and having food, we chewed betel leaves with tobacco. I joined them for another work task: we walked up and down on the corn field and flipped those seeds with our toes so that every seed could equally get sunlight. They repeatedly cautioned that I might cut my toes because I was not accustomed to doing this task.

Thus, some of my attempts at participation and observation were hampered because the participants were worried about me, presuming I was not familiar with a rural lifestyle and not used to doing agricultural work, or that I might hurt myself. However, others tried to educate me. Seeing my enthusiasm in participating in agricultural work, one farmer took me to his cornfield, which was a large area. He employed day labourers for ploughing and sowing the seeds. He showed me how the workers were told to follow the stages of corn cultivation: sowing seeds, irrigation, cleaning unwanted grasses, harvesting, and drying seeds

and packing. Digging up a portion of his land, he taught me, practically, what kind of land was suitable for growing corn. We later sat under a temporary shed he had made with wood, sticks and straw, and we discussed his experiences about displacement, wages of the day labourers he employed, and his history of seasonal economic migration.

Taking pictures of school children while they were playing cricket and football at the compound of the schools was one of the ways of gaining access to the neighbourhoods on the island. The children, very often, wanted to check the digital pictures to see how they looked and asked me to take more and more pictures. Those children called me behind my back *photowala* (photographer). The teachers of those schools eased my access to the neighbourhoods near the schools. I came to know them and thus spent time at the school, and they enthusiastically requested me to take classes. On their request, I took classes as a guest teacher several times. The schoolteachers introduced me sometimes as a "*gobeshok*" (researcher) and sometimes as a "*boro-sir*" (big teacher).

The school teachers involved me in encouraging the island parents to send their children to school. They invited me to attend several events such as the annual sports competition for the students, the opening of the new school building after they had lost the former school compound due to erosion of the riverbank, and so on. Attending those occasions made me a familiar figure and facilitated the method of participant observation further.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with some research participants such as school teachers, elected public representatives, respected persons (such as Freedom Fighters), local veterinarians, landlords, employees and volunteers of local NGOs, boatmen, local corn traders, *amin* (self-trained land surveyors), experienced farmers, and seasonal migrants. Some interviews required several sessions, especially during the agricultural season when they were quite busy with farming and collecting grass for their cattle.

I also had frequent informal discussions with diverse actors or agents such as shopkeepers, informal moneylenders, seasonal fishermen, rickshaw drivers, boatmen, women, volunteers of the NGOs, college students, returned migrants, imams (prayer leaders) of mosques, day labourers, and absentee landlords. Sometimes, informal discussions at the boat terminal and grocery shops in the island villages, and discussions with women at the

courtyard of their houses, turned into group discussions, with several islanders (both men and women) voluntarily and curiously joining the discussions. Also, a local man and self-claimed "development activist" (*unnayan karmi*) provided valuable information about the socio-economic changes that had happened through development projects.

To understand an overall picture of the households from each category (landless peasants, middle peasants, relatively wealthy farmers) I used the case study method. It focused on the history of losing agricultural land and homesteads, migration history, mobility between the islands and the mainland, livelihood options, selling labour, the pattern of land ownership, receiving credit, and memories of vulnerabilities.

In addition to the dialogues (interviews and informal discussions), my observations of their agricultural activities, and common vulnerabilities regarding poverty and disasters provided valuable data and information. Many textual elements—for example, political posters, leaflets about corn seeds and fodder, material regarding NGOs' development projects, and material on social security programs—provided important data. There were also signboards that involved text and disaster-related images, providing useful ways or strategies of adapting to hazards.

1.7.5 Situating Myself

It seems that the islands are over-crowded with NGOs. The development project CLP, funded by international agencies, and the two local NGOs (GUK and Friendship) have been collecting data and implementing development projects regarding income generation and increasing awareness initiatives there for years. The villagers have seen many native and foreign researchers, photographers, development consultants and physicians come to the islands, along with the local NGOs' employees to collect information about their lives and livelihoods. They believe that any research project would bring funding to improve their lives on the islands, as this is the kind of research they have seen in the past. It took several weeks for them to understand that my research had no affiliation with such "development projects" and had no connections with the local NGOs and international aid agencies.

Some islanders (both men and women) raised a practical question: what is their benefit in this research? However, some of the islanders willingly explained to their fellow islanders

the difference between the purposes of the NGOs' research and "research for a higher degree" on my behalf. A woman, sewing old clothes in the courtyard of her house, asked, "What are you going to do with our stories? Would you tell the government to do something for us?" Also, a middle-aged peasant, taking tea at Mamun's tea stall, asked, "What are you going to do with our stories?" Mamun, who had witnessed me replying with the same answers to such questions, replied, "*Vai* [brother], it is not an NGO-survey. This brother has returned from Ireland to know our lives on the char. He is going to write a book about our lives, and then Ireland will give him a big degree." They were surprised knowing the duration, a year or more, of my stay in the field, as they had not heard before about ethnographic research (instead, they were used to *joreep* or surveys that the NGOs frequently conduct).

Although I am a "native," I am an "outsider" too because of my multiple identities: a university teacher (my professional and social identity), an inhabitant of an urban area (place status), studying for my PhD abroad (elite status). Narayan (1993, p. 670) has argued against the dichotomy between "native" and "non-native" anthropologists and has underlined the need for "regarding shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations." As such, it does not necessarily mean that a native anthropologist can provide an authentic analysis of a native field (ibid.).

In Bangladeshi culture, the forms of addressing someone reveal the general relationships between class and social groups. Senior or unknown men are called by their name and followed by *vai* or brother; for example, *Alam vai*. Similarly, for senior or unknown women, Amina *apa* or sister. Without addressing the terms "brother" or "sister" to someone senior or unknown is considered as extremely rude behaviour. Everyone maintains extra caution in addressing high-ranking government or non-government officers, including schoolteachers, land officers, lawyers, doctors, administrators, police (no matter what rank he or she holds), and the like. Thus, the locals address them by "sir" (for male) and "madam" (for female). For example, I once joined a group of officials to visit an island. The group consisted of the Deputy Commissioner (DC), a top ranking-administrator of Gaibandha district, a police officer for his security, and the founder and employees of an NGO. The villagers, even an elected public representative, addressed the administrator as "DC sir."

I experienced the same, and no one addressed me by my name; instead, it was by *vai*, regularly, and sir, occasionally. My "sir identity" provided me with both advantages and disadvantages. Regarding the advantages, they gave me a substantial amount of time when I went to their houses and neighbourhoods. They enthusiastically wanted to know my views on national and international politics, up and down prices of agricultural products, and relationships between global politics and the price increase of fuel, which bothers them the most because they need diesel for irrigation pumps and tractors. They also wanted to know about corruption in government departments. Thus, it seemed to me that they used me as a way of getting updated news about contemporary issues in the country and globally. As such, they often wanted to know what steps the government was taking for the disaster victims. My discussions on these matters provided the means for building rapport with the participants, and also showed me the breadth of their interests and concerns.

Regarding the disadvantages, they attempted very carefully to avoid using slang in front of me. Sometimes they felt uneasy when I saw them smoking because it is culturally and socially impolite to smoke in front of older people (*murubbi*), teachers, and the well-to-do. At tea stalls, where I conducted most of the group discussions, some of the islanders, regardless of age, dropped their cigarettes when they saw that I was approaching them. Some went away with their cigarettes, came back, and joined the discussions after they had finished smoking. They repeated such "cultural performances"— dropping their cigarettes and hiding the cigarettes while smoking"— even after assurance that I would not mind if they smoked in front of me.

I experienced somewhat less easy access to women, mostly because of my male gender. However, some women (volunteers of NGOs, primary school teachers, public representatives, and women assisting their husbands running grocery-cum-tea-stall businesses) willingly talked about their everyday struggles on the island. In rural Bangladesh, people usually make noise intentionally before entering the courtyard of houses so that women members have enough time to be "decent" in front of men, regardless of whether they are known or unknown. The noises include fake coughing or loudly calling any member of the family. One of the reasons for this cultural practice is that rural people keep doors and windows open and they do their household work (cooking, cleaning, sewing, or

bathing) in open courtyards, loosely surrounded by straw walls. The houses hardly maintain boundaries, with some walking routes crossing others' yards. Thus, when the men walk across the courtyards, they make noise as a message for women who are perhaps taking a bath or breastfeeding their babies, or unorganized in their clothing. Regarding myself, I would need to perform such cultural behaviours to gain access to the island households and neighbourhoods.

1.8 Ethical Considerations

Doing ethnographic research is an ethical enterprise, and ethics and moral responsibility are an ongoing process (Lassiter, 2005). The study faced some ethical issues—for example, I attended several meetings organized by the local NGOs in the neighbourhoods to observe the interaction between the island dwellers and the development projects. I was invited to speak about the income-generating projects of the NGOs. The situation, it seemed, presented me as one of the field-level employees of the local NGOs. I repeatedly explained the purpose of this study and the purpose of observing the meetings and workshops of the NGOs in the field. As a researcher, I tactfully avoided calls for socialising with the individuals who were powerful on the islands (e.g., landlords, and public representatives), so that others could not label me as one having close relations with influential individuals or families. Of course, close rapport with research participants allows for the gathering of rich information, "but there are theoretical, ethical, and practical limits to "going native" (Fontein, 2014a, p. 77). Many islanders said that the NGOs and other volunteer groups maintain a "good connection" with influential local actors. I was able to gain trust because I did not do so. As such, many inhabitants willingly shared their personal stories about taking over new accretions of land and about corruption regarding forged land-documentation. This has made it all the more important to keep the identities of all participants of the study anonymous and unrecognisable.

1.9 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into ten chapters. Chapter 1 indicates the background of the study. It describes how the tools of practice theory help in understanding people's vulnerability and agency in the context of this hazardous place. It also shows how multi-sited ethnographic

research methods are needed to grasp the islanders' everyday behaviours, regarding their displacement, emplacement, and livelihood practices, which are their main concerns. In the process of interacting with the research participants, researchers face unexpected situations, as well as gain thoughtful ideas through serendipity; this study is no different in respect of this opportunity.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on "disaster," "vulnerability," and "human agency." Human-environment interactions have been a core concept of cultural anthropology from the very beginning of the discipline's history. The foundational studies in environment (or ecological) anthropology developed the idea of "adaptation," "cultural ecology," and "cultural materialism" in the 1950s and the 60s, focusing on how human beings perceive and interact with their natural environment. Later, in the 1980s and the 1990s, anthropologists focused on how people perceive and respond to environmental changes or disasters. The chapter shows how different approaches have developed to conceptualise consequences resulting from disasters. It also shows that, without considering human agency, people's vulnerability in hazardous places cannot be comprehended.

Chapter 3 begins by describing the interrelations between climate change and displacement. It describes the local understanding of climatic hazards.

Chapter 4 describes the socio-economic background of the study, Onishchit Char. It also shows the observation of the change of seasons and climate in the everyday lives of its inhabitants.

Chapter 5 explains how the rural agrarian structure was formed through different periods. It also shows how land-related corruption exists through everyday practices.

Chapter 6 describes how hazardous islands are seen as "multilocalities," meaning the inhabitants of the islands, particularly of Onishchit, put different meanings on the islands, where they are simultaneously vulnerable (during flooding), and hopeful (when they see their agricultural land re-emerge from the riverbed).

Chapter 7, the core part of the thesis, shows how the islanders practise their livelihoods on the island. Embracing the Bourdieusian idea of social practices, the chapter analyses their everyday practices in the social space of agriculture, where land is an important form of

capital to secure a position in the agrarian structure. It also shows that land is not only a material asset for them, but also non-material; that is to say, it is the most important means of securing prestige and domination in the community. The multiplicity of their livelihood practices leads then to two issues: their participation in development programs directed at social and economic development, and the practices of rural-urban migration, which are discussed in chapter 8 and 9, respectively.

Chapter 8 shows how the islanders respond to social and economic development programs implemented by the local development organisations. It shows that the people do not merely passively participate in the processes of socio-economic change, but also carefully observe, criticise, and evaluate the external development programs. At the same time, they internalise external development ideas.

Chapter 9 deals with rural-urban migration. It shows how the islanders have been in search of "better" places and livelihoods in the city of Dhaka. The chapter describes how they utilise social capital, in their terms "good relationships" or "good connections," to secure better opportunities in the city, where they end up living in the shantytown and other cheaper places. Migration experiences vary according to gender and the nature of the opportunities available.

Chapter 10 concludes the argument of the thesis. It shows that, coupled with an unequal social environment, environmental changes (floods and riverbank erosion) create *certain uncertainties*, meaning displacement, precarious livelihoods, and land disputes. In response to the *certain uncertainties*, the people see *uncertain certainties*, meaning resurfacing islands, fertile silt, seasonal migration, and development projects.

Chapter 2

Disaster Vulnerability and Human Agency

2.1 Introduction

How do the concepts of vulnerability and human agency join together to help us understand disaster vulnerability? This chapter seeks to understand the interrelations of these concepts, as well as to contextualise the conceptual approach of this research. In the social sciences, no serious research on disasters emerged until the 1950s, during which time geographers focused on extreme events in particular regions, while sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists focused on how individuals and groups reacted to such disasters (Oliver-Smith, 2009). Traditionally, anthropology had treated hazards or disasters as a threat to the social organisation and the environment, focusing on the behaviours of inhabitants of the disaster-stricken area, in different stages (Oliver-Smith, 1996). Many anthropologists contributed to disaster studies (e.g., Wallace, 1956; Torry, 1979a); however, much of the research was "fairly atheoretical and uninvolved in definitional issues" (Oliver-Smith, 1999, p. 23-24).

Anthropological perspectives on disaster vulnerability have progressively moved from behavioural to political economy approaches. Torry (1979) calls for anthropologists to engage in disaster research, and he argued for applied studies in the field of disaster to fill out the information gaps that help build theory. He emphasises that disaster losses have roots in the social structure that governs access to resources (ibid.). Thus, the society's arrangement determines who will become a disaster victim first (Hewitt, 1983; Wisner et al., 2004). Hoffman (2005, p.19) echoed this: "Disasters are not truly physical events, but are rather socially constructed, manufactured over long periods of time."

2.2 Cultural Ecology: Foundational Studies in Environmental Anthropology

From the late 1940s onwards, cultural ecology and cultural materialism emerged with the work of some American anthropologists who were keen on Morgan's evolutionism and

Marx's materialism, as opposed to Boasian cultural relativism (Eriksen, 2001, p. 20). They focused on cultural adaptations to environments. Steward introduced the concept of "cultural ecology" that "presents both a problem and a method" to understand the complex interrelationships between humans and nature (1955, p. 36). As a problem, the concept asks whether people's adaptations to their environment need certain "modes of behaviour" or whether the adaptations allow them to make choices of "possible behaviour patterns" (ibid., p. 36). He emphasised the characteristics of interdependence and interaction between culture and environment, adding that all the features of a culture are interdependent. Steward offered the concept of "culture core", which refers to "the constellation of features [social, political, and religious structures] which are most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements" (ibid., p. 37).

As a method, cultural ecology emphasises how the adaptation of a culture to its environment might cause certain changes (ibid., p. 42). The concept of cultural ecology implies that the patterns of the culture core vary according to the physical environments; a particular environment might develop a particular pattern of adaptations and technologies, for example. The central thesis of Steward's idea of "cultural change" is that the social systems result from cultural adaptations to the environment; the types of subsistence influence people as to whether they need to work alone or in groups.

Steward's view of the varieties of patterns of cultural adaptations to the biophysical environment criticised the unilineal evolutionism theory based on these preconceived notions—that all societies progress from simple to complex, or from primitive to modern. Instead, he offered the theory of multilinear evolution, which argues that patterns of cultural adaptation depend on the given physical environment. According to Steward's multilinear evolution theory, every society has a unique history in progress. The method of multilinear evolution is "empirical rather than deductive"; the theory emphasised historical reconstructions, but it, unlike unilineal evolution, avoided using that historical data to classify cultural changes into universal stages (ibid., pp. 18-19).

White (1943) theorised that cultural evolution depends on the level of utilising energy, the capacity for performing work. He stated: "Everything in the universe may be described in terms of energy," and behaviours of human beings, plants, animals, comets or molecules

may be understood "as a manifestation of energy" (ibid., p. 335). According to White, culture is a tool for human beings to meet every need, material and immaterial. In the case of material needs, people need to exploit natural resources. In White's view, human beings are capable of harnessing water, air, land, and animals. They are capable of producing technology such as transport and agricultural machinery. Thus, cultures become more effective or powerful when people harness more energy per capita per year.

Cultural adaptations to environment influence social relations and religions, which were shown in empirical studies in the late 1960s and the 1980s by two veteran anthropologists, Rappaport (1968) and Harris (1966, 1979). Rappaport's empirical work *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1968) shows how the Tsembaga people, living in the Bismarck Mountains in New Guinea, maintained ecological balance through performing rituals. He took "populations" as a unit of analysis instead of "culture," which was a position adopted by Stewardian cultural ecology (Biersack, 1999, p. 5). The Tsembaga tribesmen practised slash-and-burn agriculture and herding pigs for their subsistence. When the large size of pig population became difficult to manage, they arranged *kaiko*—a yearlong festival that involved slaughtering the pigs for a huge feast and inviting friends and relatives. For Rappaport (1968, pp. 3-4), the ritual played out as a regulating "mechanism or set of mechanisms," and it regulated the relationships between the people, pigs, and the garden. This regulation not only protected the Tsembaga population from the potential parasitism and competition of their pigs, but also their physical environment by managing vast areas of virgin forest and ensuring adequate cultivation-fallow ratios in secondary forests (ibid., p. 3). Like the biological ecologists, Rappaport applied a system theory approach and viewed the Tsembaga environment as an ecosystem consisting of the human population, pig population, other animals, plant species (such as yams), and non-living materials such as soil and water (Townsend, 2009).

In order to understand cultures scientifically, Harris (1979) offered the theory of "cultural materialism." For Harris, cultural materialism is the perspective that helps to "understand the causes of differences and similarities among societies and culture" (ibid., p. i). Harris's cultural materialism aims to "create a panhuman science of society whose findings can be accepted on logical and evidentiary grounds by the panhuman community"

(ibid., p. iii). Like the human body, cell and organ, the socio-cultural system is composed of infrastructure (mode of production and reproduction), structure (political economy and domestic economy), and superstructure (art, literature, and music); all the components are interdependent to each other, and therefore, any change in one causes changes in the others (ibid., p. 71). Harris's work with India's sacred cattle (1966) shows how milk grazing, traction, dung dropping, bullock-producing—as infrastructure—influence Hindu religious doctrine that symbolised cattle as a sacred animal. Harris suggested that anti-slaughtering or beef taboo could be an example of resource management under the superstructural ideologies of the Hindu religion. Harris' inflexible parting of structures displays cultural materialism as a deterministic system "in which the infrastructure 'probabilistically' determines the structure and superstructure" (Roseberry, 1989, p. 157).

The project of cultural materialism is "too scientific," and the approach conceives of cultures that remain static in a given place. Kottak calls for a "new ecological anthropology," as examinations of the older cultural ecology "have been remiss in the narrowness of their spatial and temporal horizons, their functionalist assumptions and their apolitical character" (1999, p. 1). Apart from the biophysical environment or ecosystem, cultural practices are influenced by other factors such as globalisation, colonialism, governments, political economy, media, NGOs, and so on. The perspectives of cultural materialism and cultural ecology "lacked an accommodation for the 'global array of connection' that contemporary climate change invokes" (Crate, 2011, p. 178). In the field of the new ecological anthropology, "everything is on a larger scale" (Kottak, 1999, p. 25).

2.3 Disaster and Adaptation

Adaptation has been a core concept in anthropology, which appears in the foundational studies of environmental anthropology—cultural ecology and cultural materialism. Adaptation not only simply implies technical resolutions (Crate & Nuttall 2009; Roncoli, 2006), but it also involves the need to frame responses within social and cultural parameters (Fiske et al., 2014, p. 42). As such, the idea of human agency has existed in disguise in the concept of "adaptation," one of the core concepts of cultural anthropology.

In the 1990s and onwards, a new question appeared: how do human beings adapt to extreme environmental changes or disasters that leave human beings and their environments vulnerable? Crumley (1994) reminds us that throughout "their history, human populations have both affected and been affected by environmental changes" (p. 240). In the event of environmental changes or disasters, they attempt to mitigate the effects of the adversities. Consequently, mitigation practices improve the resilience of societies to the catastrophes (Oliver-Smith, 2016). There is a consensus in anthropology that people have intimate knowledge of their environments that allow them to employ available resources for "social reproduction and sustainability and guard against general levels of hazards in the environment through mitigation" (Oliver-Smith, 2016, p. 61).

All human beings or societies are distributed among various types of landscapes: mountains, coastal areas, farm fields, cities, and so on. Thus, they inherently take adaptation strategies to their surrounding environments to survive, and they transfer their adaptive strategies to succeeding generations. The adaptive strategies include food production, making shelter and building technical knowledge to exploit natural resources. Anthropologists use the term adaptation to mean "changes in behaviour and/or belief in response to altered circumstances to improve the conditions of existence, including a culturally meaningful life" (Oliver-Smith, 2016, p. 61). As such, they adapt, not only to the natural environment (land, water, weather), but also to the socio-economic environment (culture, social structure, relations of production), and they influence, and are influenced, by both the natural and social environment. A natural environment is not static, but is, instead, changeable. This means that most of the behavioural adaptations are socially learned, which means the adaptive strategies are cultural, not genetic (Townsend, 2009). According to a group of anthropologists working on climate change:

> Adaptation generally refers to changes in beliefs or behaviors in response to altered circumstances to improve living conditions, including a culturally meaningful life; this includes adaptation to natural, socio-cultural and institutional (political, economic, and civil society) circumstances. Human beings perceive and adapt to such changes consciously, through a cultural lens of individually and collectively interpreted knowledge and meaning, to make decisions and respond, including the deployment of technology. (Fiske et al., 2014, p. 42)

Human adaptation and resilience to vulnerabilities is never complete. Intensities of vulnerabilities and levels of adaptations of peoples vary according to their socioeconomic positions in the communities they live. It implies the social construction of risk. Thus, the social structure distributes risks -- "From ground level, anthropology has asked who are the likely victims of calamity, and what are the practices that lead to unequal shares of safety?" (Hoffman & Oliver-Smith, 1999, p. 3). Thus, the concepts of adaptation, vulnerability, and resilience "have, in one guise or another, implicitly or explicitly, been the subject of anthropological enquiry throughout the history of the discipline" (Oliver-Smith, 2016, Kindle Location, 1269).

2.4 Vulnerability

Researchers from various disciplines, including geography, environmental science, and anthropology, identify various perspectives on disaster vulnerability (e.g., Adger, 2006; Faas, 2016; Füssel, 2007; Marino, 2015; McLaughlin & Dietz, 2008). Adopting their contributions, this section categorises the anthropological perspectives on vulnerability into four areas: a) hazard-centric approach; b) political economy approach; c) political ecology approach; and d) resilience and agency approach.

2.4.1 Hazard-Centric Approach

In the 1950s and the 1960s, natural hazards were studied by technocratic bodies of disaster management. Those studies overemphasise physical hazards rather than focusing on the human-environment relations in analysing disaster vulnerability. In his study on the 1953 Worcester Tornado, anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace suggests a model, "a time-space model of disaster as a type of behavioural event" (Wallace, 1956, p. 1). The model defines disaster as an event that took place in a particular time and an area, hypothesising the dimensions of behaviours of the inhabitants. However, this behaviourist approach was criticised by neo-Marxist scholars who have emphasized the role that social structures play in disasters (Hewitt, 1983; Pelling, 2003).

A hazard-centric approach pays little attention to the role of social structures and political processes that render people vulnerable in various ways (Füssel, 2007; McLaughlin

& Dietz, 2008; Faas, 2016). Hewitt (1983) calls it the "dominant view" of hazards, in that it attributes disasters to extreme natural events such as floods, earthquakes, or droughts. According to this view, a disaster occurs because of the accidental occurrence of natural events in human communities (Hewitt, 1983). It treats people's vulnerability as simply the result of an encounter with hazards (Hewitt, 1997) or being in the wrong place at the wrong time (Liverman, 1990, cited in Füssel, 2007, p. 160).

A hazard-centric approach is usually adopted by state and multinational organisations such as the World Bank. The World Bank's global analyses of disaster risks work by identifying "hazardous places at *higher* risk of flood losses than others and *higher* risk of earthquake damage than others, or a *higher* risk of both", in order to "assess *exposure* and *potential magnitude* of losses to people and their assets" (Dilley et al., 2005, p. 1, emphasis in original). In the 1980s and onwards, disaster researchers criticized the hazard-centric model for sidestepping social, political, and economic factors that produce vulnerability (e.g., Wisner et al., 2004). Wisner (2004) and colleagues argue that the two aspects—nature and society—cannot be separated from each other in analysing vulnerabilities in relation to natural hazards, as people's exposure to hazards varies depending on their class (which determines their income, how and where they live), gender, ethnicity, age group, whether they are disabled or not, their immigration status, and so on (Wisner et al., 2004, p. 6). Hewitt concludes,

> the geophysicalism of the dominant view hides within the assumptions that natural calamity is essentially the breakdown of the productive functions of society and, as crisis, is essentially an infringement upon the centralized ordering of space—or in remoter areas, an indicator of what happens when you lack the benefits of this order. The restorations of productivity and reimposing of "normal" relations become the main prescriptions of crisis management, relief and reconstruction. (Hewitt, 1983, p. 29)

2.4.2 Political Economy Approach

Not all hazards produce disasters, as a hazard is a likely threat or situation that may or may not affect human-environment relations. Geographer Gilbert White, defines the term "natural hazards" as an "interaction of people and nature governed by the coexistence of adjustment in the human use system and the state of nature in the natural events system" (White, 1974,

p. 4). A hazard is an extreme geophysical event, which can produce a disaster (Alexander, 2000, p. 7). Wisner and colleagues' seminal work *At Risk* (2004) defines the term "disasters" as "a complex mix of natural hazards and human action" (p. 5). For example, in many regions, famines or epidemics are interlinked with antecedent wars:

> It is always important to consider both the extreme physical event and the vulnerability both of the population in any definition of disaster. Without people, there can be no disaster. And poor people are generally more vulnerable than rich ones. Disaster is therefore defined as the interface between an extreme physical event and a vulnerable human population. (Susman, O'Keefe, & Wisner, 1983, p. 264)

In anthropological research, vulnerability "explicitly ties environmental hazards and specifically climate change and its effects to the structure and organization of society" (Fiske et al., 2014, p. 45). In other words, it refers to "the relationship between people and their environment, including economic and socio-political structures that can render them vulnerable to hazard impact" (Fiske et al., 2014, p. 44). Anthropological research has argued that societies produce vulnerability; therefore, the risk is unevenly distributed across the social classes, suggesting that everyone is not equally vulnerable to the effects of climate change (Oliver-Smith, 2016).

The term 'vulnerability' is linked to its associated term "disaster risk." Like vulnerability, risk can be measured "in terms of expected harm/damage" (Thywissen, 2006, p. 38). While vulnerability tells about the results of dangerous events, risk tells us "how often or with what probability" we will have to face the adverse situations (ibid.). Thywissen (2006) concludes, "risk is understood as a function of hazard, vulnerability, exposure, and resilience" (p. 39). Similarly, Wisner et al. (2004) argue that coupled with hazard and vulnerability, social, economic, and political factors produce disaster risks.

The political economy approach adopts Karl Marx's theoretical legacy that emphasises vulnerability as a class issue, meaning that not all class groups are equally vulnerable. While explaining uneven development through global capitalism, neo-Marxist scholars show how disasters (such as famine) leave particular social groups of people vulnerable. For example, O'Brien's (1985) paper on Sudan's vulnerability to famine argues that the cumulative capitalist agricultural development coupled with "trilateral cooperation" under Arab foreign

capital in the 1970s caused food deficits; peasant producers faced a declining ability in meeting consumption needs, including food. Watts's (2013) work, *Silent Violence*, in the context of the food crisis due to drought in Northern Nigeria, shows that although drought was natural, the food crisis or famine was not a purely natural phenomenon. It shows that the expansion of capitalism changed the characteristics of the food crisis and thus weakened the local people's adaptations to food insecurity.

In his well-known book, *Poverty and Famines* (1981), Amartya Sen, a Nobel laureate in Economics, offers the "entitlement approach" to analyse poverty and famines. Sen's entitlement approach focuses on the legal, social, political, and economic realities that determine people's ability to get access to food and other essential commodities. The entitlement system of a society determines which group possesses and/or commands the available resources that help in meeting needs. Watts (2013, p. lxx) argues that "entitlements have to be radically extended not simply in a social or class sense but politically and structurally." In other words:

> an analysis of famine and hunger based on entitlements must account for the particular distribution of entitlements and how they are reproduced in specific circumstances, the larger canvas of rights by which entitlements are defined, fought over, contested, and won and lost (that is, empowerment or enfranchisement), and the structural properties (what I have called crisis proneness) of the political economy that precipitates entitlement crises. To encompass these questions, entitlements would need to be deposited in what Sen himself calls—but does not explore—the mode of production. (Watts, 2013, pp. lxx-lxxi)

The political economy approach, also known as the sociohistorical or vulnerability approach, notes that the dimensions of vulnerability are rooted in pre-disaster socio-economic arrangements, which see hazards as trigger events but focus more on "structural and systematic causes that generate disasters by making people vulnerable" (Zaman, 1999, p. 193). The concept of vulnerabilities is intrinsically of "a political-economic nature" (Oliver-Smith, 2009, p. 13). The anthropological political economy was developed through scholars who adopted a Marxist historical materialism approach in their work (e.g., Mintz, 1985; Nash, 1979; Wolf, 1982). The political economy approach underlines that the development of classes and power structure is not apolitical or ahistorical. Instead, the anthropological

political economy approach considers class, capitalism, and power in understanding of culture, history, and practice (Roseberry, 1988, p.179). Roseberry attempts to define anthropological political economy:

> What has come to be called political economy is the developing product of a variety of intellectual and political movements, some Marxists and some not, some Wallersteinian [who coined the term "world-system"] and some not, that have come together as a set of arguments—with other anthropological "political economists," with other historically minded social scientists, with other styles of anthropological work. (Roseberry, 1988, pp.162-163)

Adopting the political economy approach, Wisner and his colleagues (2004) called for the unpacking of the "root" causes of disaster vulnerability. They argue that hazards exacerbate the dimensions of vulnerabilities that already exist within social arrangements (ibid., p. 9). According to the authors, disasters are not merely "natural" in a straightforward way; they are also the product of the social, political, and economic environment, and these phenomena construct the way of life of the people (ibid., p. 4). Their work, *At Risk*, illustrates how groups with less political power and access to resources are relatively more vulnerable than the privileged groups, who have more access to natural resources or government services or who reside in planned urban areas. They accentuate the recognition of the social environment. For example, people depending on limited economic opportunities have no option but to inhabit vulnerable places, which might place them at risk from flooding or earthquakes (ibid., p. 5).

At Risk defines the disaster risk (R) as a crosscutting combination of hazard (H) and vulnerability (V), that is R= HxV, which is called the Pressure and Release (PAR) model. The model shows how disasters take place when hazards hit vulnerable people, and therefore, vulnerability is "rooted in the social process" (p. 46). Many researchers applied the model as an exemplary approach of political economy, to analyse vulnerabilities to disasters (e.g., Oliver-Smith, 2009). In essence, their focus remains on the social structure rather than on physical hazards. As such, their approach does not refute the effects of hazards as "trigger events," but focuses on the human-made ways in which natural hazards produce disaster by leaving people vulnerable (Wisner et al., 2004). *At Risk* offers a simple working definition of vulnerability:

> [T]he characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard (an extreme natural event or process). It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life, livelihood, property, and other assets are put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event (or series or 'cascade' of such events) in nature and in society. (Wisner et al., 2004, p. 11)

Oliver-Smith (2009), based on his analysis on Hurricane Mitch, 1998, and Hurricane Katrina, 2005, argues that vulnerabilities to those hazards were systematic. Size and density of population, increasing poverty, and precarious livelihoods in risky areas trigger vulnerabilities to both natural and human-made hazards, and these socio-economic factors further expand the possibilities of the effects of disasters (ibid., p. 25). In the context of the natural hazards in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, the U.S., Matsuda (2007, p. 1) argues that the city saw "the flood before the flood." The former flood refers to the political-economic factors such as the racist public-school system, where black children were labelled as "failing," an outdated infrastructure of public works, availability of guns, increasing poverty, and the absence of basic health facilities.

Jones and Murphy (2009, p. 4) further contributed to the political economy approach to hazards and disasters. Their work added to the PAR model "to more fully account for ideology in the everyday economic life of people." As they put it:

> The political economy of hazards and disasters provides one such opportunity to link broader collective processes with the daily life of individuals in their households and communities to better understand mechanisms for the creation of vulnerability before, during, and after extreme events. (Jones & Murphy, 2009, p. 8)

Oliver-Smith (2009) applied the political economy approach, offered by Wisner et al. (2004), in analysing vulnerabilities to the deadly Hurricanes Mitch and Katrina. Hurricane Mitch was one of the deadliest hazards that affected Honduras, Nicaragua, Florida and parts of Central America in 1988, while Hurricane Katrina (in 2005) affected several states (e.g., Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana) of the USA. In both events, an extreme natural force approached communities whose environment, infrastructure, and population had been rendered severely vulnerable by social and economic processes. Oliver-Smith argues, "it was not just a situation of people living in harm's way, but of the active creation of conditions of

vulnerability largely through human action on the environment" (2009, p. 17). A number of studies on the effects of Mitch showed that Mitch-victims were already vulnerable to poverty before the impact of the hurricane, which only exacerbated prevailing vulnerabilities. The disaster displaced thousands of people, and many of them migrated to lowland cities that are exposed to flooding. Laska et al. (2005) state that the frustrating thing about Hurricane Katrina was that it was not only known it would happen but also what the causes and what the effects would be (cited in Oliver-Smith, 2009, p. 16); "In any environment with existing hazards, a disaster becomes inevitable in the context of a historically produced pattern of vulnerability, evidenced in the location, infrastructure, socio-political organization, production and distribution systems, and ideology of society" (Oliver-Smith, 2009, p. 14).

Klinenberg's (2015) study on the 1995 Chicago heat wave offers the idea of "social autopsy" to show the sociological reasons why poor, old, and isolated urban residents faced vulnerabilities to the extreme heat wave. While medical autopsy opens up and examines organs of the human body to examine physiological causes of mortality, social autopsy examines "the social organs of the city [of Chicago] and identify the conditions that contributed to the deaths of so many Chicago residents" (ibid., p. 11). The vulnerability lies with the social conditions (poverty, age, and race) of the people. Klinenberg (2015) shows that the victims were mainly elderly (73%), with African-Americans showing the highest proportional death rates, compared to white people (ibid., p. 18). To examine the uneven distribution of vulnerability, he highlights the social processes in which particular groups of people are isolated and deprived. As such, the great Chicago heat wave can be considered as "a barometer of contemporary urban conditions that shape the way we live and die even when we are not aware of them" (ibid., p. 236).

In a short analysis of Hurricane Katrina, one of the deadliest hurricanes in the United States, Scheper-Hughes (2005) observes that the hurricane had a "double" impact on the people. The "double" refers to "the social and political responses" to the disaster that exacerbate the adversities, and "it is difficult to say which is worse—the killer hurricane or the national response to it" (p. 3). Like every other society, wealthy residents of New Orleans faced lesser adversities compared to the poverty-stricken people. As Barack Obama, Illinois senator, and later the President of the United States (2009-2017) stated: "The people of New

Orleans weren't just abandoned during the hurricane, they were abandoned long ago" (cited in Scheper-Hughes, 2005, p. 4).

Solway's (1994) case study on the effects of a drought during the 1980s in the Kalahari region of Botswana shows that drought appeared as "revelatory crisis" in which the prevailing socio-economic arrangements were exposed. Paradoxically, the drought was seen as "an opportunity and provided a point of entry for the state to insert itself in the lives of citizens in new and expanded ways…this was an "instrument effect" of the drought relief measures" (Solway, 1994, p. 472). The drought was represented as a scapegoat: underlying problems can be unacknowledged by attributing disasters to the drought (ibid., p. 473). As such, Solway concludes, "It is not drought that produces a crisis of social reproduction; the drought only hastens it and renders visible what had been, up to a certain point, a largely latent process…it functions as a means of concealing such systematic realities" (ibid., p. 492).

2.4.3 Political Ecology Approach

While political economy sees that the broader political and economic structure produces vulnerabilities for certain groups of people, political ecology mainly concentrates on the fact that the environment is politicised. It is hard to draw a sharp distinction between the approaches of political economy and political ecology; both of these share the same theoretical standpoint, that is, emphasising historical processes of power relations.

Political ecology is an interdisciplinary research field that addresses human-environment interrelationships. It adopts unequal power and social inequalities as critical points of departure, with many scholars in the field attempting "a kind of emancipatory engagement" with marginalised or unprivileged peoples whose livelihood strategies are closely connected with natural resources (Karlsson, 2015, p. 350). It is "a multistranded research field and to what extent it will branch out or consolidate its core in the future is hard to tell" (ibid., p. 354).

The intellectual origins of "political ecology" go back to the 1970s when some thinkers—journalist Alexander Cockburn, anthropologist Eric Wolf, and environmental scientist Grahame Beakhurst—coined the term to understand questions regarding access and control over resources (Watts & Peet, 2004, p. 6). In his short article, entitled "Ownership

and Political Ecology", Wolf (1972) argues that the property issue in complex societies is not simply "an outcome of local or regional ecological process, but a battleground of contending forces which utilize jural patterns to maintain or restructure the economic, social, and political relations of society" (ibid., pp. 201-202). The cultural practices of property ownership and inheritance are not merely customs for the distributing of rights and obligations among a given population, "but mechanisms which mediate between the pressure emanating from the larger society and the exigencies of the local ecosystem" (ibid., p. 202). As such, the field of political ecology unpacks "the complex relations between nature and society through a careful analysis of what one might call the forms of access and control over resources and their implications for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods" (Watts, 2003, p. 257).

Political ecology "combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy" (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987, p. 17). The approach "encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups within society itself" (ibid., p. 17). Political ecology stands in opposition to apolitical ecology (Robbins, 2012), and it disentangles human-environment relations, with the approach arguing "politics is inevitably ecological and that ecology is inherently political" (ibid., p. 3). Unlike apolitical ecology, political ecology identifies ecological crises or issues under "broader systems rather than blaming proximate and local forces" (ibid., p. 13). Robbins suggests:

> [P]olitical ecology is an urgent kind of argument or text (or book, or mural, or movie, or blog) that examines winners and losers, is narrated using dialectics, begins and/or ends in a contradiction, and surveys both the status of nature and stories about the status of nature. (Robbins, 2012, p. viii)

Geographers Watts and Peet (2004) have outlined three approaches which formed the basis from which political ecology emerged: ecosystems, ecological anthropology, and natural hazards or disaster research. In geography and anthropology, two related sources contributed to the development of the field of political ecology. First, Teodor Shanin and his colleagues' (1972) accounts of peasants' social structure and the changes brought by modernization in peasant society and economy; second, the application of Marxism in social sciences,

particularly in development studies in various theoretical worldviews such as systems theory, dependency, and structural Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s (Watts & Peet, 2004, pp. 6-8). However, political ecology, as a theory, experienced a lack of articulation from the very beginning because "the meanings of ecology and political economy, and indeed politics, were often in question" (ibid., p. 9).

In the context of global warming, many scholars call for a "global political ecology" or "critical political ecology" to understand the dynamics of complex relations between global politics, political economy, and the environment (Peet, Robbins, & Watts, 2011). Global political ecology accentuates global political economy as a major underlying subject matter (ibid., p. 23). According to their argument, environmental destruction was produced through industrialization, consumption, globalization, and financialization. The central themes of global political ecology include:

> first, the grounding of environmental degradation in the trajectories of accumulation and the operations of market-based power; second, the intertwining of environmental conservation with struggles over environmental control; and third, the ongoing emergence of new ecologies, developing from human productive activity, with implications both for environmental destruction as well as for creative environmental alternatives. (Peet, Robbins, & Watts, 2011, p. 30)

Multiple actors (states, non-state organisations, households, communities, and individuals) exercise power in controlling, managing, or using environmental resources, and therefore, the actors are not merely the objects of the structural power, but they also internalize power. Foucault's (1991) idea of power provides such insights: how the states govern environment by employing individuals or individuals' behaviours to the environment—which is called "governmentality." Critical political ecology emphasizes revealing the discourses of environmental crises and representations of "nature." Environmental crises and their probable solutions are inseparably linked to "questions of power and governance" (Peet, Robbins, & Watts, 2011, p. 31). Foucault sees individuals are not simply powerless; they also exercise power:

> Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of

> simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (Foucault, 1980, p. 98)

In the recent anthropological studies on disasters and vulnerability, scholars have emphasized theorizing vulnerabilities in a globalized world from a political ecology perspective (Oliver-Smith, 2004). The purview of political ecology reveals disasters as less the result of extreme events, and more of ongoing social orders as they overlie physical environments (Hoffman & Oliver-Smith, 1999); "If environment is a test to which constructed social and physical worlds are the answer and continued survival the aim, from the purview of political ecology, disasters serve as one template through which societies show their score" (ibid., p. 6). To address the implications of globalization processes, which increase vulnerabilities and disasters, one needs to ask how globalization creates vulnerabilities and to what degree globalization "creates or exacerbates systematic as opposed to local specific vulnerabilities" (ibid., p. 22). Asking why disasters happen is a political question, "but understanding how they occur is a social and historical one" (Hilhorst & Bankoff, 2004, p. 4). Thus, it is important to think beyond the simplistic notion of vulnerability and to understand this as a concept with dynamism and fluidity: disasters, development and people are the interrelated contributors to the production of vulnerability (ibid., p. 9). They argue for mapping the landscape of vulnerability; there are no certain routes and fixed destinations on the map. The mapping involves both people's vulnerability and agency (ibid., p. 3). Oliver-Smith explains the insights of political ecology in order to understand the concepts of vulnerability and disaster:

> Vulnerability is fundamentally a political ecological concept. Political ecology blends a focus on the relationship that people have with their environment with close attention to the political economic forces characteristic of the society in which they live that shape and condition that relationship. At least from the perspective of hazards and disasters, vulnerability is the conceptual nexus that links the relationship that people have with their environment to social forces and institutions and the cultural values that sustain or contest them. Thus, combining elements of environment, society and culture in various

> proportions, the concept of vulnerability provides a theoretical framework that encompasses the multidimensionality of disasters. (Oliver-Smith, 2004, p. 10)

However, political ecology still lacks a "coherent proposition" (Vandergeest, Flaherty, & Miller, 1999, p. 574). In the article, "Against Political Ecology," Vayda and Walters criticize "self-styled political ecologists" who overemphasized "certain kinds of political factors in the explanation of environmental changes" and "missed or scanted the complex and contingent interactions of factors whereby actual environmental change often are produced" (1999, p. 167). They argue that "it may not be an exaggeration to say that overreaction to the 'ecology without politics' of three decades ago is resulting now in a 'politics without ecology,' which…is still billing itself as 'political *ecology*'" (ibid., p. 168, emphasis in original). They propose an alternative view called "evenemental" or "event ecology" approach, which is willing to consider both "philosophical and practical arguments" in order to investigate environmental changes through open questions rather than predetermined questions (ibid., 170). In response, Karlsson (2015) argues that political ecology is energized by new conversations including poststructuralist approaches, political ecological analysis of science and technology, and recent climate change issues. Thus, Karlsson concludes, "A critical role of political ecology is to insist that a sustainable future must be built on global social justice" (ibid., p. 354).

2.4.4 Resilience and Human Agency Approach

Broadly speaking, resilience refers to people's (individuals or society's) adaptive capacity during and after an adverse event. It implies the quality of flexibility in unpredictable and predictable consequences of extreme events, be they natural or unnatural. Resilience "is not the opposite of vulnerability, but it is often used as such" (Fiske et al., 2014, p. 12). It refers to "the capacity of a society to withstand impact and recover with little disruption of normal function" (ibid.). The term resilience has been used in many disciplines. As Gaillard (2010, cited in Lavell et al., 2012, p. 34) points out, the term has been used in disaster studies since the 1970s (Torry, 1979) and has its origins in engineering (Gordon, 1978), ecology (Holling, 1973), and child psychology (Werner, Bierman, & French, 1971). A group of scholars of climate change write:

> Resilience is defined as the ability of a system and its component parts to anticipate, absorb, accommodate, or recover from the effects of a potentially hazardous event in a timely and efficient manner, including through ensuring the preservation, restoration, or improvements of its essential basic structures and functions. (Lavell et al., 2012, p. 34)

The resilient perspective is increasingly used as an approach for explaining the dynamics of complex social-ecological systems (Folke, 2006). Ecologist C. S. Holling (1973) first introduced the idea of ecological "resilience" to explain that the ecological system has a "qualitative capacity to devise systems that can absorb and accommodate future events in whatever unexpected form they take" (p. 21); "Individual dies, populations disappear, and species become extinct. That is one view of the world" (Holling, 1973, p. 1). In an ecological system, a population can respond to any environmental changes by taking a series of physiological, behavioural, ecological, and genetic changes that restore its ability to respond to further environmental changes (ibid., p. 18). An ecological system can be resilient with fluctuations or low stability. Holling writes:

> [R]esilience determines the persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist. In this definition, resilience is the property of the system and persistence or probability of extinction is the result. (Holling, 1973, p. 17)

Holling and Meffe (1996) propose an idea of "pathology of natural resource management" to analyse how strict control and command of environmental variations simultaneously reduce environmental threats and bring expected outcomes for the temporary benefit of humanity; however, such controlling contributes to losses of the ecosystem's resilience and precludes long-term sustainability (pp. 328-329). Likewise, systems of households or communities lose resilience during and after hazardous conditions due to both environmental changes and human-induced control of resources. However, human communities have the capacity to withstand environmental changes and to come back to a previous stability, with little or no disruption.

The terms adaptation and resilience encapsulate human potential and tendencies of responding to environmental changes. Although the concept of resilience is an ecological and biological model for understanding human behaviours in a given ecosystem, nowadays social

and climate scientists and policy makers have adopted the concept to show human social resilience to absorb and accommodate slow or sudden environmental changes without completely failing (Fiske et al., 2014). Resilience in communities is rooted in the historical, social, and cultural constructions that govern the social relations, material development, and the associated institutions relating to management and growth (Fiske et al., 2014).

Recent studies suggest that disaster risk management and adaptation to climate change together can contribute to a sustainable and resilient future (O'Brien et al., 2012). Case studies of the climatic hazards such as the drought in Syria, cold-dry conditions in Mongolia, tropical cyclones in Bangladesh, and heatwaves in Europe not only reveal human loss and damage, but also the effectiveness of people's response strategies (Murray et al., 2012).

Some anthropological inquiries have been dealing with interrelations between the associated issues of adaptation, vulnerability, and resilience in the context of climate changes (Nelson et al., 2007; Nelson, 2011; Oliver-Smith, 2016). Nelson and colleagues (2007) explore how resilience is related to adaptation in the context of environmental change. Nelson et al. (2007, p. 399) stressed the need for a resilience framework research, which has "developed to incorporate ideas of complex systems and in so doing emphasises the functioning of the social-ecological system as a whole." Actor-based studies view the "process of negotiation and decisions," whereas the system-based ones examine "the implications of these processes on the rest of the system" (ibid.). They conclude that the resilience framework broadens the expansion of adaptation, as well as providing space for human agency.

The extinction or collapse of human society cannot solely be attributed to climate change; rather, it also involves non-climatic variables (McGovern, 1991). For example, many scholars examined why the Norse Greenland settlements had disappeared, and they took it as "a textbook example of the impact of climate change on human society" (McGovern, 1991, p. 77). The Norse or Scandinavian colony was founded in Greenland around 1000 A. D., a millennium ago. The settlers had established an economy of raising livestock and hunting seals, but they had disappeared by the sixteenth century. Archaeologists attribute the extinction of the Norse Greenlanders to the relationship between external (climate deterioration) and internal factors (maladaptation, conflict with Inuit) (McGovern, 2000;

Petersen, 2000; Seaver, 1996). As McGovern writes: “Many climate impact theories have been proposed, but most may be reduced to the simple statement ‘it got cold and they died’” (1994, p. 141). This collapse did not happen because of the Norsemen’s marginalized situations in Greenland. McGovern (1994) argues that the Norsemen had choices, but they were also adamant about not shifting their trade-oriented activities from walrus hunting to commercial fishing; the outcome could have been different if they had adopted Inuit technologies to utilize available resources; “The Norse were far less mobile” (McGovern, 1994, p. 144). They were “culturally pre-programmed to reject all innovations from the Inuit, fatally ignoring tainted technology and alien expertise and keeping closer and closer to home, hearth and church” (p. 147). Thus, in the Norse Greenland, maladaptation to economic changes and population decline might have been important factors in transforming the settlements’ “vulnerability to extinction” (Dugmore et al., 2007, p. 29). As McGovern (1994) puts it: “Like the Norse Greenlanders…we are not inevitably the prisoners of history and culture. Like them, we have many potential options” (p. 14).

Archaeologist Richard L. Burger (2003, cited in Dove, 2014, p. 20) asks: “whether the peoples of pre-Hispanic Peru anticipated the dangers posed by El Niño events [warm water pool moves to the South American coast], and whether they were able to develop strategies to mitigate them.” El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) refers to a periodic variation in sea surface temperatures and air pressure in the equatorial Pacific Ocean. Burger’s (2003) analysis of the archaeological data of the Peruvian coast shows the exercise of human agency: a) the ENSO-induced landslide was rightly identified; b) a solution was invented applying available technology and materials; c) labour was mobilised to build embankment; and d) later, to renovate the infrastructure.

2.5 From Vulnerability to Agency

The political economy approach is credited with emphasising the study of history in anthropology. It unpacks the impact of greater forces (such as capitalism, colonialism, urbanisation, and industrialisation) at a smaller scale (village or local community). It identifies unequal power relations that determine who would be vulnerable first. The approach is credited for bringing historical analysis into anthropology on the one hand and

is criticised for overemphasising economic aspects on the other. One of the criticisms about political economic analysis is that it absorbs people in broader structures and thus minimises human agency (Oliver-Smith, 2009).

Dow (1999), for example, based on her study of vulnerability to the oil spill in relation to the Malaysian island Langkawi, argues that small-scale fisherman's losses varied significantly. She concludes that people's coping actions (resilience and resistance) to the hazard event can influence the ways in which losses are produced and distributed.

Vulnerability denotes individuals' and/or communities' economic, political, and social conditions that affect their resistance and resilience to natural disasters. Thus, diverse historical, social, economic, political, cultural, institutional, natural resources, and environmental conditions and processes jointly produce vulnerability (Lavell et al., 2012), with both political economy and political ecology approaches holding that disaster vulnerability is deeply rooted in social arrangements. As Faas (2016, p. 14) argues, "If vulnerability is produced by human behaviour and is unevenly distributed, it is therefore historically produced." These approaches were often criticised for not identifying human agency in generating, as well as reducing, vulnerability. The agency approach points out that not all the actors in a disaster are victims, and they are not always passive victims.

Many scholars argue that vulnerability has its "dynamism and fluidity" (Hilhorst & Bankoff, 2004, p. 7). "The deeply rooted character of vulnerability" (Wisner et al., 2004, p. 9) includes the physical agents (e.g., rivers and floods) and the social and economic arrangements of a society in a given place. Disasters are created, as well as mitigated, through human agency.

In general, disasters decrease people's agency to recover losses. They are very often portrayed as "other," "powerless" and "victim." Such simplistic representations about disaster victims encouraged humanitarian organisations "to underestimate the agency of the people they set out to help and fail to understand…what the affected people can do themselves to mobilize their resources and networks" (Blaikie, 2010, p. 5). Gamburd (2014), based on her ethnographic work on the aftermath of the tsunami in Sri Lanka, explains that the "centralized" system of aid distribution contributed to the disaster victims' passive reactions to the disaster. After the disaster, Sri Lanka, specifically Southern Province, was

"inundated by a 'golden wave' of aid," but the survivors' positions in altered social and economic power determined the amount of aid he or she received (Gamburd, 2014, p. 6). They struggled to survive in the transformed social landscape and took pragmatic strategies to receive disaster relief. In her own words:

> In the disruption caused by the tsunami and the subsequent windfall of disaster relief, people struggled to achieve social, political, and economic power. They made meaning out of tsunami's chaos; came to terms with death, damage, and the destruction; rebuilt alliances, communities, and social hierarchies; and crusaded for equity, transparency, accountability, and justice. (Gamburd, 2014, p.6)

Faas (2016, p. 24) argues that focusing on human agency does not hide "the dialectical tensions between discourse and practice, sufferings and agency, power and powerlessness." He stresses ethnographic work in understanding the behaviours of the people who face disaster: "we must…be mindful to ground our work in encounters with actual people in real situations" (ibid.). He also argued that ethnographic approaches could reveal "the historical production of disaster…without rendering people as passive victims, but active agents capable of manoeuvre" (ibid.).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has described the anthropological perspectives on disaster vulnerability. As noted earlier, the approaches move from hazard-centric to political economy to human agency. Emphasizing the concept of agency in understanding people's vulnerability does not mean that it is the antithesis of the political economy approach. Rather, both contribute in revealing the processes of social, economic, and political structures, which then shape human-environment relations. As Ortner (2006, p. 57) puts it: "Agency is not an entity that exists apart from cultural construction." However, this research focuses on the agency approach to answer the following question: since the char dwellers are not just powerless victims of prevailing social and economic structures, how are they able to change the structural human-environment relations to reduce disaster vulnerability and change their precarious livelihoods by using available options? Political and economic factors, at multiple levels—local, national, and global—have the capacity to produce vulnerability, but this study

is interested in exploring the ways in which char inhabitants exercise their agency within the context of vulnerability.

Chapter 3

Onishchit Char: An Uncertain Island

3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with char dwellers' perceptions and observations on seasonal changes, as the conditions of char landscapes vary according to the seasons. Char dwellers find that seasons do not remain the same as they used to, and, instead, now they change unpredictably. Everyday conversations imply that climate is changing, and consequently that every aspect of existence is changing. But how do these people observe climate change in their everyday lives? How do they express their understandings? How has climate change appeared in the char environment? Such questions will guide this chapter.

3.2 Climate Change and Displacement

It is estimated that between 200 million and 1 billion people are likely to be displaced by environmental change over the next four decades (Laczko & Piguet, 2014). Laczko and Piguet and colleagues (2014) have described the interrelations between climate change and migration in different regions, including Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, North America, and small islands in different parts of the world. From a regional point of view, they have argued that the "environment may not always be the sole factor driving migration" (Laczko & Piguet, 2014, p. 3). In many cases, people voluntarily migrate to safer places to relocate themselves. However, it is hard to draw a sharp line between voluntary and forced migration. For example, people have not had much choice in the context of sudden ecological change, forcing people to move immediately, whereas other people have had various options in the context of regular or gradual ecological changes, such as riverbank erosion, providing time to migrate slowly (Laczko & Piguet, 2014).

Voluntary and forced migration are common effects of natural disasters (e.g., monsoon rain and river flooding) in South Asian countries, including Bangladesh and India. Climate

scientists have anticipated that 1.4 billion people will be affected by 2050 in India due to climate change (Hugo et al., 2009). People living in hazardous areas have widely utilised internal migration as a coping strategy. In addition to internal mobility, international migration could increase as a response to climate change in the coming days (Hugo & Bardsley, 2014). They have concluded that those who are already socio-economically marginal and vulnerable to natural hazards are more likely to be vulnerable to future climate change.

People involved in land-based livelihoods and low-income brackets are the most vulnerable to climate change, particularly those who reside near the sea and rivers because their families have depended on these resources over generations in order to survive. Climatic extreme events not only affect services of local ecosystems, but also worsen climate-driven disasters over time (Oliver-Smith, 2009). Scholars argue that climate-driven displaced people can be categorised as "environmental refugees" (El-Hinnawi, 1985).

Local, national and global political economy creates conditions in which economically marginal groups of people face extreme events, regardless of regions. Many environmental changes displaced millions of people such as with the Haiti earthquake in 2010, Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005, and the Bhola cyclone in Bangladesh in 1970. Although these events are primarily natural disasters, social scientists emphasise the need to understand the effects of those physical agents by linking them with socio-economic and socio-ecological factors, which are historically arranged. In other words, social scientists who work in disaster studies argue that nature and society are inextricably interconnected. As Oliver-Smith (2009, p. 120) puts it: "[T]he impacts of global climate change, like any disaster, will be socially, politically, and economically mediated, distributed, and interpreted, with measure to mitigate and respond similarly structured."

Natural disasters not only uproot people from their homestead, but also from their community, social network, and identity attached to the living place. A place is not simply a material phenomenon. It is more than that: people practise their social, cultural, psychological, and emotional lives in places where they live. As such, a place is not only a physical location but also "the setting for actions, the stage on which things happen…places, like voices, are local and multiple" (Rodman, 1992, p. 643). Places are "actively sensed"

(Feld & Basso, 1996, p. 7), and places and people are inextricably connected. Local people attach multiple meanings to the places where they live (ibid.). Basso (1996, p. 7) argues on the basis of his ethnographic work on landscape and language among the Western Apache: "place-making is also a form of cultural activity," and "it can be grasped only in relation to the ideas and practices with which it is accomplished." Therefore, people's displacement from a physical place leads to displacement from the community and culture they formed and practised for generations.

Physical disconnection of chars from the mainland accelerates the effects climate change has on every aspect of the char dwellers' lives, including continual displacement, as well as resettlement. The chars are also administratively disconnected. For example, there are no governmental infrastructures except for two primary schools on Onishchit and the neighbouring villages. No postman goes there to hand over letters because the people do not have a precise address (house number, road number, postcode, or block number). As a result, it is impossible to send a letter to a char dweller. They can only be contacted by arriving physically at their door. However, mobile phones have recently become a popular way of maintaining necessary and social communication.

"We don't have even a graveyard," Nurul said. His family used to live on Kalo Sona Char five years ago. His father died there while they were on the char. His father's dead body was buried next to the mosque located in his neighbourhood. As the char was thought to be sustainable, he hoped to make a boundary of concrete around his father's grave. Along with the settlement, the burial ground was washed away due to floods. Nurul sadly said: "Disaster washes away not only our land but also our relatives' graves. It washes away our memories of our beloved family members." He has told the public representatives in a community meeting that a graveyard should be provided around the embankment for char dwellers. He thinks the local government can acquire an area on the mainland and announce it as a graveyard for displaced families. However, he knows such hope is quite unrealistic: "Forget about the graveyard, we have repeatedly been demanding a shelter centre for us at the boat terminal. No response has come yet from the government."

Figure 6: A man rebuilding his house. Photo by researcher.

3.3 Six Seasons in Bangladesh but Two on Onishchit Char

Traditionally, they follow the Bangla calendar to observe the changes of the seasons. The school textbooks, popular magazines, and the daily newspapers call Bangladesh "the land of six seasons," which are: a) summer (*grisma*), b) rainy monsoon (*Barsa*), c) autumn (*sharat*), d) late autumn (*hemanta*), e) winter (*sheet*), and f) spring (*basanta*). On Onishchit, they functionally have two seasons: a) hazard (*durjog*) and b) the post-hazard agricultural season.

The climatic seasons play a significant role in the rural economy, society, and culture in Bangladesh. The Bangla calendar starts with the summer season (from mid-April to mid-June). The nation, regardless of religion, widely celebrates the Bangla New Year on the first day of the first Bangla month *Baishakh* (mid-April to mid-May). The recent pay scale has added a new allowance called Bangla New Year Allowance for all government employees once a year. In general, Bangla New Year is celebrated by wearing colourful traditional clothes, having traditional rural food, and listening to folk music. *Baishakh* is also important

for rural businesspeople. They mainly observe the day with their respective clients; they offer them traditional food and ask them to pay old dues and reopen their accounts—this traditional program is called *hal khata* (new account). Violent thunderstorms (*kal basishakhi jhor*), with rain, can sometimes occur in this summer season which damages fragile village structures.

As the water bodies (pond, canal, and river) dry up and the temperature goes above 30 degrees Celsius, rural people in agricultural occupations begin to wait for the rainy season because it provides water for irrigation and averts drought. The rivers and canals become full, and the boatmen earn from operating boats carrying goods and passengers. Fishermen knit new nets and repair boats for fishing. Rural people find the waterways relatively cheaper than the roads and highways in the rainy season. However, the monsoon rain leaves the low areas in flood and damages crops.

Autumn (from mid-August to mid-October) replaces the rainy season and various types of flower blossom. The Hindu Bengalis celebrate one of the biggest Hindu festivals, *Durga Puja,* in this season. Unlike the rainy season, a clear blue sky is seen in autumn. The farmers sow seeds of paddy crop. The fourth season, late-autumn (from mid-October to mid-December), brings new rice crops; rural people celebrate a traditional cultural event -- *nabanna* (new crops) -- with traditional foods, folk music, and dancing. Fairly low temperatures cause people to put out warm clothes and dry them in the sunlight to clear any damp.

Many rivers lose navigability in the dry period that includes two consecutive seasons—winter (from mid-December to mid-February) and spring (from mid-February to mid-April). Consequently, farmers, boatmen and fishermen, who depend on natural resources for their livelihood, face difficult times. Winter season is suitable for growing colourful vegetables such as cauliflower, carrots, coriander, cabbages, and other green-leafy vegetables. The season is also the time for extracting juice from date trees; the villagers turn concentrated juice into jaggery (*gur*), which is one of the main ingredients for making traditional sweet dishes. People call the spring the king of all seasons because it is not too hot and not too cold; the farmers grow mustard and wheat widely in this season.

6 seasons in Bangladesh	4 Late-autumn	5 Winter	6 Spring	1 Summer	2 Rainy Monsoon	3 Autumn
2 seasons on Onishchit	Post-flood				Flooding	
Livelihoods on Onishchit	Agriculture				Lean	
Level of migration	Low migration				High migration	
1. Summer (*Grisma*): from mid-April to mid-June 2. Rainy Monsoon (*Barsa*): from mid-June to mid-August 3. Autumn (*Sharat*): from mid-August to mid-October 4. Late-autumn (*Hemanta*): from mid-October to mid-December 5. Winter (*Sheet*): from mid-December to mid-February 6. Spring (*Basanta*): from mid-February to mid-April						

Figure 7: Seasons and Livelihood activities.

The national media covers seasonal changes through documentary reports. Urban-based middle and higher-class societies observe the seasons with various types of fashion. The top brands in the clothing industry erect advertisement-billboards, publish fashion magazines, and offer discounts on certain products. However, rural islanders do not have such a luxury; they practically have two seasons—hazard and post-hazard agricultural season, as noted above; "We only know that we have to cultivate crops when the floodwater declines" (Interview notes, 2015).

3.4 Local Understandings of Climate Change

A small number of the island villagers are aware of recent climate change discourses through the local NGOs' development programmes on the island. The development organisations frequently arrange meetings on the island to disseminate information about the issue of climate change and its consequences. They invite local people including influential

individuals, such as public representatives (Chairman and Members of the local government at village level), *matbar* (headman), wealthy farmers, freedom fighters, schoolteachers, and development volunteers to attend the community-level meetings so that the programmes can receive acknowledgment from the communities.

Saida, a woman member, who has participated in several meetings regarding climate change, stated: "The NGOs have trained us in how to adapt to the hazard risks; say, how to store dry food and candles; how to protect children and elderly people; and how to move belongings to a safer place." The usual practice is that a selected group of individuals, who are influential locally, are repeatedly invited to the same kind of workshops or community meetings.

Other than the interactions with the NGOs and television and radio news, the daily newspapers are the relevant sources that could familiarise the islanders with climate change issues. The islanders have no access to such electronic media, as there is no electricity on the remote islands. The tea stalls at the boat terminal are the only places for watching television. Television with satellite channels has become a necessary accessory for the tea stalls to attract local customers. The islanders frequently come across news on climate change (*jolbaiu paribartan*) while they take tea at the stalls. Most of them find the content of news difficult to understand. An elderly farmer said, "It is hard to understand what the TV [news] says; we only know that flood comes every year."

The NGOs popularised the term "climate change" on many islands through their livelihood related projects, presented through colourful posters and billboards. The term has become an everyday topic for young people, particularly those who work as volunteers and paid workers for the NGOs on the islands. The local terms *durgati* (wretchedness), *durjog* (disaster), and *sarbanasha* (catastrophe) are interchangeably used to explain the climatic disasters.

COP 21 or the 2015 Paris Climate Conference was taking place in Paris, France, when I was conducting fieldwork on Onishchit. Thousands of participants including official delegates from government, UN bodies, NGOs, and other civil society groups attended the conference, and they reached an agreement for keeping global warming below 2°C at this

conference.[2] Both the national and international media widely covered the issues discussed in the conference. In Bangladesh, many television channels arranged a significant number of talk shows, and the daily newspapers published numerous articles on the issue. It appeared as a daily topic of conversation amongst social scientists and NGO staff. In that context, I tried to investigate what the islanders thought about global warming. My questions about climate change and the Paris Agreement made them nervous and shy. They were shy because they thought climate change was a complex issue; they assumed rural and illiterate people like them could not understand it. They observed that NGOs had repeatedly invited local elites (political leaders, headmen, community leaders, wealthy farmers, and college students) at community meetings. An elderly farmer stated, "We [the islanders] are illiterate people. Do we understand such a complex subject? This is an issue for literate persons like you."

Nonetheless, they can explain how climate is changing, because they have been living with some inevitable uncertainties relating to losing their home and agricultural livelihoods over generations. Historically, adaptation to flood has been a common phenomenon for the people of Bangladesh (Mukherjee, 1938). One-third of the country is "gripped" with flood due to monsoon rains (Chaturvedi, 2013, p. 153). Thus, the changes of weather and climate are everyday topics for conversation. Sajjad, one of the important participants of this study, explained the local term *ujan* in relation to the Brahmaputra river which flows from the north (*ujan* or *uttar*) to the south (*vati* or *dakhkhin*), and therefore, the river affects the northern edges of all islands first. The people living in the *ujan* areas are displaced first. This explanation is commonly shared among men, women, and children. People's knowledge of weather and climate transmits to the next generation through their folk-tales and weather-related proverbs (Strauss, 2003). "[P]eople who work or live together use similar vocabularies and styles of speaking which, while perfectly recognisable, may not be particularly *meaningful* to those outside the group" (Strauss, 2003, p. 40).

It was a morning in the winter in 2016. Momen and his next-door neighbours, both men and women, were passing the time lazily chatting. They sat under a tree located at Momen's house. One of the topics of discussion was the tendency towards the decreasing intensity of

[2] See http://www.cop21paris.org/ (Accessed on 20 June 2017).

cold in the winter season (December-January). They observed that the duration of the winter season had shortened compared to the past. Momen said:

> We were taught in school that Bangladesh was a country of six seasons. But now we feel only two seasons—summer and winter. In the past, our bodies shivered with cold in winter. But now we hardly feel such cold. Nowadays we wear thin clothes in winter but, we used to wear warm and heavy clothes in the past.

He added: "Winter not only comes late but is also shortening in its duration. We used to say that *magher shite-e baghe-e dorai* [even tigers are scared of the winter of *Magh*, a month of Bangla calendar, which is January-February]. But those days are gone." A woman, who was listening to our conversation, joined in and added:

> Look, now it is around 11 o'clock in the morning. I have already taken off my warm clothes. Two-three years ago, the cold caused our bodies to shiver. We used to grow winter vegetables around the house. But, it seems that the winter season has become shortened.

Momen also said that the period of flooding and riverbank erosion has become unpredictable. He has witnessed many islands that had lasted from one to two decades. Now it has been changing rapidly; the islands only last for a few years nowadays. He said, "In the past, floodwater used to remain for a shorter period, say, two or three weeks. Whereas, in the recent years, floods come slowly and stay for a longer time." In 2015, it took around three months for the floodwater to decline entirely from their agricultural land. Like other elderly islanders, Momen stated that the joining of the Tista river with the Brahmaputra river had accelerated the intensity of riverbank erosion. Consequently, riverbank erosion has transformed the bigger islands into smaller ones, with the latter being more vulnerable.

Moksed, a young grocery shop owner at the boat terminal, experienced less profit in 2015 because the floodwater remained for a longer time than the previous year. His father, younger brother, his wife and himself jointly run two grocery shops, one at the boat terminal, and the other in their neighbourhood on Onishchit. Most of his customers are fellow islanders of his neighbourhood and the islands around the boat terminal. They usually buy grocery items (e.g., seasonal vegetables, cooking oil, salt, rice, spices, and tobacco items) at the shops in the bazaar at the boat terminal. The islanders could not regularly come to the bazaar due

to longer periods of flooding. It worries the small shopkeepers at the bazaar because the long-extended nature of the floodwater affects their businesses. Most of the customers, mostly the islanders, buy goods on credit and promise to pay after harvesting. However, a longer period of flood hinders the growing of crops, which ultimately affects both the islanders' economy and others with whom they are involved in economic transactions.

They compare their experiences and that of their grandparents regarding the patterns of the catastrophe and its implications for their homes and livelihoods. In the past, when *boro banna* (long staying flood) hit the islands, the floodwater remained for a few weeks, and the islanders had more months to grow crops. In contrast, nowadays, the floodwater continues for a longer period, and the farmers have fewer months to grow crops. Moreover, the river used to erode the islands only during the rainy seasons in the past, but nowadays it happens almost every month. The previous floods occurred in the middle of the year (June-July), but nowadays floods continue into August and September. A recent survey by GUK found that the islands are sustained for a shorter period compared to the past. Thus, the rate of economic migration has increased compared to the past (Interview notes, 2015).

Apparently, the local "disaster calendar" has started changing. A top-ranking development researcher, who has been working for GUK, observes that flood victims used to follow their disaster calendar, which is a sort of rough calculation for forecasting floods. The researcher stated: "I have been working for the char people more than a decade. I saw that elderly people could predict flooding period and duration. Now their prediction does not work anymore". Following the calendar, they used to anticipate agricultural and lean periods, where the new land would appear, and where to emplace themselves in future. Traditionally, they used to follow ants' movements—they move in groups toward higher places when they anticipate that the torrential rains would destroy their nests. As such, the local people used to receive a warning message from ants' mobility. However, such local knowledge hardly works now.

GUK built a primary school, a high school and a branch office on Kunderpara Char. The island is better known than the other neighbouring islands for its long sustainability and infrastructures (high school, a branch office of GUK, and bazaar). Its workers call the char the "capital" of the organisation. They thought the island would last for a long time, but it

has started submerging into the river since the flood in 2015. The founder of the organisation stated that it could be an example of the impact of climate change on the river islands in Bangladesh (Interview notes, 2015).

3.4.1 Hazard as "Act of God"

The local perceptions and senses of both hazards and islands are multivocal. The islanders' perceptions developed from multiple factors including religion, supernatural power, general knowledge, and their everyday observations regarding the changes of the seasons. It is noticed that many elderly people usually believe hazards are an "act of God." They believe that they are "helpless" because misfortunes embrace them, and that God controls the state of the misfortunes. On the contrary, the younger people, especially those who go to college and have come across recent climate change discourses through television news and the hazard-related billboards, believe in both supernatural and rational knowledge. Nurul said:

> It seems to me that we have a cursed life. It is a great sin to be born on the islands. We are the most unfortunate people. It seems to me that poverty and hazard do not want to leave us. Only Allah knows whether we would be able to escape from the cursed-life or not.

Like many others, Momen firmly believes that everything, including the natural hazards, happens according to God's command. He stated: "Only Allah knows well why hazards are taking place on the chars. We human beings only can guess about it, but Allah knows everything." He explained that hazards, especially floods, not only cause "helplessness," but also "opportunities":

> My, this, place [where we were talking] was underwater a few years ago. But, look at this place now. Floods left the area as a sandy char. I moved here and built my home. The river cannot flow without Allah's command. The river erodes the chars, but Allah saves us always. Otherwise, we would not be able to survive. Allah gives us floods so that we can get fertile land after the declining of the floodwater. That is why we can cultivate a huge crop after floods. You know that *riziker malik Allah* [Only Allah provides food].

Unlike Momen, Shafik, a young man, believes in both spiritual and scientific explanations in relation to the causes of the hazards. Shafik goes to a local private college, as well as taking care of his family farm. He came across issues of climate change while reading newspapers and watching television news at the tea stalls at the boat terminal. He understands that the seasons will not be the same as they were in the past because "we are constructing big factories everywhere." He added, "We might get longer or shorter winter, or we might get longer or shorter summer. We might see frequent floods, or we might not get water in the river. We might not get water for irrigation."

He has heard from his parents that Allah punishes those places where a lot of people have committed great sins such as losing faith in Allah. According to his father, the islands are one of the cursed places. Shafik also believes that everything happens according to Allah's command. He thinks that God intentionally commands flooding and cyclones to test human beings to see whether they keep faith in Him in such precarious circumstances. He shared a religious story that he heard from a sermon on Islam (*owaz*) about an invisible prophet who controls water's mobility. Shafik recalled what he had heard in the sermon:

> I do not know exactly the causes of the hazards. I am a *murkho* [illiterate]. You are an educated person; you might know this better than us. But, of course, there is a something under the river. I heard a story from a sermon: Once upon a time, a great king ruled the entire world. His name was Sikandar. The king was very strict on collecting revenue from his kingdom. One day, he had heard about 'holy water' from someone, that the water would appear somewhere in his kingdom. The holy water had a very particular power. One who drinks the holy water would be immortal. The king wanted to be immortal. So, he started looking for the source of the holy water. One day, he took Khawz Khizir with him for company. [Khawz Khizir is known as a living but an invisible prophet or saint in Islam]. The saint felt thirsty, and he drank a few sips of the water from the nearby ground while they were walking together. But the saint had no idea that the water he had drunk was the holy water that they were looking for. Since then, he has become immortal and has been living underground in the earth. And he has been ruling the water-world as well. He is still alive. All the rivers listen to his command. He controls floods and river erosion when he wishes.

Chayna, who goes to a college and works as a midwife for an NGO, believes in the supernatural power that causes riverbank erosion: “There is, of course, something under the river, but we do not exactly know what it is.” There was a shocking incident on Onishchit when the floodwater started subsiding, and the people started ploughing the plots of the agricultural land in late 2015. A little girl drowned in a boating accident. The boat was carrying ten to fifteen schoolchildren from a new river island to a primary school on Onishchit, where they used to live. They had moved to a new island because their houses were washed away during the floods in the same year. As on other days, the boat carried passengers including the schoolchildren. Accidentally, the boat hit another boat just at the departure point on Onishchit. All the passengers fell into the river because the boat capsized. The level of water was at waist-height, and all the passengers managed to walk through the river water and safely reach the island except the little girl who was a student of Class or Grade III. The local people looked for the girl for hours immediately following the incident, but they could not find the body.

It was surprising that the little girl drowned in such low level of water, especially since she knew how to swim. In fact, swimming is a basic adaptation strategy for living on the islands. It can be observed that little children frequently play in the river: diving, swimming, and catching fish. After a few days following the accident had happened, the dead body was found in the same area, where the accident happened. Describing the incident, Chayna said, “There is something that lives under the river water, which is beyond our imagination. Because no one can be drowned in such low-level of the river water.” However, her husband, a schoolteacher and one of the research assistants, shared a more reasonable view:

> We can only see the top wave of the river but cannot see the wave underneath which is as strong as the top wave. When the floodwater declines, the wave underneath becomes stronger, and it can pull heavy things and drown them no matter what the water level is.

3.4.2 Hazard as Human-Made

Human actions are also thought to be responsible for hazards. For example, unplanned sand removal from the dry river bed is one of the important reasons for riverbank erosion. The local people alleged that some influential individuals withdraw piles of sand from the

sandbanks and make a huge amount of money by selling sand in the construction sector. The local people think that such haphazard sand-removal weakens the banks of the river and the edges of the sandy islands.

The locals believe that the monopoly of corn cultivation on the fragile sandy islands is also partly responsible for riverbank erosion. In the past, they used to grow multiple crops such as paddy, wheat, jute, potato, sugarcane, pumpkin, and lentil. Nowadays, they predominantly grow corn. A young woman, a mother of two, shares a significant thought about the connection between mono-cropping and riverbank erosion: "We, the island people are also responsible for riverbank erosion. The island people have become greedy nowadays. We use every plot of the islands for corn cultivation, even sandy plots at the edges of the islands." To grow crops on the sandy plots, they need to remove all the wild plants (locally called as *kashiaa* and *dhanchiya*), which work as a natural shield for the fragile sandy edges of the islands. Those plants lessen the strong flows of the river, and therefore the wild plants protect the islands and the populated areas from the river erosion. Unlike the past, they do not purposefully implant the wild plants nowadays. Rather, there has been an increasing tendency to exploit the islands as much as possible for growing corn.

3.5 Uncertain Grazing Land

There was a large area of grazing land located in between Balashi boat terminal and Onishchit Char. Such grazing land has become an important feature of the char ecosystem. The grazing land consists of idle sandy plots, which are on relatively higher ground than the nearby settlements. The owners of the area left it unused as it lacks fertile silt. However, the field is a free source of natural grasses. The nearby islanders graze their cattle on the grass field; they do not need permission from the landowners to graze their cattle on the field. The area was partly affected by the flood of 2015 and I observed the people, both from the mainland and the adjacent chars, come to the field with boats to collect the wild grasses (*kashia*) even in heavy rain and flooding.

It was a morning in the flooding season in September 2015. The boatmen anchored their boats just at the end of the concrete road at the boat terminal. Some shops had moved somewhere else, and some remained locked. The flood water just touched the roof of the

small tin-shed shops. Boatman Delwar hurried to start the boat as it was about to rain. He loudly announced that he would start the boat as soon as possible and for the passengers to get on the boat quickly, as it had started raining. The boat was full of passengers, even though it was raining. Most of them had a sickle, rope, and empty sacks as they were heading to the grass field to collect grass for their cattle.

Figure 8: The river has inundated the grazing land. Photo by researcher.

When the boat reached the grass field, both men and women jumped into the waist-height water and approached the grasses. They started cutting the grasses, which were about 5 feet into the water. Compared to the men, the women had to struggle with their long sarees along with cutting the long grasses. Cutting such long wild grasses requires extra caution as the grass is sharp enough to cut fingers. They requested the boatman, Delwar, to collect them at a convenient time before the sun would set. Many of them carried their mobile phones protected by tiny plastic bags so that the flood water could not damage the device. When I was coming back from Onishchit in the afternoon, the boatman anchored the boat at the grass field to collect some of those grass collectors. The boatman phoned several men and asked them to inform everyone to come back to the boat as soon as possible. It took nearly an hour to collect them and their collected grasses. Some, who did not bring sacks, tied up the grasses with ropes. Since they cut the grasses in the waist-

height flood water and the rain, they all looked wet and exhausted. They managed to protect their cigarette packets, mobile phones, and betel leaves they had taken with them in the morning. Nearly half of the grazing land was eroded during the course of my fieldwork, and there was a little chance of growing natural grasses on the remaining sandy area.

3.6 Balashi *Ghat*: A Continually Displaced Boat Terminal

The boat terminal is only seven kilometres away (4.34 miles) from the zero point of Gaibandha town, from where a road, called Balashi Road, goes toward the boat terminal. It takes 15-20 minutes on a three-wheeler auto-rickshaw, which is operated by rechargeable batteries, to reach the boat terminal from the town. The auto-rickshaws have become a popular form of transport because their fares are lower than the manual rickshaws pulled by men. The vehicle is locally called *auto*; it carries both passengers and goods from the town to the terminal, and vice versa. The boat terminal is one of the main connecting hubs between the islands and the mainland. It is a popular business centre, especially for the islanders and the people living around the boat terminal.

There are many shops with tin roofs and tin walls at Balashi. Most of the shops do not have registered names; a shop is named according to what it sells. In addition, the shops are known by the name of the owners. The types of shops include restaurants as well as shops selling tea, medicines, vegetables, fish, meat, grocery, electronics, and seeds and fertiliser. Moreover, many people bring milk, homemade sweet items, seasonal fruit, and garden vegetables to Balashi to sell. Many *autos* are parked there. The auto-drivers loudly chant "Gaibandha, Gaibandha, Gaibandha…" to draw the attention of the passengers who are heading to Gaibandha town. The fare is fixed but also negotiable. At least eight passengers get on an auto-rickshaw at a time. The seven-kilometre-long Balashi road just ends at the river—the spot is called *puccar matha* (end of the Balashi road), from where several unorganised sandy paths go toward the boats. "*Ghat*," "Balshi *ghat*," "Balashi," and "*puccar matha*" are interchangeably used by the islanders to indicate the boat terminal and the surrounding spaces such as the local bazaar and the embankment.

The ghat is also an attractive place to the local tourists for enjoying fresh air and boat journeys. In the 1980s, the river was located nearly eight kilometres away in the north from

the ghat's current location. A woman who assists her son in running a restaurant at the ghat shared her nostalgic experiences regarding the ghat in the past:

> When I was a small girl, my grandfather took me to the ghat to see the bigger launches and enjoy the river view. Now we do not have to go to see the river view at the river. The river has come to us. It has eroded our land. It has made us landless and homeless. Ten years ago, this place [where we were talking] was *bir* [stable land]. We used to grow crops here. Then the plot was eroded. It re-emerged a few years ago, but it has only sand, no silt.

The ghat looks different according to the seasons: dry and flooding. For example, the very same spot was used for operating boats and growing paddy in November and January, respectively. The ghat is much busier in the dry season, as the boats remain active in transporting seeds, fertiliser, day labourers, and other agricultural machines such as tractors. During the harvesting phase, many trucks are seen parked and waiting for loads of corn coming from the islands on the big boats. The wage labourers, especially from the different islands, converge at the ghat from early morning to be hired for loading and unloading the boats and trucks. Unlike the agricultural season, the ghat looks somewhat indistinct in the rainy season when the river becomes full and inundates the ghat, and the boats are anchored just at the end of the Balashi Road. People do not usually use small boats without engines at this time, as the river flows with high waves which might sink the small boats. The typical picture at the ghat during flooding is of the big boats transporting livestock and belongings from the inundated islands to the mainland. The islanders' primary concern is to save the animals from flooding because raising livestock is one of the main sources of earnings on the island.

Habib, a young man, runs a small tea stall at the ghat. His stall is an example that depicts how the ghat moves. Like other shopkeepers, he needs to move his stall according to the mobility of the ghat and the levels of river water around the ghat. Habib's tea stall can be assembled and disassembled within less than twenty minutes. His stall has only three small wooden benches for customers, but not a tea table. A little wooden box is the main furniture of his stall. It has a few drawers for keeping money and goods such as packets of biscuits, chips, sugar, cigarettes, betel leaves (*paan*), and areca or betel nut (*supari*). His home is

located close to the ghat. He opens his stall daily early in the morning and closes at ten o'clock at night. He brings his lunch in a metal tiffin box; sometimes, his wife brings lunch for him at his stall and helps him in washing the teacups and kettle. He takes his bath in the river, dries his wet clothes by hanging them over the wooden structure of the stall, and keeps his dried clothes in the box.

I witnessed Habib having to move his stall more than ten times during my sixteen-month fieldwork. He did so less frequently in the dry season, but he had to move the stall often during flooding and afterwards. When the river water increases, he, along with the other shopkeepers, moves back toward the Balashi road, and he comes forward toward the banks of the river when the water subsides. I used to follow his stall because he used to set it at the place where the boats were anchored. All the boats looked almost the same in size and colour (black), and it took me several weeks to figure out which boat goes to Onishchit. The boatman used to take tea and hang around Habib's tea stall until the boat was filled with passengers.

After losing agricultural land due to the river erosion, Habib and his mother took shelter on the mainland very close to the ghat. His father left them and started a new family somewhere else. A generous man allowed them to stay on his land until they found a place to live. Now, Habib's household consists of his mother, his little sister and his wife. He had to shift, not only his stall but also his business type. When I met him in late March 2015, he used to run his tea stall. After a few days, he closed the stall and started selling tea and cigarettes while walking around the ghat, carrying a flask full of tea as well as teacups and a few packets of the cheaper cigarettes in his pocket. He had to change his business partly because the area of the stalls at the ghat was inundated and partly because he was short of capital. In the past, he used to sell seasonal fruit as a hawker at the ghat until the flood water subsided and the sandy land resurfaced where the small businesspersons could set up their temporary stalls.

After the flood, while I was there, Habib received a loan from a moneylender and restarted his tea stall. The governing body of the ghat did not collect the *khajna* (revenue) from him, as the stall was too small to pay taxes on. However, some of them took advantage of it—for example, one day I observed a man who took tea and cigarettes from Habib's stall but did not want to pay. Habib was afraid to protest because the man was close to the head

of the governing body of the ghat and the man might make it difficult for Habib to run his business without paying the revenue.

The islanders recall that big launches, steamers, and ferries were operated from the ghat in the past. Other than the country boats, there are still several large vessels including pontoons, ferryboats, barges, and tugs moored at the ghat. The Bangladesh Railway Authority operated the heavy transport watercraft. The big ships were used in the past to carry both passengers and freight from one river port to another, including the main ports in divisional districts (e.g., Bahadurbad Ghat, Balashi Ghat, Tistamuk Ghat, Sirajganj Ghat, Narayanganj and Jagganathgonj Ghat). Now, these watercrafts are kept idle at Balashi ghat. The formation of a sandbank in the river has left the ferries standing idle. According to the everyday casual comments of the boat passengers, these watercrafts have been kept inactive for more than a decade, and the government has been losing money in paying salaries to the railway workers who have nothing to do but just watch the idle ships day after day. According to the islanders, the lack of navigation has eroded the glorious past of the waterways.

A caretaker of a large ferry stated that he and his colleagues used to work in the ferry from morning until evening a decade ago. Now, they have become idle and inactive like the ships because of insufficient navigability in the Brahmaputra River. The river loses navigability during the dry season. They have nothing to do except cook meals and pass their working hours by reading newspapers and gossiping. The caretaker presumed the ships would be closed permanently very soon because the bigger water transport vessels could not navigate the river due to the many sandbanks. He stated:

> The British and then the Pakistan government bought the ferries and tugs. The People used to love and enjoy traveling by train and ferry. Now it is *etihas* [history]. The glorious days of the river and rail were gone. Now the people pay more for traveling on the roads. I think the government has abandoned its hope in the railway and waterway. Bangladesh is called the land of rivers; you know that. But the waterway and rail are ignored. After opening the Jamuna Bridge, the government hardly dredged the river for navigation. People are encouraged to use the bridge and pay more. I think the higher authorities are emphasizing on constructing roads, highways, and bridges, but ignoring the waterways. The ships we have at this moment were launched in the Pakistan period.

> The British introduced us with trains and railroads. The rail-river-ways were profitable in the past. But why not now?

An elderly farmer, nearly eighty, named Munser, recalled that the ghat was very famous and prosperous in the 1970s. It was used to operate large ships. He used to travel by boat for trading spices and oil between India and Bangladesh. Such long-distance boat journeys have been interrupted, as the river has become dotted with thousands of chars. He also said that India's control on the upstream water of the Tista River is one of the reasons for the discontinued navigation. He criticised the government for not taking serious steps to make sure the river has navigability during the dry season.

The ghat has no concrete infrastructures except a pontoon donated by the government of Japan. A group of people headed by a contractor (*ijaradar*) lead the process of moving the ghat—they select a relatively higher place at the bank adjacent to the mainland and employ day labourers to make a path so that people can walk from the concrete road toward the place where the boats are anchored. The governing body of the boat terminal is entitled to collect revenue (*khajna*) from the boat-owners and passengers who carry goods for business purposes. The process of collecting revenue is somewhat semi-formal, however. Two young men, for instance, were forcefully charged to pay tax on the spot. We got on the same boat heading to Onishchit. They brought some metal utensils with them to sell them on the island. At first, they refused to pay tax when asked by a group of people who claimed themselves to be collectors of revenue for the ghat. They were threatened and told that they could not leave the ghat without paying the tax. The utensil-hawkers asked for a revenue receipt. The revenue collectors said they did not have such a receipt-giving system. The heated talk between the collectors and the hawkers delayed the boat, and the passengers lost their patience. The boatman and some passengers suggested to the vendors that it was better to pay the revenue; otherwise, they would make a problem when they came back from the island. Eventually, they unwillingly paid the so-called revenue, and they angrily declared they would never come to the island to sell their utensils.

The ghat plays a significant role in national and local politics. The local people, both the islanders and mainlanders, have been expecting a modern bridge like the Jamuna Multi-

Purpose Bridge would be built around the ghat.[3] The bridge would connect Gaibandha to Dhaka via the neighbouring district of Jamalpur. Presumably, flood-prone areas such as Gaibandha and Jamalpur would then get access to economic development that is centred in the capital city of Dhaka. The politicians promised several times in their political campaign speeches before the national elections that a bridge would be constructed around the ghat if their party could lead the government. Several decades have passed, and no government has produced a plan yet to build the expected bridge. “Politicians charm us by announcing this kind of promise, they say many things to get our votes, and they forget the promises after they got elected” (Field notes, 2015).

Figure 9: Balashi boat terminal in the dry season. Photo by researcher.

During flooding, the river becomes too full, and the boats are anchored just at the concrete road attached to the mainland and Balashi road. The people can get on the boats within a few minutes after getting off auto-rickshaws during periods of flooding. Conversely,

[3] The Jamuna Multi-Purpose Bridge is one of the largest bridges (above five kilometres long) in the world. It connects the northern part of Bangladesh to the capital city Dhaka.

the river water recedes during winter, and the boats are anchored where navigation is available. In winter, one can go to Rasulpur and Chatarkandi, Onishchit's neighbouring islands, by walking on the dry riverbed from the ghat, but one needs boats during flooding to go to the same islands. The locals find it difficult when they need to carry sacks of seeds and fertiliser to the islands because they have to cross the dry riverbed on foot toward the boats. Thus, some people hire auto-rickshaws or manual vans for carrying agricultural accessories from the road to boats. A manual van, loaded with the sacks of seeds and fertilisers, is usually pulled as well as pushed by several men.

Figure 10: Indigenous engineering for improving navigation at Balashi ghat. Photo by researcher.

Operating the boats requires continual maintenance of the ghat. The maintenance involves cutting and moving the sand so that the river water can flow into a single channel, which is difficult for the governing body because they do not have the necessary machines to dredge the sand bars. As such, they depend on indigenous engineering. For example, in January 2016, the lessee (*ijaradar*) of the ghat was directing a group of day workers to move sand from one place to another to make a path for passers-by. Under his guidance, the

labourers made a fence with straw and bamboos at the boat-operating place. The labourers, as well as the lessee, placed several bamboo walls to direct the stream of the water to a single channel because the sand-deposition makes several channels and transforms the large channel into smaller ones, which hampers navigation. Several people voluntarily came down into the water to help the labourers. They tied up the bamboo fences into the water. However, the fence, supported by bamboos, was too weak to direct the flow of the river water and the bamboo logs fixed behind the fences fell down due to the high flow of the water. So, they deployed an engine boat's fan to crush the sand bars. The fan of the boat started breaking the sandbar under the boat, and the channel got deeper and wider. Eventually, the water started moving quickly and joined the channel they were planning to make navigable. However, the higher flow of the water again collapsed the bamboo fence within half an hour; they made several attempts, but the bamboo walls did not last longer than an hour.

3.7 *Vatia*: Inhabitants of Char-Lands

The mainlanders informally, sometimes jokingly, call the islanders, as well as their accent, *vatia*—a widely used slang word in Gaibandha. It refers to the inhabitants of the island villages. The local term *vati* is a formal Bangla word that means downstream of a river or lower ground along with a river, and the opposite is *ujan* that means upstream of a river. The char dwellers address the mainlanders and their Bangla accent by calling them *bangal*. Even as a native speaker of Bangla (or Bengali), it took me a few weeks to understand the difference between the two accents: *vatia* and *bangal*.

The local terms *vatia* and *choura* are used interchangeably. Choura refers to those who live on the chars. It is believed that the char dwellers are somewhat of a choura sub-culture, which is different from the mainland in every way (Zaman, 1989, p. 197). For example, a college student, who was one of the important participants of this study, travels back and forth to Onishchit. He shared a room in a lodging house close to his college on the mainland (Gaibandha town). He stated: "The people [mainlanders] think that the inhabitants of char-lands are illiterate and uncultured. They think that we are stuck in poverty and hazard forever." I have observed that some shopkeepers on the mainland calling their acquaintances living on char-lands: "Hey vatia, where are you going?" Delwar, a boatman, said that he was

called bangal while he used to live on the mainland; now he is called vatia, as he has been living on char-lands.

Vatia refers not only to the remote geographical location, as noted above, but also to the disconnection from sophisticated tastes, education, and "good" lifestyle compared to the mainlanders. Salam, a relatively wealthy farmer on Onishchit, said that the mainlanders treat the islanders badly:

> They [mainlanders] treat us as poor and brainless. They see that we must go to the mainland for everything [grocery shopping, treatment, and education], but they do not have to come to char. They think that they are local and permanent residents, we are not. We move where the river takes us. We are the temporary residents here. I bought a piece of land on *bir* [mainland]. Some people living on the mainland are jealous of my ability to buy land. They gossip about how a vatia could afford to buy land next to their houses.

However, many people living on the mainland acknowledge that the islanders are naturally very "brave" and "hardworking," compared to the mainlanders, as they struggle with disasters and precarious livelihoods in their everyday lives. One of my acquaintances in Gaibandha town, who used to teach at a primary school on an island, stated, "You will hardly find fat men or women on the char-lands. They all look physically fit. They work hard from early morning till going to bed." He explains that there is no transport on the islands and they must walk for hours on the dry riverbed, and they all earn their living from manual jobs. In essence, then, their everyday adjustment to the uncertain livelihoods and the disasters gifts them with hard working dispositions. In this way, they are portrayed as "hardworking day labourers." As such, such representation hides the division of classes among char dwellers, based on land resources.

As noted in chapter 2, I joined a team consisting of a high-ranking government officer and a group of workers from a local development organisation to visit a char-land called Khatiamari.[4] The Chairman, a top public representative in the local government, hosted us and showed us the development activities undertaken by the local government on the island. In late afternoon, he took all of us to his office, and he proudly demonstrated that his office

[4] The purpose of the team's visit was to distribute recovery support to flood affected families, in association with Christian Aid and funded by European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO).

was equipped with modern facilities such as a computer, a printer, and solar power. The Chairman also offered us cold energy drinks. A government officer asked the Chairman with a deep curiosity where he managed to acquire the cold drinks because the islands were not connected with electricity. The Chairman replied, laughing, that his office had a refrigerator that was powered by solar energy. He proudly said: “Sir, we are not vatia anymore.” Thus, he implied that the islanders are progressively escaping from vatia identity and improving their lifestyle like the mainlanders.

3.8 Conclusion

Char dwellers describe the growing unpredictability of an already uncertain way of life, and an increasing susceptibility to climatic hazards. Their understandings about the causes of the disasters range from being acts of God, to being human-made, to being both at the same time. However, some individuals (e.g., college students, volunteers of development organisations) are taught about the scientific discourse of climate change. They report that climate change has already affected every aspect of their existence, and that it worsens the usual social and economic arrangements, which are based on unequal access to natural resources.

Chapter 4

Socioeconomic Life of Char Dwellers

4.1 Introduction

Like other rural settings in Bangladesh, the socio-economic structure in Onishchit is based on unequal access to land. Although social, economic and political structures could potentially be fluid due to climatic hazards and disasters, in fact they endure even when char dwellers relocate to new chars due to floods and riverbank erosion. Thus, the community changes but the typical rural socioeconomic structure remains the same, meaning that patron-client relations between landlords and smallholders as well as patriarchal household structures continue to exist.

4.2 Livelihood and Socioeconomic Groups

Household control of means of production (land, labour, and capital) depends on how much cultivable land people inherit and how many plots of land are relatively free from river erosion. Many households own a number of acres of land that are submerged in the river. They might be considered as landlords, based on ownership of the land, but their current earnings indicate the opposite, that is, they survive as small peasants. For instance, Alim, a middle-aged peasant, used to hire day labourers to cultivate his five acres of land in the last agricultural season, but his land was eroded during flooding. Now, his livelihood depends only on raising livestock. A few years ago, he was referred to as *gerostho* (a relatively rich farmer who could afford to hire day labourers), but the river erosion left him completely landless. Economic conditions for the island households vary almost every year because it is hard to predict what part of the island will be eroded.

Ownership of cultivable land is significant for a household because the economy of the island is predominantly agrarian. Thus, in order to categorise the island households, the researcher asked the households a series of questions: how much land (cultivable or non-

cultivable) they had inherited, as well as bought with their own savings; what amount of land they had lost due to river erosion in the last three years; what amount of land they had been cultivating for the last three years; what principal and secondary sources of income were they depending on for the last three years; and do they depend on seasonal migration and selling labour power (regularly or irregularly) to survive.

The majority of the island households can be considered as *poor and landless peasants*, who depend on subsistence farming, raising livestock, and selling labour power in agriculture and non-farming sectors, in both the islands and the mainland. As such, they very often migrate to cities for better economic opportunities. Outside the island, they earn from manual jobs such as pulling rickshaws, selling goods at the roadside, carpentry, loading and unloading trucks, and masonry jobs in building and road construction.

Some households that currently own 1-2 acres (3-6 *bighas*) of cultivable land and produce crops on it can be categorised as *middle peasants*. They can cultivate both subsistence and cash crops, and they are able to save a little amount of money to invest it in the next agriculture season and afford to hire day labourers irregularly. They have more livestock than the poor peasants but less than relatively wealthy farmers.

A few households that currently own more than 3 acres (9 *bighas*) of cultivable land or produce crops in it can be categorised as *wealthy farmers*, who own land on both the temporary islands and the mainland. Thus, they can afford to hire day labourers, and they have sufficient means of production. Many of them own agricultural machinery, such as irrigation pumps and tractors. The small and middle peasants, usually, rent that machinery from the wealthy farmers and absentee landowners, with many of them owning land on different islands, even on the mainland. The wealthy farmers lease some of their agricultural land and gain benefits in the form of receiving money or crops. Sharecroppers (in most cases, landless peasants) depend on the wealthy farmers' land. For instance, Zahir owns more than 60 acres of land located on several islands, as well as an irrigation pump. Peasants on other islands, where he owns land but does not stay, come to him to lease his land for certain seasons. A few absentee landlords, who have permanently moved to the mainland leaving behind a large amount of land on Onishchit, are the dominant ones. They do not involve

themselves in growing crops on their land, but they lease their land to the landless peasants. At the end of the agriculture season, they earn a substantial profit.

A few households depend on *small-scale business*, which includes running small grocery-cum-tea stalls and trading crops or livestock. The shop owners buy grocery items such as spices, salt, eggs, oil, packet-snacks, and tobacco products from the mainland and sell these on the island for a small profit. A few relatively wealthy households earn from seasonal trading. They accumulate sacks of corn seeds, the main cash crop on the islands, from the peasants and sell them to the big buyers. A few men and women depend on field-level jobs for the local NGOs that run rights-based development projects in many chars. The local NGOs hire educated young people from the islands—which provides easy access to the island communities. The study found only two households that depend on *government allowances*, called the Freedom Fighter Allowance. Finally, there are some households, which are female-headed. Having no earning members (husband, father, or son) or cultivable land, they depend on the mercy of the fellow islanders. In other words, they beg for money and food in order to survive.

4.3 Architecture of the Char Houses

Since the monsoon rain and the river flooding are regular extreme events on the char-lands, the char dwellers select relatively higher places to build their houses. They raise the plinths of the houses by piling earth or sand from the nearby low land. Recently, the Chars Livelihoods Program (CLP), funded by international aid agencies and the Bangladesh government, has contributed in raising the plinth of the island houses by piling earth. The support is given on a once-off basis. However, even when the plinths of the houses are higher, they can be eroded quickly if the floodwater stays for a few days.

A tin-shed house on an elevated plinth, along with a separate nearby place for animals, is the usual homestead for the islanders. Relatively wealthy houses have a tin roof and tin walls; no houses have concrete floors. Those who cannot afford tin use the dry straw from wild grasses for the ceiling and thin slices of bamboo or straw for the walls of their houses.

All the houses are a single room. Kitchens are built separately near the bedroom, and the toilet structure is very fragile—some toilets have a roof, some have not. The walls of the

toilets are made of straw or tin. Some houses have an open courtyard where they dry clothes and crops. Both men and women take a bath in the river; women take a bath in the evening with their children after completing all the household work—cooking, cleaning, and taking back their cattle from the grassland. The interior of the house has two parts: a bed for sleeping and a higher platform—made of wood or bamboo—for keeping utensils, cooked food, crops, and piles of firewood. The upper platform in the room is locally called *mancha*, which is an essential part of a house to protect household items from floodwater.

4.4 Gender

Like other relations in human society, "gender inequality" is generated through social, cultural, economic, and historical processes. As Engels's (1972 [1884]) historical-material approach shows, the origin of private property, family, and political organisations are inextricably interconnected. Engels argued that, historically, male dominance in accumulating wealth led to the formation of monogamy, in which a husband needed his wife to take care of their children so that property would be transferred to the next generation, that is to say, it generated the idea of patrilineal descent (Engels, 1972 [1884]). Thus, in this historical process, women had become an inferior class, who were supposed to provide support to their husbands; in contrast, men had become a superior class, who control their patrilineal family line and have been at the apex of the patriarchal structure.

Gender relations in household and community are shaped by both patriarchy and Islamic beliefs in the rural context of Bangladesh. Kotalová's (1996) account of womanhood in a Muslim peasant community in rural Bangladesh shows how a patriarchal society, coupled with Islamic beliefs, shapes gender identity. A woman is transferable—her sense of belonging travels from her father's house to her husband's house (Kotalová, 1996). Therefore, family assets are distributed among the next generation unevenly: men inherit more than women do. For example, a daughter's share is equal to half of her brother's share. As such, male domination and discriminatory patriarchal norms have produced a great gender imbalance in the ownership of land (Arens, 2011).

Households on Onishchit Island are headed by men (grandfather, father, or elder son), while older parents are expected to take care of their grandchildren and play a supporting

role in economic activities such as collecting grass for cattle and fishing for family meals. A household head is traditionally considered the chief of almost everything: in charge of the distribution of household assets among the members, utilising the productive resources, schooling children, making decisions about the next generation's marriage and the family budget. Females, children, and elderly members depend on earning members of the families. Female members are supposed to take care of children, cooking, cleaning, and feeding livestock. In addition to the family economy, men have always been culturally and socially in charge of making decisions about when and where to move during hazards.

Although early marriage is an illegal act, many parents arrange an early marriage for their children, particularly for their daughters. The reasons for such practice are manifold: remoteness of the island, male dominance, poverty, insecurity, and custom—all these phenomena are inextricably interconnected. The culture of dowry and social stigma attaching to unmarried girls are pervasive on Onishchit. The poor parents force their little daughters to get married as soon as possible, even at thirteen, because they know they will have to pay a large dowry for arranging a marriage for an adult daughter. Thus, financial and social pressure makes parents arrange an early marriage for girls in rural Bangladesh (Field & Ambrus, 2008).

Marriage is also considered a way of reducing household poverty. Many poor parents intentionally let their sons get married as soon as possible because it brings dowry in the form of cash, agricultural land or livestock. Aisha, a college student and a volunteer with NGOs, said, "Girls from the low-income families are more helpless. They are forced to get married at thirteen or fourteen. Because a marriage for an adult girl requires good amount money as dowry." She gave a rough estimate of dowry:

> Say, for a younger girl, the amount of dowry would be BDT 50,000 [approximately €600], and for older, it would be BDT 200,000 [approximately €2,400]. The poor parents cannot afford such a huge dowry. That is why they think it is better to arrange an early marriage for their teenage daughters.

Aisha also said: "The char men usually do not like the educated and adult girls for the wedding. They suspect that unmarried adult girl might have had an affair with boys or secret

stories that stopped her wedding." She was happy about her parents' current perspective on child marriage:

> My parents are different than other parents on the char. They inspired us to complete our college degrees first. They have realised that they had made a mistake by arranging my elder sister's marriage in her early age. She could not even complete her high school education. Now she is a mother of three kids. My parents regret that. Afterwards, they decided to let us [two sisters] continue our studies. They do not even think about our marriages. But this is very rare on the char. Say, one out of a hundred families.

There were many teenage mothers on Onishchit Char. Samad, a schoolteacher at an NGO's primary school, convinced many parents of his female students that they should send their daughters to school and not arrange marriages without informing him or the school. Nonetheless, while I was there, he found that three girls of Class V (or Grade V) got married. A woman, below twenty and mother of three children, shared the story of her early marriage:

> I was a little child. I could not even manage my clothing on my body. My parents had arranged my marriage with an unknown man living on the *bir* [stable mainland]. I had no idea about the marriage. Now my parents realised that they had made a huge mistake. Now I know nothing but doing only household work. I can write my name with the highest effort. Now the times are changing. My younger sister is going to a high school. I advised my parents not to repeat the same mistake.

Aka, a self-announced "development activist" (*unnayan karmi*) on Onishchit Char, explained that all the parents want their daughters to go to school and have a bright future. He thoughtfully identified that recurrent displacement and poverty are the underlying reasons behind the practices of early marriage. According to his explanation, most of the children who had completed their primary education on the island lost interest in going to high school on the mainland because going to the mainland required regular boat fares and long walks on lonely deserted land. The disasters also damage school structures and cause study interruptions for the children. The poor parents were also put off when they saw that sending their children to high school on the mainland was quite expensive and unaffordable.

The char girls especially experience a more severe obstacle: there are many stories of girls who have been sexually assaulted while they walked on the deserted sandy island toward

the schools. Aisha shared a story from a few years ago, where a group of young boys sexually molested a girl while she was going to school on her own. The girl had to bear the stigma, as the parents of the girl could not find an eligible bridegroom because of the social stigma, and the girl ended up getting married to a deaf-mute man. Thus, women's subordination continues, helped along by poverty, patriarchy and the physical characteristics of the charlands.

4.5 Family and Household

Approximately 500 families resettled on Onishchit six years ago when the island resurfaced. However, the number of families constantly fluctuates as they have been on the move to look for better opportunities somewhere else, including the neighbouring islands and the mainland. The patrilineal family or household is the primary unit of the social structure in rural areas of Bangladesh (Gardner, 1995; White, 1992). Unlike urban society, rural society consists of extended or joint families in Bangladesh.

The terms *ghar* and *bari* are interchangeably used to indicate family or household in rural areas. Ghar also means a single room. There are many nuclear families connected to the same lineage who share the same compound for residing. Settling on the same territory provides ways in which they maintain kinship bonds—which is a practical and effective adaptive strategy to protect their property from land grabbing and to invest their collective labour in agriculture and raising livestock. Hence, family members are considered important resources for agricultural production in rural areas, be it on the islands or the mainland. Rich peasants and their extended families may reside in the same neighbourhood, whereas the poor and landless peasants live wherever they find shelter. The following household, headed by Zahir, can be taken as an example of a char family that maintains bonds with their kinfolk.

Zahir's family and his son's families built houses in the same compound. Zahir, in his late seventies, and his wife, in her early sixties, live in a small house. His house is surrounded by his three sons' families and other consanguine and affinal kin. His three sons formed their families in their early twenties, which is a usual practice in rural societies here. His eldest son Salam's family consists of his wife and a teenage boy. Moreover, his (Salam's) elder daughter had gotten married and moved next to his house. Zahir's kinship network involves

nearly forty people in the same neighbourhood. His sons share the same agricultural fields but own different cattle. Although the families cook separately, they share food regularly. I found several times that the female members were talking about what they were going to cook and share with each other. One day, at the end of a conversation with Salam, he invited me to join them for lunch. His wife and their daughter were making *roti* (flat round bread). They offered me a few rotis and some leftover curry. In the middle of eating, Salam's wife had saved some rotis for her father-in-law (Zahir) and sent her son to bring his grandfather to the lunch.

It is difficult to draw a sharp line between the perceptions of family and household on Onishchit. For example, Zahir's fourth son, Kalam, moved to the mainland permanently. However, although Kalam and his family live on the mainland, they consider themselves members of his father's household on Onishchit. One day, I asked Kalam, while we both were waiting for the boat at the boat terminal: "Where are you going?" He replied, "I am going to our *bari* [home] to see whether my father needs some help. Because the floodwater is rapidly increasing. My father and brothers may need help for moving their cattle." In this case, Kalam considers himself a member of his family on the mainland, as well as a member of his father's household on the island.

4.6 Lineage and Neighbourhood

Residing in the same area with members of the same lineage (*gusthi*) is traditionally considered an important way of keeping regular interaction with kin groups in rural Bangladesh (Bertocci, 1972; Jahangir, 1979). Similarly, a cluster of families connected to the same lineage tries to reside in the same neighbourhood on Onishchit. Several neighbourhoods or homesteads form quasi-villages, but, unlike the mainland, those type of villages are not organised. Bertocci (2013) calls such unorganised villages "elusive." In the context of flood-prone environments, there were no nucleated villages but rather "a pattern of settlement which is in effect socially random, in which scattered, sometimes clustered, groupings of homesteads are produced" (Bertocci, 2013, p. 206).

There are no visible or physical boundaries between villages or little communities (*samaj*). The mosques and tea stalls are important places where they, particularly men,

socialise with fellow char dwellers. They name the mosque after the name of the village or neighbourhood where they have settled.

The little communities have no central leaders or authority structures. However, relatively rich peasants, current and former public representatives, and important older adults are considered important individuals to mediate everyday social conflicts. These influential people are locally called *matbar*, or *matabbor*, or *deuan* (headman) who lead power structures in rural Bangladesh. In most cases, such headmen come from dominant lineages and are rich farmers (Bertocci, 1976; Jahangir, 1982).

4.7 Power Structure

In Bangladesh, there is a popular saying: "it is much harder to understand the rural politics than urban." The saying refers to the complex and multi-layered patron-client relations, which can be understood only through observation of the everyday relationships between multiple actors—peasants, landlords, headmen, elected representatives, and moneylenders. As such, economic power is a significant factor in the consolidation of authority of headmen in rural communities (Jahangir, 1982).

Large lineages play a significant role in controlling land and relationships of production. Most of the public representatives of the local government at the village level, locally called Union *Parishad* or Council, (UP) come from large lineages and relatively wealthy households, and they are aligned with government bureaucracy at the local and national level.[5] For example, both the current and former UP Members can be categorised as relatively well-to-do farmers. In practical terms, a primary condition of winning in the UP election is to be a member of a big lineage. Many studies on the interrelationships between landowning classes and power structure in rural Bangladesh highlight that kinship bonding has been an essential bedrock for pursuing political and economic power in community and local government administration (Jahangir, 1979; Jansen, 1986; Karim, 1990).

[5] Union *Parishad* or UP is the smallest unit of the local government department of Bangladesh. Rural people elects the governing bodies of the UPs. The members of an UP includes a Chairman, nine Members, and three reserved Women Members, who are responsible to implement as well as govern rural socio-economic development projects—for example, increasing public awareness, road construction, distributing public support, solving local level petty crimes, and so on.

For instance, Salma, a Member of Fazlupur UP, said that she would not compete as a candidate in the next UP election. Her husband, her husband's younger brother and a cousin's brother showed their interest in being a candidate. Their kinship group would select one of these potential candidates; otherwise, their kinship network would be divided into factions, which makes it practically difficult to elect a representative from their lineage network. She was sure that someone from her husband's lineage would win in the election, as they have a large lineage on Onishchit. Moreover, her husband and husband's brothers own huge amounts of agricultural land, which is distributed in different islands, and they can afford to hire day labourers and modern technology for their agricultural fields. One of her husband's brothers, who is believed to be the most likely candidate, is a well-known corn and cattle trader (*bepari*). He expects that those who have rented his land and worked as day labourers for him would support him in the upcoming UP election. In the middle of an interview with a UP Member at a tea stall at Balashi boat terminal, we saw two big boats transporting flood victims and their belongings. Flood victims were moving to a safer place. Seeing flood victims moving to somewhere else, the representative instantly reacted: "Look at the passengers on the boats; they are from my char. They are my voters. They are going away. They elected me a Member in the last election. If the floodwater stays for a few more days, the entire char will disappear, and I will lose my voters."

Apart from elected Members and rich peasants, freedom fighters (who fought against the Pakistani Army during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971) are considered influential people on the islands and other rural areas as well. The government has awarded them monthly allowances and rewards their next generation by providing a Freedom Fighter Quota in government jobs.[6] Primary school teachers and educated individuals in wealthy households are also relatively influential people in the village. These influential elites lead the customary village court (*shalis or bichar shova*) for mediating everyday conflicts such as land-disputes, conjugal crises, sexual violence, and extramarital affairs.

[6] This quota system in government jobs, particularly for the generations of freedom fighters, is earmarked for reform. Recently, the country has witnessed country-wide demonstrations, organised by students of public universities, demanding reforms to the quota system. Many people criticised the quota system for being disproportionately distributed and frequently misused.

The social and political status of the Chairman and Members of the UP provides both authoritative and symbolic power. Such individuals are given importance on every occasion at the community level—for example, they are frequently invited by the local NGOs to attend meetings and workshops. They have been default members of the school managing committee and other informal committees regarding socio-economic development projects executed by the local developmental organisations. However, it is frequently alleged that the kin groups of the elected representatives receive extra privileges when the representatives distribute disaster aid (e.g., cash, dry foods, and house materials).

4.8 Values and Norms

The senior-junior relationship is also an important element of both rural and urban society in Bangladesh. Arguing with elder (*murubbi*) members of society or households is thought of as a serious breach of the cultural code of conduct. A person who has misbehaved with an elder is dubbed as *beadop*, meaning someone who does not know how to behave properly with elderly persons. I witnessed, for example, an incident between a young boy and one of the boatmen of Onishchit. The young boy, who claimed to be a school student, harshly argued with the boatman, named Alam, just after getting off his boat. Alam was annoyed when the boy refused to pay his boat fare. The boy said that no boatman was supposed to charge him the boat fare because the community leaders had decided that school students would enjoy free boat travel, particularly when they go to and return from schools located on the mainland. Alam told the boy that he would not expect the char students would pay the boat fare: "But as you have got married, you are no more a student. You can afford boat fare. Also, you are not coming back from school right now". At some point, the boy attempted to attack Alam, with some passengers, who were watching the incident, scolding the boy for his unacceptable behaviour. As such, many of the witnesses called him "a beadop boy."

The people's mode of socialising at the grocery-cum-tea stalls also displays power relations, norms and values they practise in their everyday lives. For example, young people leave their seats when they see elderly people heading toward the tea stalls. Seeing old people, they also hide cigarettes, as it is socially unacceptable to smoke in front of elderly neighbours or relatives. I have observed that landless peasants do not argue with influential

individuals (wealthy farmers and public representatives), partly because they expect to be hired for agricultural work by such individuals in the agricultural season. It indicates the existing patron-client relations in the island villages.

4.9 Structural Opportunities: Education and Health

The char dwellers are marginalised because the remoteness and insufficient communication networks hinder them from getting access to state-run services centred on the mainland (Thomson, 2000). Although most of the islanders are illiterate, they have learned how to put a signature on formal documents such as national identity cards and deeds. The fingerprint is widely used as an alternative to the signature. Some have completed their basic primary education, and some had started going to school but left school before sitting the final exam at the end of Class or Grade V, with a few of the islanders having completed secondary and higher secondary education. Furthermore, the researcher found that only five young boys and three girls went to a college, which was located on the mainland, in pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

Despite the push for education and its value on the island, disasters keep it out of reach. Schools cannot be operated during the floods because the floodwater inundates schools and homesteads, and the teachers living on the mainland cannot come to the islands during the floods because it is too risky to go to the island by boat. In addition, the schoolchildren residing in the neighbouring islands cannot come to the schools on Onishchit due to the floodwater. The structure of the schools is very fragile, and the schools are very often displaced. For instance, a few years ago, a government primary school from an adjacent island moved to Onishchit since the former island was completely submerged in the river. Unfortunately, however, the state has not yet addressed the impediment that islanders would face in getting access to such education due to a physical disconnection to the mainland (Kabir, 2006). There were two government schools and the NGOs' primary school on Onishchit. Many parents alleged that the teachers of government schools live on the mainland and hardly attend the schools regularly, be it during flooding or in the dry season.

Only wealthy households can afford to send their children to school on the mainland. Children of the landless peasant families are expected to assist their fathers or brothers in

agriculture or any livelihood-related activities such as grazing cattle, operating boats or fishing. Whereas the daughters are forced to get married in their teens no matter at what level they read. Another factor is that poor parents feel discouraged in sending children to college, as they find that many educated young men and women have failed to find jobs in the public or private sectors, where it is difficult to find a job without strong social networks, or, sadly, the use of bribes. For example, a father of two young sons said:

> My younger son is going to college next year. But I see no hope in a college degree. My elder son completed his college education, but he has not yet got any job. He has been working for an NGO with a little salary. He passed some exams of the government jobs, but he was asked for giving bribes for getting a job. We [the islanders] are penniless poor. How can we afford to give bribe?

Recently, a community health clinic has been constructed to provide basic health care on Onishchit. However, travelling to this health clinic involves transportation costs, which are unaffordable for most of the islanders. Thus, for healing ailments, the islanders depend on traditional healing, folk medicines, an NGO's satellite clinic, and the local medicine shops located at the boat terminal. For example, at Mamun's tea stall, a middle-aged man approached an old man with a fresh piece of banana leaf. The old man was believed to have a unique skill of healing illness through spirituality. He took a matchstick from Mamun's shop and started drawing some lines on the leaf. Then, he folded the leaf and handed it in to the middle-aged man, who was suffering from a headache and chest pain. The healer told him to keep the leaf always with him and drink water as much as possible. The patient was told that he would see the results very soon.

Modern health care is expensive and inaccessible for the islanders. They approach the medicine shops and narrate their sufferings due to illness when they feel sick. The medicine shopkeepers, be they trained or not, sell prescribed and non-prescribed medicines. Finding difficulties in receiving services from the government medical centre, some received treatments from private clinics in the town. For example, Sattar, an elderly islander who was suffering from heart disease, showed me a diagnostic report and prescription when I was conversing with him. He wanted me to read the report for him partly because he did not know how to read, and partly because he wanted to have my view if the clinic had unnecessarily

prescribed diagnosis tests. He presumed that the private hospital took advantage of "ignorant patients" and prescribed them expensive tests for nothing. He alleged that the doctors at the private hospitals and diagnostic centres then systematically divide their share later.

Figure 11: A char-ambulance. Source: collected.

An emergency health service is almost unimaginable for the islanders. Traveling to a hospital requires help of a group of people, time, money, and hiring a boat. They carry patients on their shoulders. In emergency cases, they put the patient on a wooden bed hanging by ropes attached to a long bamboo stick. Taking a patient in such a way requires the collective effort of several men at a time; this system is locally called the "char-ambulance".

4.10 Cattle Robbery

Like other islands, cattle robbery is a common incident on Onishchit, particularly during floods. As the islands are flooded, and the boats can navigate freely, robbers can anchor their boats at the door of the island houses. The islanders make a roster to guard their neighbourhoods with bamboo sticks and torchlights to protect their cattle from robbers. They also keep piles of bricks or stones at the door of the houses so that they can throw these hard

objects at the robbers when they approach their houses. They keep informing the police station about the cattle thieves, but no useful steps have been taken yet. In fact, the police are also helpless to stop the robbers because the robbers are well organised with arms and big cleavers, and are larger in number compared to the police. Many islanders also believe that the cattle robbers have a "good connection" with the police and they give a share to them. Shaidul, an important participant in the study, said:

> If the police department performs their responsibilities seriously, no one can steal our cattle. The reality is the police are the main terrorist in Bangladesh at this moment. They know where and what incidents are going to happen. The police are invisible members of the group of the cattle robbers.

Zahirul, the elder son of my host family, also said:

> It seems to me that they [the robbers] are not afraid of death. They take an oath: do or die during the robbing. Otherwise, it is not possible to go for robbing in front of many char dwellers. If a robber with a gun or a big cleaver appears in front of us, ten of us with empty hands are unable to attack them. The cleavers they bring with them during robbing are used for slaughtering animals. They are very cruel. They have got scars on their body because they were caught and beaten many times.

He also shared a story of robbing:

> A group of nearly forty robbers with sharp cleavers and guns attacked Kamarjani Char. They robbed more than thirty cows. The leader of the robbers found that one of his members was missing while they were about to run away. The villagers managed to catch a robber and severely beat him. In the meantime, the robbers started shooting and asked the villagers to let their man free. The helpless people had to let him free. Before running away, the robbers shot a man and left him to die.

It was a morning in September 2015. As usual, I was waiting for the boat at the boat terminal. The boat arrived from the island and I bumped into Shaidul, a peasant. He looked exhausted. He along with his fellow neighbours did not sleep because they were guarding their neighbourhoods for fear that the robbers might attack their houses in the night. He had heard shooting on the adjacent island that night; a few years ago, such violence had happened on the same char. The Member, an elected public representative, of the island announced that

he would be very strict against the cattle robbers. As such, one day, there was a cattle robber named Sabur, who along with this gang attacked the char where the Member and his family used to reside. The char dwellers were ready to resist the robbers, however. They threw pieces of bricks and stones at the robbers, before the robbers started shooting. The robbers left at least ten char dwellers injured, including the Member and his father. They were brought to the hospital of Gaibandha town. Due to this, the Member and his men attempted to take revenge. They sank two boats owned by Sabur's relatives. In an attempt to end the conflict between the Member and Sabur, the Chairmen of four UPs sat together and reached a mutual resolution: Sabur was asked to give compensation to those who were injured by his men. However, he did not pay the compensation, and after one year, the conflict again gave rise to violence. Again, the robbers attacked the Member and his men, leaving several people injured. Sabur and his gang announced that they would not stop attacking the char and robbing cattle until they had killed the Member who organized the char dwellers to fight back.

The local and national level newspapers often publish news on cattle robbery on the islands. For example, a Gaibandha-based online news has published[7]:

> Farhad Munshi (45), resided in Annand Bari Char, Fulchari Sub district, Gaibandha, died after being shot by the cattle robbers. He is a son of Faim Uddin Munshi, living in Ananda Bari Char in Erendari Bari Union. He used to work as an Imam for Bangal Para Mosque in Ananada Bari. According to the inhabitants of the char, a group of the cattle robbers anchored their boat and attacked the char at midnight. They robbed money, ornaments, and cattle, holding gun at the face of Farhad and his neighbour Abdul Alim. The robbers shot when the char dwellers challenged them. The robbers managed to escape with the valuables and left Farhad shot and injured. He died the next day in the middle of taking treatment in his house.

4.11 Conclusion

The chapter has described the socio-economic background of Onishchit Char. It shows that the island households and societies are dominated by patriarchal structures in which males

[7] GaibandhaNews24.com (accessed on: 10 September 2015)

control family resources and gender relations. Although their communities and neighbourhoods are apparently unstable due to disasters, typical rural power structures exist there like in other rural contexts in Bangladesh. On the power ladder, the landowning classes and political figures have traditionally been at the top. However, the socio-economic groups cannot be sharply categorised. For the sake of conceptualising the social arrangement, the island households are divided into several groups: landless and poor peasants, middle peasants, wealthy farmers, and small-scale entrepreneurs, who in addition to the natural disasters, face violent attacks from cattle robbers, particularly during floods.

Chapter 5

"Crocodile in the Water, Tiger on the Bank": Land, Peasants, and Power

5.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the history of peasants' subordinate position in the agrarian structure. To do so, it describes peasants' access to land resources in colonial and postcolonial periods. Bangladesh's uneven agrarian power relations can be traced back to the historical contexts, particularly the 200 years of British colonial rule and the 24 years of the Pakistan period. These periods worked as "identifiable determinants" (Wolf, 1982, p. 387) in restructuring economic, political, and social structures in Bangladesh, in particular its rural agrarian structure. Thus, land-based class divisions produced in the colonial period persisted through the actions of local elites (Schendel, 2009). In addition to class divisions, corruption in land governance added another dimension of vulnerability in rural society.

Char studies find that complex land documentation and lengthy litigation are part of the char dwellers' everyday lives (Baquee, 1998). As such, they face powerful land-grabbers in the community, on the one hand, and land-related bureaucrats on the mainland, on the other. Many people compare this predicament with a common Bengali proverb: "Crocodile in the water, tiger on the bank," whereby the "crocodile" refers to the local elite and land-grabbers in the community on the chars, and the "tiger" to the government officers, bureaucrats, and legal processes related to land surveys and documentation.

5.2 Land and Peasants in British Colonial Bengal (1757-1947)

Land has been a key resource for rural Bangladesh, with the fertile agrarian land of Bengal, modern day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal attracting European imperialist traders, including the Portuguese, French, and the British East India Company, the latter of which ruled Bengal for 200 years and transformed the agrarian structure of Bengal. The

significance of the "colonial revolution" in South Asia cannot be grasped without paying attention to agrarian transformation (Bose, 1993). After a decisive victory against Bengal's last independent *Nawab* (ruler) Siraj-ud-Daula at the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British East India Company sowed the seeds for British imperialism in Bengal. The Company's trading had provided the means by which the British captured the political domain in India with the collaboration of local Bengali merchant capitalists (Bose & Jalal, 2004); "The East India Company pursued an 'indirect rule' policy based on local patronage and playing off local princely rulers against each other" (Lewis, 2011, p. 48).

The Company introduced a land taxation system called the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, giving unlimited power to the local landlords (z*amindars*); from then, the landlords enjoyed hereditary rights over their estates. The act functioned as the nucleus of the colonial system of control (Schendel, 2009). It is stated that the act failed in generating a capitalist agricultural economy in British India. Ranajit Guha's seminal essay, *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (1996), examines how the colonial establishment of the land revenue system intervened in traditional agrarian structures and strove to replace it with the physiocratic idea of private property regarding land; however, capitalist ideas on private property, that developed in England, could not work in a Bengal agrarian context. As such, the act was "to turn back on its course to degenerate into an apologia for the quasi-feudal land system in Eastern India during the remainder of British rule… The Permanent Settlement assumed the character of a pre-capitalist system of land ownership, mocking its own original image…" (Guha, 1996, p. 186).

The Permanent Settlement Act 1793, as noted above, gave huge rights and power to the landlords. On the other hand, tenants' rights and ownership of land was not officially defined and recognised, although they paid tax to landlords. However, tenants' rights were recognised as customary rights, which left the peasants in a vulnerable situation. The landlords arbitrarily increased the tax on the tenants' land as they (the landlords) were asked to pay a fixed amount of revenue to the colonial government to sustain their lordship. Landlords, as the absolute proprietor, punished tenants if they failed to pay a specific amount of tax; they increased tax whenever they wanted to or needed to. Landlord-tenant tension reached a peak when landlords failed to pay revenue to the colonial government. When the

landlords failed to pay revenue, they had to leave their lordship by default, and therefore rich peasants became landlords as a result of public auctions of land.

The Company's political and economic ascendancy in colonial Bengal, as well as in other regions of India, helped to strengthen textile manufacturing in Britain during the second half of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. Agricultural products such as jute and cotton were transported from agrarian to urban places, and during the second half of the eighteenth century the Company invested the revenues extracted from India to purchase Indian manufactured products, mainly textiles, to sell them in world markets (Bose & Jalal, 2004, p. 56).

Before British rule in Bengal, the Mughals used to sell textiles from Dhaka to Britain through the British East India Company. However, since the textile industries had appeared as a prosperous sector in trade, the East India Company took control over the textile industry of Bengal by making the local rulers puppets (Lewis, 2011; Gardner, 2012). Moreover, during direct British rule, British traders found that the hill-side of the north-east region of East Bengal (now Sylhet in Bangladesh) had good quality soil for producing tea. Thus, they captured land through the local governors and set up a tea industry there, with the local people employed as labourers in the tea gardens. Robins (2012) re-examines the underlying meaning of the Company's legacy for the world economy of the twenty-first century. The company not only brought spices, textiles, and tea from Asia to Europe, but also innovated the model of modern business institutions and administration, pioneering the profit-based global economy. Hence, the company is considered the "mother of the modern corporation," particularly in South Asia (Robins, 2012, p. 5).

In addition to controlling agrarian land in colonial Bengal, the British colonisers set up their power on the woodland of Bengal. Sivaramakrishnan (1999) explains the everyday forms of state-making for forest management in Bengal during the British colonial period. British colonialism exploited woodland in Bengal through "scientific forest management" that involved potent agents such as government, scientists, bureaucrats, and elites. They penetrated colonial forms of government and its mechanisms (e.g., bureaucracy) in the woodlands of Bengal, where 'managing forests' was utilised more for state-making;

"Objectification of the colony in the light of certain kinds of knowledge was crucial to establishing colonial power" (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999, p. 38).

The Company exported agrarian products (e.g., opium, jute, and cotton) to China to purchase tea and other commodities in order to re-export to the world market. Under the company's indirect rule, wealth drained from India to England, on the one hand, with Bengal and some parts of Bihar and Odisha experiencing dreadful famine (including the great Bengal Famine of 1770), on the other. The company's monopoly over trading forced Indian peasants to cultivate opium, indigo, and cotton, instead of food crops such as rice and wheat. The company had found that Bengal's raw jute and cotton were profitable agricultural products for cotton industries founded mainly in Kolkata (then Calcutta) and Britain, while indigo was used in dyeing clothes in cotton mills in Britain and many parts of Europe.

Kumar (2012) shows how colonial modernity, economic globalisation, and knowledge of indigo culture were interconnected during British colonial rule because modern knowledge of indigo cultivation was used for producing blue dye for the cotton industry in Europe. The exploitative nature of colonial imperialism developed profit-based industries and labour throughout the world (Wolf, 1982). Since the peasants were forced to cultivate indigo instead of rice, they experienced first-hand the misery of poverty. Moreover, the company increased land taxes, as they gained taxation rights from the Mughal emperor. As such, the Company's voracious trading pushed Bengal's peasants into severe famine; it has been estimated that the Bengal Famine of 1770 took the lives of millions of people.

Reaction to indigo cultivation appeared in a Bengali play called *Nil Darpan* (The Indigo Planting Mirror), written by Bengali author Dinabandhu Mitra (2013[1861]). The drama showed that Bengal peasants had enough food for surviving until indigo cultivation, and the wealthy planters, associated with the British rulers, coercively forced them to cultivate indigo for commercial purposes. The Bengal peasants did show agitation against the planters from 1859 to 1862; this movement is called the Indigo Resistance Movement. Peasant movements in colonial Bengal revealed that agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, landholding peasants, and labourers in industries were politically and economically discriminated against by landlords, wealthy farmers, and *bhadroloks* (e.g., lawyers, doctors, and service holders).

Once again, colonial Bengal was affected by famine during the Second World War, when British rulers purchased enormous quantities of war-related materials during the war. Nearly Rs 3.5 billion was spent on the defence sector in India during the war. As such, the war economy pushed rural people, especially in Bengal, into severe poverty and famine in 1943-1944, killing between 3.5 to 3.8 million people—which was the least publicised holocaust of the Second World War (Bose & Jalal, 2004, p. 129).

In addition to a war economy, a cyclone struck the coastal areas in 1942, killing thousands of people, sweeping away livestock and damaging the main sources of staple food, the rice crop; the British colonial government hoarded rice for their soldiers. The main reason of starvation of the Bengal population was a lack of administration to distribute food among every class group; landless agricultural labourers were the main victims (Sen, 1981). Sen's well-known work, *Poverty and Famines* (1981), offers "the entitlement approach" to analyse poverty and famines, and argues that the lack of food supply was not the only reason for the famine. Sen's entitlement approach focuses on the legal, social, political, and economic realities which determine people's ability to get access to food and other essential commodities. Thus, although epidemics, floods, droughts, cyclones, or the war economy might provide immediate causes for famine and vulnerabilities to those events, the political and economic subordination of the peasantry does nothing but undermine the peasant's capacity to struggle with such disasters (Arnold, 1984).

5.3 Land and Peasants in the Pakistan Period (1947-1971)

Accompanied by severe communal outbreaks of violence between Hindus and Muslims, the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into two countries in 1947: Pakistan for the Muslim majority and India for the Hindu majority. This quick-fix geographical partition, based on religious nationalism, solved political problems between the British Empire and the Indian nationalists, but it created animosity between the two newly born states because state power was handed over to opposing local nationalist elites. In the processes of partition, the Bengal province was divided into two parts: East Bengal for the Muslim majority, belonging to Pakistan, and West Bengal for the Hindu majority, belonging to India. From this, the agrarian society entered a new historical and political era — the Pakistan period (1947-1971) until

Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) went through armed conflict which resulted in Bangladesh becoming an independent country on 16 December 1971.

As noted above, the colonial land governance systems—the Permanent Settlement Act in 1793 and the following Bengal Tenancy Act in 1885—formed intermediary ruling classes (*joterdars* or *talukdars*) to collect revenue from the peasants. After the partition of British India, as well as Bengal in 1947, the newly independent governments abolished the *zamindari* system on both sides. The Pakistan government passed the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act (EBSATA) of 1950 for the eastern jurisdiction—East Bengal or East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh). The act replaced the landlords with the state—the government held legal rights to acquire the rents of the land no matter who owns what, with the Act stating that agricultural lands "shall be held by one class of people to be known as *maliks* or *raiyats* [peasants] which means that there shall be no intermediary between the State at the top and *malik* or *raiyats* to be regarded as the tillers of the soil at the bottom." The state imposed a land ceiling of 33.3 acres (100 *bighas*) for a family, which increased to 125 acres (375 *bighas*) in 1961. It went through further changes in post-independence Bangladesh: 33.3 acres (that was in the 1950s), and later the Land Reform Commission of 1982 suggested 20 acres (60 *bighas*). However, those engaged in large-scale cultivation and manufacturing (e.g., tea and sugar) and growing raw materials for industries were provided with an exception to holding such limited sizes of land[8]. The landlords were compensated under the new act; compensation ranged from ten times the net income of estates, with incomes below Rs. 500, to twice the net income of the largest estates, with incomes of Rs. 100,00, and over, per annum (Ahmed & Timmons, 1971, p. 58). The act also provided pre-emption rights to co-sharers or tenants (such as *bargadar* or share-croppers), in the context of selling any portion of land.

In addition to reforming agricultural land holdings on the mainland, the EBSATA outlined the future of char-lands. According to the act, if land is submerged into a river due to riverbank erosion, it can be given back to the original owners under the following conditions: the resurfacing of the land must occur within twenty years; the owner may get the land back by paying rent, as settled by the revenue officer; and the original owner must

[8] Government of East Bengal, Legislative Department, The East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 (Dacca. East Bengal Government Press, 1951).

not own land over 375 *bighas* (Baquee, 1998). These conditions, not only frustrated the peasants, but also favoured the big landlords (ibid., 61). Baquee (1998, p. 65) argued: "The laws [regarding land distribution] seem deceptively simple on paper but are very complicated in the implementation."

Land reform is still one of the major national socio-economic challenges for Bangladesh today, with many violent incidents resulting from controlling or grabbing landed property. Following the Bengal partition, millions of Muslims migrated from India to Muslim-dominated East Pakistan, with Hindus from East Pakistan heading to Hindu-dominated India. A group of opportunists utilised this opportunity to grab the land left by the Hindus in Bangladesh.

5.4 Distribution of Agricultural *Khas*-Land in Post-Independence Bangladesh

The unequal power relations in an agrarian economy engineered by the colonial power still exists in the present time. As Roseberry (1989, p. 116) puts it, "It is also important to recognise that the social relations that characterise one period or one type of relationship continue to carry social, economic, and political weight in a subsequent period." This section shows how structural power relations prevailed in the process of *khas*-land or state-owned land distribution in rural Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world—161 million, according to the World Bank's estimate. Of the bulk of the population, 47 million still live in poverty, with 26 million living in extreme poverty; 70 percent of them live in rural areas (World Bank, 2014). It is estimated that more than fifty percent of the total households are functionally landless, and many of them ended up working as smallholder farmers, sharecropper farmers, day labourers on other people's land, or rickshaw pullers (Hartman & Boyce, 2013). Less than 10% of Bangladesh's rural households own more than 50% of the country's cultivable land, and 60% of rural families own less than 10% of the land (Jannuzi & Peach, 1980). In the case of rural Bangladesh, landlessness directly connects to "poverty, indebtedness and powerlessness" (Rahman & Manprasert, 2006, p. 54). Landholding signifies not only economic prosperity but also symbolic value in society. As Lewis (2011,

p. 14) puts it: “access to land has been the key structural asset that has mainly defined social class.”

As noted above, the cap on ownership of agricultural land was changed several times. The Land Reform Ordinance of 1984 limits future land acquisition to 21 acres, keeping the ownership ceiling of 33 acres unchanged. The ordinance for the first time recognised the sharecropper-farmers and input providers. Development researchers and academics have suggested that the cap on ownership needs to be decreased, as the size of the population has been on the progressive increase, and the land should be distributed among the landless people. In Bangladesh, many state and non-state bodies suggested that *khas* (state owned) land should be properly distributed among the landless households in order to alleviate poverty (Barkat et al., 2001; Momen, 1996). Land reform has become inevitable for more agricultural production for Bangladesh (Jannuzi & Peach, 1980). As such, the documentation and distribution of khas-land became one of the important initiatives to reduce rural poverty; however, the land data and accountabilities of the respective departments are questionable.

In 1997, the government planned to systematically distribute the khas-land through its Agricultural Khas Land Management and Settlement Policy. The policy involved forming national and local level committees to identify the khas-lands situated in remote areas such as chars or dry river beds. According to the policy, the land would be distributed to the landless families who depend on agriculture for a living. The potential applicants who could apply for the khas-land are as follows, in order of priority: destitute freedom fighter's families; victims of river erosion; widowed or divorced women; families without a homestead and agriculture land; those who became landless due to the government’s acquisition of land; and families which have a ten-decimal homestead, but not agricultural land and yet are dependent on agriculture. The eligible candidates would be then given no more than 1.5 acres of the khas-land. This policy has not been implemented significantly. Rather, the people in power, including landlords, politicians, and bureaucrats, have been beneficiaries of the khas-land, unlawfully (Barkat et al., 2000; 2001).

5.5 Khas-Lands in Onishchit Island Villages

Colonial Bengal became a distinct area in regulations relating to land management due to its deltaic characteristics. For example, the British government's Bengal Alluvion and Diluvion Regulation, 1825, was conceived as a result of "frequent sources of contention and affray" due to alluvion and diluvion. The regulation stated that the Courts of Justice found difficulties in determining the rights of litigant parties claiming char-lands. The alluvion-diluvion land policies were amended several times: in the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s. According to the latest law, if the diluvion land emerged again within 30 years, the owner of the land or his or her heir can claim ownership through the legal process. If no one claims such land, it would be considered as khas. Both the alluvion-diluvion laws and physical chars are marked by uncertainty. As Adnan (2013, p. 99) puts it: "These rapid and sequential changes in property rights created scope for considerable confusion and uncertainty in the legal status of particular holdings." The lack of implementation of the land laws creates ways in which people take alternative means to get access to char-lands.

Adnan (2013) categorises the mechanisms of gaining access to the char-land in two ways: *de facto* and *de jure* rights to land. Identifying and distributing khas-land requires various steps: employing surveyors to physically visit the place and draw a map of the emerged land; announcing the information publicly so that landless people can apply; and then screening the application forms to select those who are eligible. These steps do not correspond to the realities of landless people, however, because most of them are illiterate and therefore cannot fill out the given application form. Moreover, such information can hardly reach char dwellers, as they reside on the remote chars. Government officials have been the "least active agents" to disseminate the information relating to listing and distributing the khas-land (Barkat et al., 2000, p. 5). Influential persons include the landowning class and elected representatives of the local government dominate the rural power structure and influence the distribution of newly formed char-lands (Zaman, 1991). Above all, landless and poor peasants are afraid of going to the government office in case the officers ask for a bribe. In Onishchit island villages, the inhabitants hardly receive khas-land legally or systematically. Government surveyors rarely visit the remote chars to observe if a khas-land emerges through accretion.

Which portion of land is khas is a conundrum because of a lack of legal proof; people depend on their imagination and on the memories of senior members of their households or neighbourhoods. Traditionally, those who own the adjacent land to the khas-land get the privilege to use it. However, many of those using khas-lands pretend they owned or inherited such lands. Thus, the researcher finds contradictory answers to the same question about the same block of land: Is this land khas? A young char inhabitant named Zahid, going to college and who occasionally migrates to Dhaka to work in a garment factory, depicted how some people grab khas-land adjacent to their land: Many landowners prefer to buy land close to the khas-lands because they might be able to register the lands in future with a small price. They convince the land officers by giving them bribes; although the public representatives at local levels (e.g., Chairman and Members) are responsible for ensuring the land office selects the actual landless household, they influence the officers and clerks to choose candidates falsely. Shahadat, a middle-aged farmer, shared his story of giving a bribe to register a piece of khas-land in his name. Although he is a member of a rich peasant household, he applied for the khas-land in a sneaky way:

> Owning a khas-land is easier for the people who can afford bribe. A poor person can hardly afford to give a bribe, say BDT 10,000. Those who cultivate a large landholding, say ten acres, can afford it easily. For example, I have been using a plot of khas-land. Recently, I have recorded the land to my name by giving a bribe of BDT 9,000 to a man working in the land office. It took almost a year to save this money. And, I presented myself as landless in the application form. It is the system that is going on. Everyone cannot afford such big amount of bribe. Besides, it takes a long time to go through the whole process. It is an ongoing process. You must maintain good relations with the land officer. Otherwise, he would deny that he took a bribe from you. Or, he might not complete the full process and might ask for more bribe. They make a drama that they have to give a share to their bosses so that they keep the secret and make quick the process.

The undistributed khas-land very often creates land disputes between the users—who already have started using the land without going through judicial proceedings. No surprise, then, that members of large lineages very often win such competitions regarding taking control over the land, including those designated khas and abandoned. However, a mutual

understanding between the interest groups can lessen the intensity of land disputes. Asadul, a teacher of an NGO's primary school and one of the key participants in this study, shared his father's story about using a block of khas-land. His father used to live in Sirajganj, which is another flood-prone area in northern Bangladesh. His parents moved to a char adjacent to this study's char. His father happened to know that the homestead he had been renting was a khas-land, whereby the so-called landowner had appropriated the land a long time ago. After knowing the truth, Asadul's father negotiated with him and convinced him to charge less rent than he was paying. Otherwise, he would inform the land office about the khas-land. Eventually, they came to an agreement that they would keep the information between them. They then both took control over that piece of khas-land. Asadul stated: "It is an open secret matter. Everyone, especially the elderly peoples, know which portion of land is khas. Those who have guts and large lineage can use the land." He added with slight disappointment, however: "The government does not care about land-problems on chars. They [employees in land office] ask for bribe even for a small service." Das and colleagues' (2012) study on Shovna Village in the northern district Khulna in Bangladesh showed that the process of khas-land distribution ostensibly follows legal regulation. The formal process of land distribution is bypassed through informal processes and can be circumvented (Das et al., 2012, p. 28). They conclude that the allocation of public resources is materialized through secret and informal ways and pragmatic interrelationships between local elites.

The government's inactive or slow land management process also creates conflicts between char dwellers. At Anwar's tea stall, in this study's char, a senior man explained why land is officially khas, even when many people have been using it as if they own the property:

> You would find a lot of khas-lands on chars. In 1962, the government recorded land all over Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). After independence [in 1971], the new administration started updating the land record in 1982, but they have not recorded the char-lands yet. Here, several people claim ownership of the same land. At the end of the day, *Jor jar jomi tar* [Those who have muscle power control the lands].

A pragmatic patron-client relationship continues the culture of land appropriation and the rivalry for land. Many landlords—who moved to the mainland but move back and forth to the char-lands—exploit landless people's poverty and have grabbed khas-land and the land

left behind by the absentee landowners, whereupon they then lease those lands to the landless and small peasants. It leads to conflicts between those renters and other landless peasants, who claim they have rights to khas-lands as they are poor. Such conflicts cannot reach those so-called landlords or land-grabbers, however, as they do not live there. In most cases, the leaseholders prefer not to protest the landlords-cum-land grabbers. Instead, they use the land under the patronage of the grabbers. Many such patrons compete in the local government election for the position of Member and Chairman, where they craftily manipulate the leaseholders to cast their vote for them. Many char dwellers explained such patron-client relationships by mentioning a widely used Bengali proverb: "It is not wise to quarrel with a crocodile while staying in the water."

5.6 Corruption and Land

Practices of corruption in the owning and controlling of land are deeply embedded in the culture of patron-client relations in Bangladesh. In the context of Onishchit, the patrons include government officials in the land office, wealthy individuals (e.g., landlords and traders) and political leaders. Corruption becomes "a form of structural violence" (Gupta, 2012, p. 76) that denies the services that are supposed to be provided by the state free of cost. Corruption continues through everyday practices of patron-client interactions aiming to receive mutual benefits. As Gupta (2012, p. 76) puts it, "Instead of treating corruption as a dysfunctional aspect of state organizations," it can be seen "as a mechanism through which the state itself is discursively constituted." It does not necessarily mean that the island dwellers are passive actors in the practices of corruption, however. In some cases, they act as powerful patrons. In most cases, however, wealthy landlords, big traders, public representatives and government officials are the powerful patrons in rural Bangladesh, including Onishchit.

5.6.1 "Paper is Okay, but Pen is Corrupt"

One evening, I was hanging out at a sweet shop located at the zero point of Gaibandha town. A rickshaw-puller was riding his rickshaw with a male passenger, who was advertising a little book on land and land documentation by using a rickshaw-mounted megaphone:

> You face problems when you read your land document because you do not know the exact meaning of the vocabularies about land. It is not surprising that many highly-educated people find difficulties in understanding the vocabularies of land measurement and land litigation. A couple of lawyers, who have been working for a long time on the land issues, have recently published this little book. It gives you an easier explanation of the land vocabularies. By reading this book, you will be able to understand how land-sellers and land-brokers cheat you, and you will be able to understand how you can avoid their techniques of cheating.

A significant number of copies of the little book were sold within in a few minutes. I also bought a copy of the book and found that most of the terms were unknown to me, thus it needed a serious reading to understand the complexities of the process of land registration and the methods of land surveying. In the case of the island villages, the land registration system is more complicated because the landscape of the islands changes every season due to riverbank erosion and floods, which exacerbate land disputes in people's everyday lives.

Power-knowledge relations (Foucault, 1995 [1977]) exist in corruption practices in the context of this study's char. Officials in government offices (e.g. land surveyors, assistant commissioners of land) and other skilled professionals (e.g. advocates) are considered the most educated (*shikkhito*) and knowledgeable, and are considered as gentlemen (*bhadralok*) in rural Bangladesh, people who are expected to provide their services in honest ways. The island villagers find them to be the opposite, however, while they face complexities relating to land registration, documentation, and tax. As such, illiterate villagers find themselves subject to the institutions (land office, court) and professionals' knowledge and skills. Therefore, knowledge and social positions become sources of power, which are used to gain benefits; in this way, illiterate peoples and skilled professionals become losers and winners, respectively. Foucault suggests:

> We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault, 1995, p. 27)

It was a morning in the winter of 2016. A few islanders were looking for their land records at the local land office. The one-room office (nearly eight ft. by six ft.) had no electricity, thus, bringing some sunlight into the room required opening the door and two windows. After knowing the purpose of my visit, the land officer started complaining about the poor logistics support, which had been slowing down the regular activities of the office. He stated that the office needed more space, with a steel cupboard, to protect the land documents, and to provide better service. One of the islanders wanted to see whether his land document resembled the land record in the record book. The officer looked through several books, but he could not find the right one. The man also wanted to see his previous tax record. That too seemed difficult for the officer.

I went out of the office and started walking to the main road leading to Balashi boat terminal. One of the service seekers followed me and told me that it was not the first time he was at the office. He commented that the land officer intentionally procrastinated when he asked for the service. He said: "They [people in the land office] delay the service so that the service seekers offer a bribe to make them find the right book quickly. It is impossible to receive the service from the land office without giving a bribe." He thought I might help him with requesting the officer to provide the service as soon as possible.

A schoolteacher, named Samad, in his late twenties, stated that he found it difficult to understand his father's land document. He said:

> My father is an unschooled man. He can only write his name with his highest effort. But he easily can understand any land map. Look at me—I am an educated man, but I cannot read a map of land. My father says reading a land map needs experiences of buying and selling land.

According to his explanation, most of the islanders are illiterate; thus, a group of sneaky men take advantage of their ignorance, cheating those who cannot read a land map. The uneducated people are afraid of going to the land office to know the exact official information about their land because government officers expect bribes. Moreover, the dominant groups, who grab others' land, keep "good connections" with the land officials so that the land-losers cannot take formal steps against the land grabbers. As the procedures for the land

documentation are complex, lengthy, and corrupt, the illiterate islanders avoid approaching the land office, which is one of the most common ways to lose control over land.

One day, two men (islanders) asked Aka's advice about how they should approach the land officials in order to receive quick service; Aka is one of the local elites in his neighbourhood. They needed to know whether they had missed paying property tax. Aka gave them a practical suggestion: "At first, you should give them [land officials] BDT 200 before asking any question. Otherwise, their heart will not become soft enough [he laughed] to help you. This is how the land office works."

There is a familiar story, widely told in rural Bangladesh, regarding the suffering due to lengthy litigation. In the past, the landowning class used to file a case against their rivals. Filing a land case against rival groups is a popular way of taking revenge because land-related litigation involves spending money and time. It is a widely practised strategy, which is used to give a hard time to political opponents, especially in the context of village politics. Anwar, a grocery shop owner, went through a seven-year experience of land litigation. Finally, he won his case, but he had had to spend a lot of money on travel to court and to pay his lawyer. He stated, "I spent a lot of money to regain my land. I could have bought a bigger size of land by the amount of money I had to pay for the litigation." He had mixed feelings about the land dispute: regret and satisfaction. In the island villages, every flood gives birth to new stories of direct and indirect land grabbing—which is one of the common topics of everyday conversations. Ibrahim, a landlord, self-trained land surveyor and one of the local elites, explained how the culture of corruption works. He said:

> Land documents or any other legal, or official papers are innocent. A document cannot be counterfeit unless someone uses a pen on it. The government officials have the power to use a pen on all the documents. They have the power to produce a forgery land document. The government-men are our main problem. They control the pen. That is why I call this system: the paper is innocent, but the pen is corrupt.

5.6.2 "Jor Jar Mulluk Tar" ("Might is Right")

Land grabbing has been an omnipresent process at community and national level, with the daily newspapers covering news of violent and non-violent conflicts over land on a regular

basis. A large number of films and plays have highlighted the nature of violence and resistance in the context of land disputes. For example, a recent Bangladeshi film titled *Lal Char or* The Red Sand (2015) depicts how powerful landlords and peasants involve themselves in never-ending blood-shedding battles over taking control of a resurfaced river island. Here, the "red" refers to the bloody violence. Back to reality: the police and labourers of a sugarcane farm of Rangpur Sugar Mills, and indigenous Santal community were involved in a land dispute in November 2016 in Bangladesh. The Santal community—who have been using their forefathers' land and making a living by cultivating crops for generations—were forcefully evicted from their land by state-run violence. It is repeatedly alleged that the police, with the support of local politicians, actively attempt to evict the indigenous community from their land; a video on the internet exposed that the police set fire to Santal houses in Gaibandha, for instance ("Santal victim files GD against Gobindaganj MP, UNO," 2016).

Adnan's (2013) seminal case study on land grabbing on chars in Noakhali, a south-eastern district of Bangladesh, shows that a complex interrelationship between neoliberal globalisation, state intervention, and local power relations collectively accelerates the mechanisms of land grabbing. The global capitalist economy creates ways in which the state, directly and indirectly, evicts peasants from their land by establishing so-called development projects (ibid.). For example, capitalist shrimp production projects triggered "a chain reaction of land grabs and violent political conflicts" in the Noakhali river islands (Adnan, 2013, p. 89).

Adnan divided the mechanisms of land grabbing into two analytically distinct categories - land seizure and land denial:

> First, when an area already owned or possessed by a group is taken over by others, the process is termed *land seizure*. Second, when a group is prevented from gaining access to land to which it is entitled, the mechanism is regarded as *land denial*. Despite these differences, both processes result in outcomes that have similar consequences in terms of *deprivation* of land and can be regarded as constituting complementary strands of the broader category of land alienation. Furthermore, the processes of land seizure and land denial can take place simultaneously, or sequentially, in the actual dynamics of land alienation. (Adnan, 2013, p. 96, emphasis in original)

This study has found evidence of direct and indirect ways of grabbing land. There are significant numbers of examples of a direct way of grabbing land. For example, powerful groups of people attempt to utilise the newly re-emerged cultivable land, which is owned by absentee landlords or less powerful villagers. Absentee landlords know that their land could be grabbed, but many of them moved to the mainland, leaving little hope of holding onto their land on the islands. The grabbers' strength comes from their extensive kinship network and regular connections with the local elites. They start farming newly re-emerged land without informing the actual landowners. In some cases, the original owners might or might not be given a share of crops. According to the islanders, when a char is about to emerge from the river bed, first the birds enjoy the advantage of having free fish and, then sneaky people benefit from cultivating the land without informing the actual owner. Finally, the original landowners take control of their land after harvesting. As an elderly islander stated, "In order, *bok, thok, and hok* (osprey, sneaky people, and original owner) use new char-lands."

Jamal's case can be considered an instance of land denial. He used to farm his land next to a wealthy farmer's plot before it submerged into the river due to riverbank erosion. His land re-emerged from the river bed after a few years. He went there to see his land and saw that the boundary between the blocks of the lands had vanished due to floods; in fact, it is not possible to build a long-lasting boundary between the plots, as the earth-made boundary is too fragile. Such boundary marks can be eroded, even in daylong rain. People pile soil up around their plot to mark the boundary, which is locally called *ail*. The narrow *ail* is also used as a walking path that connects the adjacent agricultural plots.

They need to trace and measure their plots of land after every flood, which is not an easy task, as the boundary-marks between the plots vanish during floods. They use their memory to trace the line between the plots—which quite often produces disputes. Solving the conflict on a land-boundary requires calling the land surveyor from the land office or self-trained local *amin*—who might or might not have received formal training on how to survey or measure land. Jamal asked to get back his land, but the wealthy farmer rejected his claim and tried to establish that he was not using Jamal's land. After hours of debate between them, the wealthy farmer asked Jamal to bring proof of his ownership, which is a widely used

strategy after using someone's land unlawfully because "showing proof" means showing actual land documents, as well as calling a land surveyor. The latter step is quite expensive for a poor peasant like Jamal because calling the surveyor requires the following formal steps: filling out a certain application form, paying the application fee, and waiting for a reply from the land office for a few weeks, in some cases months. If one expects a quick reply from the land office, he is expected to give a bribe to the land officials or to pressurise the land office by capitalising on the power of local elites. In the meantime, the grabber cultivates the land and harvests crops, which had happened in Jamal's case. He had been waiting for months, but the government land surveyor had not shown up, and therefore he could not regain his re-emerged land. In the meantime, the grabber harvested crops for one season, whereas Jamal could not utilise his own land.

Illegal (or unplanned) sand-moving is another example of direct land grabbing. Flood water leaves muddy silt and sand, whereby the former is cultivable, and the latter is not. When the flood water recedes, sandy lands re-emerge. If the sandy lands are located adjacent to the boat terminal or the mainland, the landowners of these lands are considered lucky, because they can remove the sand and sell it in the construction market; sand has great value in the construction sector of Bangladesh, and one can see a lot of tractors collecting and moving sand from the sandbanks to the mainland. A restaurant owner at the boat terminal told me that collecting and selling the sand is a quicker and easier way of making money because the landowners do not have to invest capital to obtain the sand, they just need to wait until the floodwater recedes. According to his explanation, influential people and landowners can afford to collect the sand because it requires hiring a big tractor and hiring several day labourers. The smallholders form a group to hire accessories (a tractor) for withdrawing the sand from their newly re-emerged land. Alternatively, they depend on the wealthy landlords who can afford to hire those accessories. In some cases, the landlords take advantage of the smallholders' inability to hire accessories for sand moving. They employ labourers and the equipment to move sand without taking consent from the smallholders. In addition, there is no guarantee that the landlords will give a share to the smallholders from the income gained from selling the piles of sand.

Figure 12: Moving sand from the dry river bed. Photo by researcher.

Moving the sand from state-owned land is an illegal act, but it seems that if the sand withdrawers have a "good connection" with powerful people, it would not be a reportable issue. Sometimes, powerful people withdraw sand from the river bed illegally. The restaurant owner at the boat terminal stated:

> It is all about the muscle power. *Jor jar mullok tar* [Might is right]. If a dominant group of people asks you to sell sand from your plots of land at a lower price, you are bound to do that. Otherwise, you will be pushed into a difficult situation. Those who can afford to hire labourers and tractors are not ordinary men—they are very powerful. They technically force the weak and powerless people to sell sand from their plots at cheaper price.

Powerful and wealthy people also acquire land in indirect ways. They have greater sources of cash than the smallholders, and they can afford to buy a small piece of land anytime. Most of the wealthy farmers own houses and a huge amount of land, both on the river islands and on the mainland. Since the land is cheaper on the islands, they buy land on several islands,

considering it as an investment for the future, even though they are aware that they might lose land due to the river flooding. They target the smallholders and provoke them to sell their small piece of land. They make them understand that they (the smallholders) cannot survive with their little piece of land in such hazardous islands, thus informing them it would be wise to sell it before the river erodes it.

Kinship networks have been an effective social force or capital for both grabbing and retaining control of char-lands. Such actions provide livelihood opportunities to one group (especially dominant) while limiting the opportunities for other groups who are less powerful. Ashan, a poor peasant, is a second-generation char dweller. He used to be a wealthy farmer when he had twelve acres of cultivable land that he had inherited. However, the river swallowed all his land a decade ago. Nearly two acres of his eroded land re-emerged from the river bed a few years ago. Most of it was sandy and infertile, and, therefore, he could not use the land for growing crops. He bought nearly an acre of cultivable land with his little income, and he had to spend all his savings to register the land to his name; the expense had also included legal costs and bribes.

Another householder, relatively influential, claimed that his new land document was counterfeit because the person from whom he bought the land was not the original owner. It was difficult for Ashan to find the original owner because he had left the char permanently. Thus, the householder declared Ashan to be a fraud for making a counterfeit land document and for starting to produce crops on the land. The conflict between them went from bad to worse, and they ended up calling for *shalis*, the customary village court which involves the local elites mediating a rivalry between the villagers. Ashan alleged that the *shalis* talked for influential households because they had bribed the elites. He then lost his hope for the land and was worried about taking further legal steps because it would require both legal costs and bribes. Ashan unhappily stated: “They would not grab my land if I had a big lineage like them. On char-lands, the big lineage has everything—land and *dapot* [domination].” As noted, the large landowning families have been at the top of the power structure in rural Bangladesh (Jannuzi & Peach, 1980).

State-run land documentation and management have not yet reached the remote char-lands. Although several land reform policies have been planned (both in the colonial and

post-colonial periods), as noted above, inter-household, inter-neighbourhood, and inter-char-land disputes have been recurrent on Onishchit, like in other chars. One of the main reasons is that many households inherited land but no "authentic" document. Thus, it seems that any land document of the islanders can be accused of being a forgery.

For example, Kalam, a peasant, lost control of his inherited land because of having no authentic document for it. A few years ago, he moved to Onishchit due to riverbank erosion. After a few years, his father's agricultural plots re-emerged. However, in the meantime, his father died. Kalam went to reclaim his father's land and saw someone had started ploughing the plots. He claimed his possession and the "grabber" asked him to show the original document against his claim. Kalam failed to show proof of his claim because he knew that his father had used the land unlawfully, meaning the land was khas. Kalam said that his father never thought to register the land to his name, believing the villagers would not stop his son using the khas-land when he was gone. However, Kalam stated, "The grabber has *matbar* [headman] and the land officers in his pocket." As noted by Baquee:

> One may have valid and legal documents but may fail to bring the land under his possession, since the *matbar* will have already managed to take possession of the re-surfacing land. It is an irony of fate indeed. The poor farmer can do nothing where might is right. If the *matbar* has designs on the land claimed by the poor farmer, who on earth would dare to procure the release of his land from the settlement office! (Baquee, 1998, p. 68)

5.7 Violence

It was a sunny morning in early November 2015. The flood water started receding, and agricultural plots of land resurfaced. The island peasants started ploughing their land with power tillers and traditional tools. Although Onishchit, like other islands, is apparently inaccessible, a few big tractors (branded Mahindra, made in India) were brought there for ploughing larger pieces of land. Using such big machinery is unusual on the islands because hiring those machines requires enough money. However, a few landlords can afford it. A huge amount of fertile land resurfaced within the year, and a group of young people started ploughing by employing a big tractor.

Babul, one of the key participants in this study, said that a group of young men brought a few tractors to the char. They hired some labourers and brought the tractors to plough the land, which did not belong to them. An early-retired military officer, whose lineage lives on Onishchit, led the young men to produce corn on the newly resurfaced area. He is known as very influential; his relatives are landlords and community leaders on Onishchit. He has a "strong connection" with the local politicians as well. The people could then hardly go against him and his lineage. His followers had also beaten an islander over a land dispute. Babul explained:

> It is a big risk to go against the dominant group as they have a strong connection with the administration. Moreover, the protest requires money and time. First, you need to go to the land office. If you ask them to measure the boundary of your land, there is no guarantee that they will come to here [island villages]. The land surveyors work only for those who bribe them.

Parvin, a middle-aged woman of a wealthy household, told of her father's vulnerability during a land dispute. She witnessed the biggest conflict ever known regarding the control of some char-lands. Parvin's father, Abdul, was very popular with poor farmers because he used to own large amounts of land and many poor and landless peasants used to rent his land. However, some people, including smallholders and landlords, accused him of using a large size of khas-land unlawfully. They threatened him and stated he should confess that he had been using khas-land without informing the land office. She said, "It was a conspiracy. Some people manipulated the landless people to go against my father." Her father showed them the original document and claimed that his father and grandfather used to own the land and that he had inherited it. The antagonism produced two rival groups: Abdul and his leaseholders, and Mohsin who led a group of the peasants against Abdul. The rivalry went from bad to worse, even though several shalis had taken place to resolve the conflict.

Eventually, Mohsin and his groups filed a case against their counterpart, alleging they had been using a large khas-land illegally. Abdul and his group went to the police station to present their claims and show legal documents. They returned in the evening and found that their houses were burnt and Mohsin had taken control of the land. They even threatened Abdul that they might attack his family members. Parvin said that her father was afraid for

his family, so he stopped sending her to school, assuming they might abduct her. “Since then, he had avoided taking further legal steps. Besides, *kot-kachari* (receiving services of the police department and judiciary administration) is quite expensive and lengthy. It brings more *jhamela* (troubles),” Parvin said.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has described that the formation of unequal access to land in rural Bangladesh is deeply rooted in the colonial political economy. Although the political-economic context has changed, the agrarian structure has remained the same, that is, access to environmental resources varies according to people’s economic, political and social positions in society.

In the eighteenth century, class divisions based on controlling landed property were introduced by the colonial power through the Permanent Settlement Act in the Bengal delta. The Act displays the British colonisers’ coercive power, which then shaped Bengal’s agrarian structure. The colonial political economy formed hierarchical classes such as landlords (*zamindars*), gentlemen (*bhadralok*), and peasants in Bengal. Hence, the colonial economy systematically denied peasants’ property rights on land and formed structural constraints on the peasantry. This legacy still exists in post-independence Bangladesh, where peasants are the most vulnerable class in the rural economy. In the present, corruption in land bureaucracy has also appeared as the biggest barrier, particularly for poor peasants, to owning and controlling land, be it on river islands or the mainland.

Chapter 6

Char as Multilocal

6.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to describe a) how the island-dwellers perceive and experience floods and their chars; and b) how they respond to displacement due to disasters; in other words, how they create and recreate spaces on chars for their habitation. Haron, a peasant, said, "*Amader jomir jonno banna dorkar kintu boro banna amaderke vitachara kore*" ("Our agricultural land needs floods, but bigger floods displace us."). Like Haron, many other char peasants expect floods to a lesser extent for their agricultural land, calling it a small flood (*choto banna*). This research conceptualises small floods as a hazard that affects char dwellers' homesteads and economy to a small extent. In contrast, bigger floods displace them and leave them landless. Therefore, bigger floods are conceptualised as a "disaster". The same flood can be a disaster for a poor household and a hazard for a wealthy household. Similarly, a char is lived, viewed, and used differently by its inhabitants.

The physical agents—floods and riverbank erosion—frequently submerge the islands, on the one hand, and create new islands, on the other. The island inhabitants move to the newly emerged islands, seeking habitation and agricultural livelihoods. In essence then, both displacement and emplacement can be observed on the islands during their frequent exposure to hazards. However, this study finds the meanings of "flood" and "islands" to be equivocal. From what people say—"flood is not a big problem," "flood is a big problem," "flood leaves fertile silt," "char is our home," "char is our motherland," and "the river gives as well as takes away land"—the study can infer that the island dwellers understand and experience floods and the islands differently. As Rodman puts it, "a single physical landscape can be multilocal in the sense that it shapes and expresses polysemic meanings of place for different users" (Rodman, 1992, p. 647).

6.2 "Place" as an Anthropological Problem

"Place" became an anthropological problem in the 1980s (Appadurai, 1988; Rodman, 1992; Basso, 1996). A place is not only a physical location but also "the setting for actions, the stage on which things happen…places, like voices, are local and multiple" (Rodman, 1992, p. 643). Places are not inert containers. Instead, they "are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions" (ibid., p. 641). Thus, Rodman underlines the ways in which different actors "construct, contest, and ground experiences in place" (ibid., p. 652).

Philosopher Michel Foucault (1986, p. 23) introduced the concept of "heterotopias", which refers to the practices of constructing various real spaces that mediate between utopias and ideological subjects. Foucault's idea of heterotopias provides the understanding of the social and cultural practices of sites, or spaces, or places, which are basically non-homogeneous. Foucault argues:

> The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a *heterogeneous space*. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, *we live inside a set of relations* that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposed on one another. (Foucault, 1986, p. 23, emphasis added)

Actors create spaces through socio-culturally defined relationships with other actors in their society. Foucault's idea of *"heterogeneous space"* helps us understand that different actors define and experience their dwelling spaces differently, and the idea that *"we live in a set of relations"* suggests focusing on multiple relationships, which are not fixed, but rather contingent.

In focusing on actors' power or human agency in creating and recreating spaces, Rodman (1992) provides an example from Melanesia to delineate the ideas of "multilocality" and "multivocality." The idea of multivocality helps us understand multiple narratives, voices, and senses of places; "Multivocality often involves multilocality…Narratives of

places are not just told with words; they can be told and heard with senses other than speech and hearing" (ibid., p. 649).

Rodman argues that multilocality has different dimensions: a) it provides "decentered" or subjective analysis rather than objective; b) it "can refer to comparative or contingent analyses of place"; c) it "can refer to reflexive relationship with places; and d) it refers to "polysemic meanings of place for different users" (ibid., pp. 646-647). Coexistence of different meanings implies the significance of multivocality; that is to say, people's narratives of attachments to places are manifold (ibid.). On this, Rodman writes: "By joining multilocality to multivocality, we can look 'through' these [Melanesian] places, explore their links with others, consider why they are constructed as they are, see how places represent people, and begin to understand how people embody places" (1992, p. 652).

Places are "actively sensed" (Feld & Basso, 1996, p. 7), and places and people are inextricably connected. Their work shows that local people attach multiple meanings to the places where they live. Basso (1996, p. 7) argues on the basis of his ethnographic work on landscape and language among the Western Apache: "place-making is also a form of cultural activity," and "it can be grasped only in relation to the ideas and practices with which it is accomplished." The idea of sense of place includes:

> [T]he relation of sensation to emplacement; the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested, and struggled over; and the multiple ways places are metonymically and metaphorically tied to identities. (Feld & Basso, 1996, p. 11)

This study observes the island villagers' affections and hopes for their place—the hazardous islands. Undoubtedly, hazardous events produce risks and vulnerability. Thus, people's risk perceptions vary depending on age, gender, health status, cultural practices, and prior experiences of similar risks. Cultural practices influence people's decisions regarding what risks to take and what to avoid (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). Rural households from Onishchit seem to believe that there is often a risk of flood but that floods can be adapted to. As such, the island peasants, deliberately and otherwise, have been living and investing their labour and money in hazardous places over the years.

The islands have significance both economically and emotionally. In rural Bangladesh, agricultural land acts as the nucleus of solidarities among the families, households and communities (Jahangir, 1982). Customarily, the household-heads (grandfather, father, or elder brother) make decisions on using agricultural land. They decide what amount of land is to be utilised, what type of crops are to be produced, and how many day labourers are to be employed. In practical terms, collective ownership and use of agricultural land are considered much more profitable on the islands, and therefore the households or extended family members hope to move together to a higher island and hope to emplace themselves in the same islands to form a new community there.

The local sense of "home" goes beyond the economic adaptation, then. As noted in Chapter 1, Momen perceives his land to be his "child," and he experiences an emotional attachment, even kinship, to his inherited land, even though several plots of his land were eroded; "This [island] is our motherland. We cannot ignore it. Maybe, God wants us to live here" (Interview notes, 2015). Feld and Basso (1996, p. 8) and their colleagues stress the ways in which "people encounter places, perceive them, and invest them with significance." Bariul, a returned in-migrant, had settled in Dhaka but recently came back home to Onishchit to settle there. He compared his experiences with "home" (island) and "out" (Dhaka):

> I used to work in many areas in Dhaka. I drove big buses and trucks, and I earned enough money. But I was not happy there. Now, I am very happy here [on the island] because I have been cultivating crops in my own field. My life in Dhaka was so horrible. I earned a lot in Dhaka—that was true. But, I found no peace there. Now I have been living here for several years. I feel this place is very safe like a child stays safe in its mother's womb. Living in one's own home is like staying with mother's love. *Jomi* [agricultural land] is like a mother who takes care of her children without any expectations. We face flood on the islands. But this is our home. Everything is in here.

6.3 Char as a Temporary Resource

In a study about people's agency and adaptability in the context of chars in northern Bangladesh, Indra (2000) argues that the island dwellers are not "just displaced and poor," they creatively recreate space under precarious conditions. The char dwellers' perceptions about the char landscape are in a state of flux then as the landscape changes and gives both

uncertainty (displacement) and hope (resettlement and agricultural livelihoods). The experiences relating to hazards vary depending on the households' holding and access to agricultural plots on multiple islands, with residing on the islands on a temporary basis being an ongoing strategy for some islanders. They settle on the islands for six to eight months during the agriculture season. In addition to the island dwellers, many wage labourers from the mainland go to the islands to seek work in agriculture on chars. Therefore, a large population depends on chars for obtaining agricultural livelihoods, even though it is exposed to cyclical hazards. In a similar study on Char Nalsonda in the north-central Bangladesh, Lein (2009, p. 98) argues that the char people cannot simply be labelled as "the poorest and most vulnerable." Some char dwellers consider the island as a potential place "to obtain a decent and sustainable livelihood" (ibid., p. 110). As such, some people (individuals or families) voluntarily move to the islands and temporarily settle there.

Using one's own land provides "mental peace" and "social status" in communities in rural Bangladesh. People might be poor or vulnerable to hazards, but they feel pride and contentment if they consume rice and garden vegetables produced on their own land. For example, Shahidul, a middle peasant, stated: "*Ghar-vangon* [displacement] is part of our life. Having said that, we feel happy to have our *gharer chal* [rice produced on one's own land]. Buying rice is disgraceful for *krishok* [peasant]." Shahidul compared buying and producing rice:

> Those who do not produce rice for their family members' consumption, buy white rice from the market. That white rice is artificially brightened by using chemical, which is very harmful to health. We are lucky that we do not have to buy rice from the market. We eat rice that we produce. Island dwellers have been privileged for enjoying *taja khabar* [fresh food], *taja mach* [fresh fish], *ghorer dud* [milk from family's cattle] and *mukto batas* [fresh air]. We have the energy to walk on dry sand mile after mile. But the people like you [who are not from the islands] cannot.

Shahidul's comments partly correspond to a schoolteacher's observations on islands and island dwellers. He had been teaching at a primary school on Onishchit. He stated:

> If you judge the island people on how they live, it would be wrong. Many of them own land in *kayem* [stable land]. On the islands, they live only for growing crops and raising

> cows. Now some families are sending their children to colleges in Dhaka. They are more hard-working than us [the mainlanders]. You would not see them suffering from the critical diseases. Because they eat everything fresh. They grow everything on the islands. They look poor, but they have sacks of rice stock in their houses.

6.3.1 Aziz's Temporary Living on Char

When I reached the courtyard of Aziz's home, he was binding square-shaped fencing, which would be used as walls for his two small huts. The main material of those fences was dry wild grasses, which is also used as cattle feed. He tied up bunches of the grasses with strings in between thin slices of bamboo. His wife went out to collect grass for their cattle, and his two little children were playing with sand near the courtyard. As he only lived there for the agricultural season, he wanted to build his huts with light materials (dry shrubs, thick polythene sheets, and bamboo pillars) rather than using heavy materials such as tin. In addition, disassembling shrub-made houses is easier than tin-made houses.

Aziz is originally from Arenda Bari, a part of the mainland of Gaibandha, where he used to earn a living from farming. Recently, he has moved to Onishchit and lived there only for the agricultural seasons. He has been renting fertile land from an absentee landlord. He has been growing corn and raising cattle on Onishchit in every agricultural season since the island resurfaced. After harvesting corn, he goes back to Arenda Bari before the floods come. During flooding, Aziz moves to Dhaka for employment and stays there, usually for a month a year. Sometimes, he works there for several months.

He shared his plan that he would complete corn harvesting by the first week of March. Then, he would have nothing to do on Onishchit. He would go to Joydebpur in Dhaka for at least a month, where the wealthy need wage labourers for harvesting paddy and for the process of husking. He moves and works there almost every year. Aziz said, "We [the wage labourers] get at least BDT 20,000 a month. It is a good amount of money. We can purchase our daily necessities for a few months with this money." So, Aziz lives in three different places in the same year: Arendabari, on the mainland in Gaibandha; Onishchit island during agricultural season; and Dhaka, when Onishchit faces floods.

6.3.2 Salam's Temporary Living on Char

Salam, in his early forties, is a well-known farmer because he is from a wealthy family on the island, although he has moved to the mainland permanently. He used to work for a private company. Now, he is a fully-fledged farmer. He said, "Farming is more profitable and secure than my last job in the company." His father owns acres of land located on different islands. Salam is responsible for visiting their land located on the islands to check whether their land resurfaces, and whether someone grabs their unattended land. As their plots of agricultural land are scattered on several islands, it is not possible for them (Salam, his brothers, and his father) to utilise their scattered land all the time, which is why they look for potential tenant peasants who want to rent their agricultural plots.

Salam is also responsible for looking after their agricultural land on Onishchit and Rahmatpur Char. In addition to letting tenant peasants use their land on lease, Salam produces crops on acres of land on Rahmatpur. He employs labourers and hires tractors for farming in every agricultural season. As sometimes the agricultural work needs long hours, Salam must remain close to his cultivated land on the islands. In addition to the long hours, he needs to watch over the irrigation pump and other machinery employed in farming, as the machinery can be stolen if he leaves it unattended. He has built a small hut next to the cultivated field to remain there temporarily. Sometimes, he asks some labourers to stay with him for security. His wife occasionally visits him with food, when he needs to stay in the temporary hut. Like Aziz, Salam lives on the chars temporarily in the agricultural season. He expects chars will be potential tourist spots. On this, he said:

> During the floods, many islanders migrate to Dhaka for looking for jobs. But we can create job opportunities here. We can transform this flooded place into a tourist area. We just need group effort. We, some friends, have already thought that we would invest some money on this. There are many higher islands here. We could set up temporary tea stalls and food shops here. We could employ engine boats and security guards. I am sure the urban people would come here for the fresh air and the boat journey.

It can be assumed that he came across the idea while he had been in Dhaka. There is a waterway in Ashulia, not very far from Faidabad, Dhaka, to which many island people seasonally move for better economic opportunities. Many street vendors and boatmen set up

their business there, especially in the rainy seasons. The location has been a popular tourist place for urban dwellers. I observed too that many people from the mainland frequently come to the islands to enjoy boat journeys, fresh air, and the natural landscape of the islands.

6.4 "Flood is a Big Problem"

The state of disaster vulnerability, particularly for the landless and poor islanders, is a sort of relay race, in which a sprinter runs with a baton to hand it over to the next sprinter to finish the race. In the context of Onishchit, the islanders' landlessness, poverty, and disaster-induced displacement are transferred to the next generation. However, they practise their agency to adapt to the adversities caused by hazards. Indeed, they have little choice, as they have limited access to and control over land, which is the main capital for surviving, as well as for ameliorating the effects of disaster due to climate change.

For those who do not possess land or houses on the mainland (most of the households are in this category), "flood is a big problem". They take temporary shelter on the roadsides on the mainland, the embankment at the boat terminal, or other higher ground on the chars. And, of course, the houses which are located at the edge of the islands are the most vulnerable due to riverbank erosion. Thus, it does not matter how wealthy they are. According to a small peasant: "I feel very helpless in floods. Water is everywhere during floods. We cannot let our children out because they might drown in the floodwater. Sometimes, I feel *fapor* [perplexity] and cannot decide where to move."

6.4.1 Haron's Household

Haron, in his early fifties, is a second-generation char dweller. His parents were relatively wealthy farmers and possessed about three acres of land in a stable village at the boat terminal in the 1970s. Like other current char dwellers, his parents lost their entire land holding and homestead due to floods in the 1980s and took shelter near the embankment. The floods left him landless. After his father's death, Haron became responsible for providing food, clothes, and shelter to the household members: his mother, two younger sisters, wife, and two children. In the 1990s, some plots of their land had resurfaced, and they hoped to cultivate crops and live on the newly resurfaced char, which is said to be a common case for many of

the inhabitants of chars. Like many others, he cannot recall how many times he shifted his house, but he could recall the name of 6 chars where he used to live in his 25-year char life.

Haron's two brothers migrated to Dhaka. They have been in search of a stable job and sharing a small room with other in-migrants there: "They are determined to settle in Dhaka. They can do it so because they are young and bachelor". For him, it is too late to attempt to settle in Dhaka, as his family members need him to stay with them on the char. Haron's wife stated that her husband Haron used to migrate to Dhaka and neighbouring districts for earnings. She worries during her husband's absence in the house. Once, their little daughter nearly drowned during flooding while they had lived in Kalo Sona. After that incident, she asked her husband not to migrate anymore, as she is concerned about the security of her children: "It is better to stay with family during flooding. I cannot manage everything alone."

Figure 13: A poor peasant family's house. Photo by researcher.

Haron attempted to leave char-life twice but could not afford it. He thought he would rent some agricultural plots for several seasons on chars, grow crops, and build a hut on the embankment close to his father-in-law. In this way, he hoped he would be able to save a

substantial amount of money to buy a small piece of land on the mainland to settle there permanently. Accordingly, then, they moved to the embankment. They had managed to stay there nearly a year but after that, a higher living cost pushed them to go back to char-life. Haron's mother explained her observations on the interrelationships between disaster vulnerability and poverty:

> You see! Poor people's dream never comes true. On the one hand, our state of pennilessness. And, we stay with flood-riverbank erosion day after day, on the other. *Ai duita amader kopale lekha ache. Kivae thekaben?* [These two are the decree of fate. How can you avoid these?] Isn't it so? If it is not the case, why couldn't my son [Haron] manage to escape from this hardship of char-life after his several attempts?

6.4.2 Tarek's Household

Tarek, aged fifty-five, used to live with his parents in Kanchipara, a part of the mainland located around the boat terminal. His household used to grow crops on several acres of land possessed by his parents. Combined with the effects of natural hazards, a burglary in their house transformed their economic condition from "good" to "bad."; "The robbers even took our *jomir dolil* (deed of land)," Tarek said. After his father's death, their household's economic condition got worse. They could not afford to live on the mainland. They had been in abject poverty that forced them to relocate to Hardanga Char. Since then, their char-life had started. Now, Tarek's household consists of his widowed mother, wife, two younger brothers, and two teenage daughters and a son.

Tarek married a char girl. His father-in-law offered him to stay on the char as he (Tarek) was in abject poverty. In Tarek's words: "I had nothing. I was a poor man. My father-in-law saved us by giving me some land to build a house next to his house on Hardanga Char." Since then, Tarek's household and his father-in-law's household had been staying in the same neighbourhood wherever they move; Tarek shifted his house and relocated his family seven times from the beginning of his char life. His father-in-law's support helped him escape from the hardship of poverty and unemployment: "My father-in-law owns a good amount of land. I grow crops on lease on his land. Otherwise, I might have gone to Dhaka to look for jobs leaving behind my family." He replied to the question about what his plan is regarding permanently escaping from cyclical displacement:

> Every char person dreams of settling on the stable land. But what's the point having the dream but not having the ability? I guess I will not be able to live on the mainland in my lifetime. I hope my children will do that. I am working hard so that they will not have to work as poor peasant like me. Now they are going to a high school. I pray for them. They will be able to gain good jobs. They will be able to afford staying on stable land.

Overall, although both Haron and Tarek wish to escape from climate-driven displacement, but they could not afford it. In fact, Haron made several attempts but those did not work out. Tarek, as landless, was offered a homestead by his father-in-law. As we can see, then, supports of kinship appear as the most effective support in crisis moments. Repeated climate-driven displacement and abject poverty hardly give them a chance to escape from the adversities of the disasters. Therefore, they hope against hope that the next generation will be able to escape from hazards and poverty.

6.4.3 Jamila's Household: A Woman-Headed Household

Jamila, in her early fifties, is a third-generation flood victim. Her grandparents and parents lived on chars in Sirajganj. She got married to a young farmer in Gaibandha's char. Like other male members of char families, her husband occasionally used to migrate to Dhaka during every flooding season for better economic opportunities, and he used to come back to his family, consisting of his wife, a son, and a daughter. In one season, her husband migrated to Dhaka but never came back. She happened to know that her husband had remarried and started a new life in a slum in Dhaka. Jamila said: "I went to Dhaka to meet him, but he had moved to somewhere else so that I could not trace him. Since then, I had left the hope to see him again and I tried to *manush* (take care of) my children."

Now, Jamila's household consists of her son, the son's wife, daughter, the daughter's husband, and two grandchildren. She said: "Now I have two sons [her own son and son-in-law]." She offered her son-in-law sharing their house. "Staying in the same house is good for everyone. We can move together during floods," Jamila said. Jamila's household faces poverty on the one hand and displacement on the other. She cannot remember how many times she shifted her house on different chars in her life. However, she recalls that she has resettled in four char villages in the last decade.

On a winter morning, Jamila was about to go to collect muddy-sticky soil from the bank of the river, used for coating small holes on the floors of earth-made huts. I joined her, and we walked to the river. She pointed her finger at Rasulpur Char that was located across the river, saying: "We used to live on the char five years ago. We used to rent a homestead at the bank of the river. We had known that we needed to move very soon because the river had already started swallowing the char when we moved there." The flood of 2010 inundated the entire char and they moved to Onishchit; "Onishchit Char was very big when we moved here, now it is becoming smaller. The river is swallowing it day by day. It will disappear within few years." She replied to the question of how many times she relocated her house on Onishchit in the last five years:

> [Recalling and counting with fingers] Four times. First, we built our house in the north. That place was too low. We figured it out during floods. Then, we moved to the middle of the char. That place was higher. But the neighbourhood was not good. We had a problem with a family. Then we moved to the south in the same char. There, flood water was at my neck height level. That year, my daughter gave birth to a son. We moved from there and again settled in the middle. Now, we have settled here [north-east of the char] because we could manage to rent a homestead and an agricultural plot in the same area. We produce crops in the land and share it to the landowner. God knows, how long we can stay here.

Once Jamila's household moved to the embankment at Balashi boat terminal and stayed there nearly a month. They moved back to Onishchit when the flood water had declined. They had to spend all of their savings, aggregated by her son and son-in-law, and they had to borrow money from a moneylender for resettling. Jamila said: "Flood is a big problem for us. *Ghar tulte na tulte abar ghar vangar time chole ashe* (We could not properly finish assembling our house after disassembling it because floods again make us to disassemble the house.)"

There has been a silent dispute between two groups in Jamila's household: a) Jamila's daughter and son-in-law, and b) Jamila, her son and son's wife. Jamila's son-in-law wanted to move to the mainland very soon as he wanted to earn from pulling rickshaws in Gaibandha town. The main reason is that there is no work in the char in evening time; if he stays on the mainland, he can earn from pulling rickshaws, even in evening time, and he does not have to return to the char before evening. Jamila and her son want the same, but they think that it is

too early to move to the mainland, as they cannot afford to live on the mainland right now. She worries whether they might need to come back to the char after resettling on the mainland if they moved immediately. In an afternoon at Mamun's tea stall, Deepu, Jamila's son-in-law, said:

> I need to move to the mainland as soon as possible. I shared an idea to my brother-in-law [Jamila's son] that we [he and his wife] will first build a small house at the embankment. We try to settle there. And, then, the rest will join us after a year or two. Otherwise we cannot be able escape from floods. She [Jamila] felt sad when I shared my idea. I am sad too. But what should we do? *Kintu mayato thag korte-e hobe ai bonnar haat thake mutkti pate* (But, we have to sacrifice our feelings in order to escape from floods)."

I have witnessed Deepu's moving toward the mainland while I was in the field. He progressively did what he planned: earning from rickshaw pulling, renting a small piece of land at the boat terminal, and saving money to build up a small business with his brother-in-law [Jamila's son named Mintu]. Mintu and I were waiting for the boat on a winter morning. I asked Mintu what his plan was, concerning moving to and joining with Deepu on the mainland. He replied: "We all are sad to see that they [his sister and sister's husband Deepu] are not around us. We are poor. We need to be stay together. If a big flood comes, we cannot survive unless we stay together." They hope to join Deepu as soon as possible. Mintu has a plan: "If the river does not erode our cropland this year, I will sell crops and try to leave the char." If it happens otherwise, he and Jamila will not be able to join Deepu in the house on the mainland. Consequently, they will have to stay on the hazardous char. Although the men [Deepu and Mintu] are the main earning members of the household, they give importance to Jamila's ideas in running the household because they acknowledge that Jamila worked hard as a day labourer in agriculture to take care of her two children after her husband left her. However, the two men make decisions on moving and farming. Jamila says: "We need to stay together. But flood is a big problem that *bichchinno* [disconnects] us from time to time. We are poor people. We need to be staying together to survive. On top of everything else, we are unable to avoid disaster. We are unlucky char people by birth."

6.5 "Flood is not a Big Problem"

Flood is "not a big problem" for a few households, who are relatively wealthy, because they are able to make essential preparation to face the potential adversities of floods. They send women and children and important belongings (such as cattle and land documents) to their mainland house. The following cases display that their prevailing socio-economic conditions provide effective supports for recovering from disaster losses with less effort, compared to the poor households.

6.5.1 Khan's Household

Khan, a wealthy farmer, said: "Flood is not a big problem for me." Riverbank erosion is the main problem for his property distributed in different areas, including several chars and the mainland. Khan was expecting me at Mamun's tea stall on Onishchit, as we had agreed earlier to have a conversation on that day. He took me to his house consisting of four small huts: two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a cattle room. His wife, Khadiza, in her early forties, was preparing to cook: cutting vegetables and sorting out firewood. Five labourers, hired by Khan, were working in his cornfield adjacent to his homestead.

Khan is an influential person in his neighbourhood. He is known as a wealthy farmer, *matbar* (headman), *amin* (self-trained land surveyor) and corn trader. He is regularly invited to attend at informal village court (*shalis*) by his fellow char dwellers. He proudly described his father's past class status as a landlord in Sirajganj, where his father was born. Khan's father told him that his great grandfather was a *jotedar* (wealthy farmer) in the British colonial period. That is why Khan's father inherited a large amount of land. Khan said: "My father inherited hundreds of acres of land in Sirajganj. He lost some land due to riverbank erosion. Locals took advantage of the *gondogol* [Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971], and they grabbed some land. He managed to sell some acres of land before moving here [Gaibandha]." Riverbank erosion displaced his parents from Sirajganj during a flood in 1970. Afterward, Khan's parents and some close relatives started moving to Gaibandha to escape from hazards they had experienced in Sirajganj. His father bought a large amount of land in Gaibandha.

His parents had settled in a mainland village. In the past, the village was a part of the mainland, but the river had gradually submerged the entire village in the 1990s, and Khan's char life started. However, as he owns a large amount of land, he has never been landless or homeless. He invests his savings in buying land and growing crops on lease on chars. Moreover, he has bought "a good size" of land in Dinajpur District, which is free from riverbank erosion right now, as there is no big river around the area. He is almost ready to leave the char: "Imagine that I have placed my one foot on the mainland. I will be able to settle there within a year or more."

Figure 14: A relatively wealthy family's house. Photo by researcher.

He owns more than 230 acres of land, including cultivable and non-cultivable. The status quo is that half of the amount of his land is underwater. He hopes that the eroded land will resurface, and he would grow crops on it. His two brothers graduated from a public college. One teaches at a primary school in the capital city Dhaka, and the other runs a clothing shop in Gaibandha town. Khan said: "Among the brothers, I am the less educated one. But I can read and write. I have participated in training regarding the techniques of surveying land so that I can trace my land when it resurfaces." Many char dwellers hire him to survey and trace their land after the subsiding of the flood water: "I witness many cases of

land-disputes when I survey the land." Khan proudly said that he offered some low-income families to use his land for homestead in exchange for working for him during the agricultural season.

His two brothers verbally gave him full authority to grow what crops he likes to grow on their inherited land, and he is supposed to share crops or values with them after harvesting. Unlike the low-income families, he is not continually worried about losing his homestead during floods, as he has places for shelter: his brother's house in Gaibandha town and his land in Dinajpur. He thought he would wait some years to see if their eroded land resurfaces. His wife recently explained her worries about their children's future, compared to the children living on the mainland. Khan realized: "I have stuck myself in the *jomir maya* (illusion of possessing land). I was afraid of losing control of my inherited land if I leave the char." Khan described his plan of escaping from the hardship of char life:

> Char land is good for cultivation and raising cattle. But it's not wise for staying there forever. My children are growing up. They will need to go to high school next year, but there are no high schools on chars. I must move to Dinajpur as soon as possible for the sake of my children. I should leave the illusion of owning cheaper land on chars. I wanted to leave chars a few years ago, but I could not make my mind ready to escape from the illusion.

6.5.2 Sajjad's Household

Sajjad and his five brothers have been residing on Onishchit since the island resurfaced nearly five years ago. The villagers consider them a "rich and powerful lineage" because they own a large amount of land on several islands, and Sajjad's father was elected a UP-Member once. Recently, they built a bigger house on the mainland, which Sajjad calls their "second home." One of his brothers, his family, and his elderly parents have resettled there. He temporarily stays in this second home during floods and comes back to the char village during the dry seasons for growing crops. One of his elder brothers is a cattle-trader and owns a big engine boat. He visits his brothers living on Onishchit to know if they need his boat for moving to higher ground during floods.

Sajjad's main reason for staying in the char village is to keep an eye on their land so that no one can grab it. As noted above, nobody would dare to grab their land because the lineage he belongs to is quite big and influential on Onishchit. His kinship network includes the families of his five brothers and other relatives. Moreover, one of his nephews is a potential politician, who resides in the town and keeps regular contact with the villagers to increase his popularity on Onishchit.

Sajjad and his other brothers do not think of themselves as "helpless," as they voluntarily stay on Onishchit for several months of each year to raise cattle, grow crops, and collect rents from those who have been renting their land. They can afford to move to their second home anytime. Sajjad stated:

> Riverbank erosion has caused severe sufferings in our lives in the past. My parents tried hard to give us a good life. We [brothers] all completed school education, but my parents could not afford to leave chars permanently. Now we can escape from the stressful char life. Our children will not have to go through such painful lifestyle.

Overall, the households of Khan and Sajjad are relatively well-to-do compared to the landless and poor households such as the households of Haron and Tarek. It does not necessarily mean that the wealthy households are free from the adversities of hazards, however. Inheritance from previous generations, skills (land surveying), savings, small-scale investment, and kinship network provide socio-economic conditions that ease any climate-driven effects, including displacement and resettlement.

6.6 Kalo Sona Char: A Short-Lived Hope of Certainty

There had been a prosperous char called Kalo Sona, which is fondly remembered. Thousands of households had settled there just after the devastating flood in the late 1980s. The people had found the place relatively higher, as well as fertile, than other newly resurfaced chars. Kalo Sona had a vast area of fertile silt, which consists of soft and muddy sediment (*poli mati*). The sediment is usually black (*kalo*) and the black sediment was so fertile that the islanders could produce plenty of crops without using chemical fertiliser, and that is why the island was popularly called "black gold" or *kalo* (black) *sona* (gold). Here, the "black" refers to the black-coloured silt, and the "gold" refers to the abundance of crops. The char sustained

for more than a decade, which is a rare example of longevity on such temporary river islands. As such, no one had thought the river would wash away the whole island. However, in 2010, the river eroded the entire island, leaving the inhabitants on the move again. Recently, the char has started resurfacing from the river bed, and many displaced households have started moving there again. Unfortunately, the island has not come back as it was. An elderly farmer, who used to live there, said: "Can you imagine that we had several big mango trees on Kalo Sona. We thought that we had finally settled there, we would not need to move again."

In the past, the quality of the soil of Black Gold attracted a lot of farmers and investors. Even many wealthy farmers moved there from the nearby mainland, and they settled and invested their money in land there. For example, Momena, in her early thirties, used to live on the char with her parents. Her father used to work at a rice mill in Rangpur city. He quit his "good" job and decided to settle on Black Gold instead. She reminisced:

> We were happy on Kalo Sona. My brothers used to produce crops on our own land. My father used to go back and forth to Rangpur city to work at a *chatal* [rice mill]. He thought farming on Kalo Sona would be more profitable than working in the rice mill. He did it. My father and my brothers invested their savings in buying the agricultural land. It was going very well. We used to harvest a huge amount of crops every year. We could not imagine that the char would vanish so quickly. The river ate the whole char. Afterward, we moved here [Onishchit]. Those happy days are gone.

Like Kalo Sona, another fertile area called Rasulpur (then mainland, now an island) had been eight kilometres away from the river back in the 1980s. It had been inhabited by hundreds of flood victims. No one thought that it would be inundated and eroded. There had been a well-known school and a college, large garden, and an abandoned palace. Many people used the garden as a public park. Moreover, the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) built a sluice gate at Rasulpur to protect the mainland. However, the flood in the early 1990s completely submerged the sluice gate into the river. Amzad, an elderly peasant, clearly recalled the day when the sluice gate collapsed because his elder daughter was born on that day, and it was Friday. Amzad described a lot of people, who were coming back home from mosques after finishing the Friday afternoon prayer, who were screaming as they watched the large sluice gate collapse. Rasulpur resurfaced after a few years since the devastating flood. Amzad stated:

> It was unbelievable how the river had swallowed such a huge sluice gate. We thought that we would see the gate when Rasulpur would re-emerge from the river's womb. The char re-merged, but the disaster transformed our fertile land into sandy. When we dug the land for setting irrigation pipe, we felt that the pipe touched the sluice gate under the sand.

6.7 "Char People Look After Char People"

In the absence of institutional services, social capital has been considered a significant way of surviving on the chars. Mamun, the owner of the tea stall, told me, "Brother, you have observed our sufferings. No one [the local government] comes forward when we need help. If we do not help each other, we cannot survive here. The char people look after the char people." Ashley and colleagues' (2000) study of livelihood practices on the island in Kurigram in Bangladesh suggest that social capital is a key resource to which most of the islanders have the greatest access.

Moving and resetting house structures requires daylong labour of a group of people. It requires paying more than BDT 1,000 (nearly €13) to the labourers. Culturally, they (relatives or neighbours) help each other without expecting wages for this type of social support. In such cases, the house-owners offer cigarettes and betel leaves to the helpers or volunteers, and if possible, one meal.

In a morning in August during the flood, Rahman, a young boatman, could not manage his time to have his breakfast except for smoking a few cigarettes because he was operating his boat from the very early morning. In that morning, many flood victims called him from the adjacent neighbourhood. The neighbourhood consisted of nearly thirty families. The flood affected the neighbourhood first, as it was located at the edge of the char. Rahman, along with a few men, voluntarily helped ten families to disassemble their house materials (tin roof, tin walls, and bamboo pillars) and rescued other belongings (wooden bed, cattle, firewood, and kitchen utensils).

Figure 15: Temporary resettlement on the embankment at Balashi Ghat. Photo by researcher.

Motaleb, a freedom fighter and a former UP-Member, was from the inundated neighbourhood. He came to Mamun's tea stall. He looked quite anxious and agitated. He shared his experiences of displacement. He, along with other people at the tea stall, appreciated Rahman's boat-service in rescuing flood victims from the inundated neighbourhood. Motaleb, Rahman, and others were requesting some fellow islanders to come to the stall to form several groups for rescuing flood victims. Nearly thirty men gathered there, and Motaleb and Rahman led the groups. They brought two families and their belongings at the tea stall, where many people, including men, women, children, and myself, were waiting to see them.

Agitation against the state can easily be noticed in such vulnerable situations. Motaleb made phone calls to the current UP-Member, who lives near the boat terminal, asking him to send some boats and individuals to rescue flood victims. Two NGOs (Friendship and GUK) employed a few engine boats and their staff to rescue flood victims. The organisations also provided financial support to rebuild victims' houses. Farhad, a char dweller and a field-level employee of Friendship, stated: "We have elected our people as Chairman-Member, they are supposed to take care of us in this crisis moment, but they are not available here. Whereas the NGOs' brothers [workers and volunteers] are helping us."

Moving a house-structure and other belongings requires a bigger engine boat, a group of men, and a skilled boatman. Rahman is one such professional boatmen on the island. Loading the household stuff in a bigger boat requires at least an hour, and unloading the boat needs another hour. After moving two houses, Rahman came back to the tea stall to have some snacks and betel leaves. He asked me whether I was interested in seeing the neighbourhood that was inundated: "Brother, would like you to join us? You will have a chance to look at how we disassemble a house in the floodwater, and you can take pictures of it." I declined his offer, as I might be useless because they needed experienced men who can load household objects and livestock onto the boat.

At the tea stall, many flood victims gathered and shared their experiences of moving their houses. Rahman's boat came with household stuff from the inundated neighbourhood, and he asked more men to go with him because some of the helpers were feeling exhausted. Three men joined him. At the tea stall, several people started digging the earth to make holes to place the bamboo pillars into those holes. After setting the bamboo pillars vertically, they lifted the tin roof and set it on the pillars, which was an arduous task. Then, they tied up the tin walls with metal strings and ropes with the bamboo pillars. Helping move and re-set flood-affected houses is considered an altruistic task.

Rahman approached me and said: "Look brother, how difficult it is to move a house! I have transported five houses [house materials] till now. I am exhausted. I have not taken my breakfast yet. Soaking in the rain, we are moving houses." A senior man directly rebuked a couple of young men who were about to start playing cards close to the tea stall. He said, "The people are dying, and you *jubok* (young) men are playing cards. It is unbelievable! Why are you not assisting Rahman?" They replied with a shy smile, "*Achcha dada* [ok, grandfather]. We thought Rahman had enough helpers."[9]

[9] Informally, the kinship term *dada* or grandfather is usually used to address elderly men in Bangladesh. Similarly, *dadee* or grandmother is used to address elderly women.

Figure 16: A group of char dwellers helping a family to shift their house during the flood. Photo by researcher.

6.8 Conclusion

The river and floods are considered material capital in their own terms. Like other islands, Onishchit is best seen as a multilocality, since the island is lived, used, and imagined in various ways. For the wealthy landholders, it is a "better" place for growing corn and raising livestock. In contrast, for the smallholders and the less influential people, it is a place for both subsistence and temporary home. Thus, both the small peasants and wealthy farmers find the islands a "better" place for growing crops and raising cattle. The inhabitants' attachment to the islands also goes beyond economic behaviour. They regard the islands as "motherland," "home," and "inherited property." Alternatively, some feel "helplessness" during disasters when they must move to a new place, leaving behind their cultivated land and community. Also, a few people hope to see the "hazardous" island become a would-be "tourist place" like many rural riverine areas in the country.

In the absence of public support, social capital has been an effective way to survive. Kinship ties, both inside and outside lineage groups, are the main constituent of social capital.

Moving houses and belongings from one island to another, or to the higher ground on the same island, needs group work, which can be obtained from the local communities free of cost. “Vulnerability” and “invulnerability” are in a state of flux due to the erosion and formation of the riverine islands. Thus, a family can be simultaneously “vulnerable” and “invulnerable” in the same year on the same islands.

Chapter 7

Livelihood Practices on the Island

7.1 Introduction

A char peasant said, “I have some land today, but it could go underwater tomorrow [next flooding season]. It may re-emerge. We have been living with this uncertainty for a long time. We are king today, beggar tomorrow” (Interview Notes, 2015). This quote illustrates that people's socio-economic conditions can rapidly fluctuate due to climatic disasters. The land has always been a crucial asset, as rural livelihoods of Bangladesh are predominantly land-based. The amount of land available varies periodically due to submergence and the formation of new land. Within a week or a month, disaster can transform a family’s “higher” economic condition to a “lower” one, and vice versa. “We are king today, beggar tomorrow”—this is how people express the sudden changes of their socio-economic conditions due to river floods and riverbank erosion. Some landlords said they used to possess more than fifty acres of land located on different chars, but large portions of the land went into the river or were turned into barren char due to disasters. Likewise, some smallholders said they used to produce crops on much land, but the river swallowed it and made them landless and helpless. Most of the island households own land that varies in size, location, and current quality (fertile or sandy).

They practise multiple livelihood strategies: farming, raising livestock, selling their physical labour, running grocery-cum-tea stall, fishing, etc. Nowadays, corn cultivation and raising livestock are the main methods for making a living. This chapter deals with the following questions: What are their livelihood options? How do they interact with each other in the social space of agriculture to secure their livelihoods on Onishchit?

7.2 Social Practice and Livelihood

Social structures consist of different "fields" or "social spaces"—for example, business, law, education, journalism, sports, and so on. A field has its subfields—for example, football, basketball, and tennis are subfields of the "sports" field. Football, as a social space, requires an understanding of how multiple agents or actors (referee, linesmen, coaches, players, captains, and spectators) interact with each other by obeying certain rules. Although they act, they are not free or autonomous agents. Instead, they are guided by certain rules of the game, on the one hand, but they are free to show their skills, on the other. Bourdieu's idea of structure-agency relationships started from this point: "how can behavior be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?" (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 65, cited in Maton, 2012). Like a football field, the social world can be considered a space or field in which agents are "defined by their relative positions within that space" (Bourdieu, 1985, pp. 723-724). Actors act to ensure their positions in different fields, and their positions vary depending on their access to and attainment of the different forms of capital—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Bourdieu (1985) argues every field has its own logic and hierarchy, and therefore, a field is hierarchized.

Bourdieu's idea of "habitus" is an important element for understanding social practices in a field. Every member (individuals, institutions) is competitive with each other, and they take strategic actions to secure their positions in a field. One's position in society is produced through his or her habitus, which refers to routinised actions or behaviours that are consciously or unconsciously practised, improvised and reproduced. The production of habitus is an ongoing process. Thus, it goes beyond the present moment and is produced historically. As Bourdieu writes, "The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices…in accordance with the schemes generated by history" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54).

Habitus evolves through interactions between structure and agency. For example, football players routinely practise particular skills guided by coaches or football training books. It does not necessarily mean that they are supposed to be fully obedient to football rules. Rather, they can improvise their skills in their own ways, depending on their various capitals (body size, level of understanding, and disposition). In Bourdieu's term, the players

tend to internalise the external elements (training) and externalise their internal elements (improvisations). Habitus is "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53), meaning humans' tendencies are not fixed, but changeable and dynamic. In essence, then, habitus fuels the process of structuring structures without losing sight of the domination of the structures. It is "[o]bjectively "regulated" and "regular" without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organising actions of a conductor" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53).

Bourdieu's idea of social practices, in analysing livelihoods, is "able to capture in a more realistic way the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of the way in which people make their living" (Sakdapolrak, 2014, p. 23). To address rural livelihoods, a group of development practitioners of DFID and academics of Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University in England developed the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF):

> A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shock, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base. (Scoones, 1998)

In the 1990s, this framework had been dominant in policy making and development research. However, the drawbacks and pitfalls of the approach have become apparent when it has been applied (Sakdapolrak, 2014). Sakdapolrak (2014, p. 20) identifies three clusters of critiques of mainstream livelihood research: "a) imbalanced consideration of the structure-agency relation; b) lack of a broadened and embedded idea of assets; and c) poor recognition of spatial and temporal dynamics." Bourdieusian analysis shows that individuals secure their livelihoods by applying their agency, but that the structure constrains people's agency. However, the SLF does not provide any explanation "of how structural aspects such as institutions and policies influence livelihoods, or of how livelihoods influence the structural level" (Sakdapolrak, 2014, p. 21).

7.3 Agriculture as a Social Field

On Onishchit Char, the agricultural social space consists of many agents such as tenant peasants, day labourers, landowning classes, moneylenders, and petty traders. Thus, to secure livelihood in the agricultural field, poor peasants strategically maintain "*valo samparka*" (good connections) with landlords and moneylenders to rent land and borrow capital, respectively. Thus, in experiencing limited access to state-run banks, the islanders rely on traditional moneylenders.

7.3.1 Kamla (Day Labourer)

Working as a day labourer or *kamla*, both in the farming and non-farming sector, is the main form of livelihood for smallholders and landless islanders. They work in agriculture on both the islands and the mainland. Occasionally, they work for their neighbours' households in constructing and repairing house structures, moving earth, cutting trees, and raising plinths. The landless peasants ask the wealthy farmers whether they need day labourers in the agriculture season, which they do; in fact, the wealthy farmers need day labourers for ploughing, sowing seeds, weeding, irrigation, harvesting, and threshing. Usually, the employers pay BDT 250 to 300 (approximately €3 to 4) per day and provide one cooked meal, particularly lunch. Feeding the day labourers is not a compulsory deal but a well-practised norm. Many labourers sell their labour power in advance: the employers pay them after harvesting and selling their crops. Therefore, the labourers must wait for months until the employers sell their crops and earn money. It has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is that the same employer might hire the same labourers for the duration of the full agriculture season. The disadvantage is that the labourers have to wait for a long time to receive wages.

It was a sunny day in the agriculture season on Onishchit. Nurul, a landlord, hired more than ten fellow islanders for ploughing his acres of land. In addition, he called his elder son to assist him in ploughing. His son goes to college and stays in the dormitory of the college in Gaibandha. Nurul looked exhausted as he started ploughing his land from the early morning with the labourers he hired. He took a break and came back home to have his lunch and to collect the meal for his workers. His wife and two daughters were making lunch for

the labourers and the family members. He asked his son and daughters to carry a big pot full of boiled rice, lentil soup, and fish curry. Nurul took two plastic jugs and a few glasses with him. They took all the food to the field where the labourers were working. Like others, Nurul said that sometimes they desperately look for labourers because many labourers migrate to the purlieus of the cities and neighbouring districts to look for jobs, as jobs in the cities provide relatively higher wages than those provided on the chars.

Figure 17: Day labourers harvesting corn. Photo by researcher.

Nurul criticised the labourers, however: “Many landless islanders are lazy, and they do not want to work in agriculture fields; instead, they await the NGOs’ financial support.” Ashan, who depended on day labour jobs, quickly responded to such criticism and said that it was very hard for a day labourer to work in an agriculture field for several successive days. He explained why the day labourers prefer working in the non-farming sector on the mainland, noting that working in agriculture fields requires working from early morning to evening. In non-farming sectors, they can take breaks.

The islanders also involve themselves in carrying loads at the boat terminal. Two young brothers of Delwar, a boatman and an important participant in this research, work as day labourers at the boat terminal all year round. They pull rickshaw-vans during the flooding period when the terminal becomes less busy. One of the brothers, Sanowar, in his late thirties, was waiting and smoking along with his fellow day labourers at the tea stall where I used to wait for the boat heading to Onishchit. A trader had hired them for unloading a truck that was coming with fertilizers from Bogura, and then to load it onto a boat that was already anchored at the boat terminal. Sanowar and his fellow labourers approached the truck with the supervision of their leader when it arrived at the boat terminal. Two labourers got on the truck. Their job was to lift the heavy sacks full of fertiliser and place the loads on the heads of the fellow labourers standing at the truck. Putting the loads on the boat required a few seconds of walking on the sandy walking path, followed by walking into the river water at waist height. They organized the loads into the boat according to the contractor's instructions. The final step of the job was to push the boat strongly until it could float again because it had got stuck in the mud. All in all, unloading the truck and loading the boat took nearly three hours. After completing the job, they went to the nearby tea stalls and the temporary hotels that sell meals. Some took tube-well water, which was always free, some ordered tea, cigarettes, and then betel leaves with tobacco as usual. The contractor asked them to wait for a while until he came back with wages from the employer (contractor). After half an hour, he came back and distributed their wages, BDT 150. I followed Sanowar and sat at the same tea stall. He offered me a cup of tea and a betel leaf. He drank two glasses of water since he was tired and thirsty. He told me that the wage was relatively high, as they only worked for three hours. In general, they earn BDT 300 to 400 (approximately €3 to 4) for full-day labour, from morning to sunset. His brother, Delwar, was operating the boat on that day. He anchored the boat around the tea stall and joined us for tea and smoking. Sanowar informed Delwar that he had been paid and needed to buy potatoes, green chillies and some small fish for his family and asked him not to start the boat until he came back with his shopping.

Maintaining a constant "good connection" with the people in the social network provides employment opportunities. The social network consists of potential employers such as wealthy farmers, middle peasants, corn traders, and foremen (*sardar*). The employers usually use foremen for larger scale work—for example, loading and unloading boats and

trucks. There is a norm in hiring a group of day labourers: the employers are supposed to contract a foreman or supervisor. In most cases, labourers select a senior or experienced man as a foreman. Getting a job in future requires maintaining a "good connection" with such foremen, as they are effective patrons in hiring day labourers. A contractor negotiates with the employers the required number of labourers, working hours and wages. The employers give necessary instructions and pay wages via the foreman. It is important for foremen to remain in touch with the potential employers such as big traders and contractors in construction sectors.

Figure 18: A day labourer carrying a load on his head at Balashi Ghat. Photo by researcher.

Women and children also work as day labourers, especially in the harvesting time. Many landlords hire women for picking crops (corn and chillies). After harvesting corn, women are hired for separating the seeds from the corn stem and for drying the corn seeds and packing them into plastic sacks—these kinds of jobs are described as "easier" and for women. The women labourers are paid at BDT 100 to 150 (approximately €1 to 2) per day,

which is roughly half of the wage for male labourers. At certain times, the landlords hire teenage children for weeding out grasses and sowing the seeds.

Shanta, a woman who runs a grocery shop with her husband, was exchanging jokes with a little boy when he came to her shop to buy some sweet snacks. She attracted my attention and said that school-going boys also earn on the island. She explained that a landlord hired a few school children to remove unwanted weeds from his cornfield. They are paid nearly BDT 100 (approximately €1) per day. The children are employed partly because they do not demand the same wage as young men demand, and partly because weeding out grasses requires only a few hours; a young man usually seeks work for a full day instead of a few hours.

7.3.2 Landlords, Moneylenders, and Peasants

In the field of agriculture in Bangladesh, be it on the mainland or the river islands, prosperous farmers, wealthy elites and moneylenders have been traditionally the dominant actors. Most of the wealth in agriculture "flows into the hands of large landowners, merchants, and moneylenders" (Hartman & Boyce, 2013, p. 276). The poor peasants borrow money, not only for buying agricultural inputs, but also for survival. However, higher land rent leaves the poor peasants at the mercy of moneylenders. Renting land is practised in two ways: receiving cultivable plots on lease for a few seasons and paying by cash, and using others' land on a verbal agreement and paying with crops, which is locally called *aadi* or *barga*. In general, the smallholders or landless peasants receive cultivable land on lease to produce crops until the disaster erodes the land. In this contract, the lessees are supposed to pay rent in cash after harvesting. In most cases, they pay the agreed rent in several instalments (*kisti*); not doing so results in a quarrel and jeopardizes the verbal contract. Regarding sharecropping, the peasants are supposed to invest capital and labour in cultivating crops and return one-third of the total production to the original landowner.

Most of the island peasants cannot afford initial capital for agricultural inputs. The actors in their social network such as well-off relatives, friends, or moneylenders are the primary source of cash as capital. They hardly ever receive credit from the state-run banks, even though the banks are supposed to operate loans for people working in agriculture.

Government banks are reportedly inaccessible for the poor or landless peasants, and the peasants allege that the banks sanction credit only for those who have large landholdings and who are able to return the loan in due course. Many peasants do not even know that the public banks run an agricultural loan scheme. This is partly because they are not well informed, and partly because the peasants do not understand the formal process of applying for an agricultural loan. However, a few of them managed to receive credit from the banks via influential middlemen, who took advantage of the peasants' ignorance regarding the process of bank loans. Amir, a middle-aged farmer, told me that he pursued a bank loan once. An officer of the bank told him that the bank would not sanction the loan to his name unless one of the bank account holders agreed to act as a guarantor for him. Amir had no such acquaintance who would be a guarantor for him, and he abandoned any hope of pursuing an agricultural loan from the banks.

Brokers are capable of sanctioning loans in the name of the poor peasants, however. Such brokers are responsible for distributing credit among the peasants, as well as collecting it with interest in due course. The standard approach is that brokers receive the loan from the bank before passing it on to the recipient, but they abuse their power: they hand over only a partial amount of the credit to the peasants, and then they invest a portion of the credit in an unidentified sector so that the banks or the peasants cannot trace it. As such, many intermediaries are accused of nepotism: they use the details of the poor peasants of the island villages to sanction the loan, but they hand over the credit to people in their own kinship network.

It was a Friday morning during the flood of 2015. Although it was a public holiday, a group of employees of a private bank came to Onishchit. The bank, located in Gaibandha town, sent the officers to find out the island peasants who had received loans according to the records of the bank. The officers had a file with the loan application forms that the peasants filled out for pursuing the loan. They showed the pictures attached to the forms to some islanders and asked for the directions to reach the relevant homes. After a few hours of searching the addresses, they found that most of the debtors had moved to somewhere else. They discovered that some photos were fake, and that the loan had not reached the actual borrowers via the middlemen. They also found that the amount of credit the bank sanctioned

and the amount the farmers received did not match. One particular islander was not at home at that moment. The islander's wife told them that her husband had gone to Dhaka looking for work. His wife also told them that her husband received the credit from a *dalal* or middleman and he returned it with interest after corn harvesting. The officers were surprised to know that the interest rate the broker charged was quite a bit higher than what the bank had charged.

Borrowing money from traditional moneylenders (*sudaru*) is considered an easy and a quick way of receiving initial capital for agriculture. The moneylenders include absentee landlords and mid-level traders, who usually live on the mainland adjacent to Balashi boat terminal. The moneylenders usually charge higher interest rates than the banks and NGOs' microcredit programmes do. The peasants require land, the collective labour power of their families and a six-month agriculture season, whereas the moneylenders invest only their money and take a short-term risk. A significant amount of the output goes into the moneylenders' pocket. The moneylenders charge ten percent interest per month on credit for six months (agricultural period); that is, a debtor is supposed to return BDT 10 against BDT 100 per month. Thus, a debtor returns BDT 6,000 (BDT 1,000 per month) against a credit of BDT 10,000 in a period of six months; more than a half of the original amount. The following two cases of Zakir and Shahidul provide an account of the interrelationships between the constitutive agents in the agriculture field in which the landlords and the moneylenders have been dominant to a great extent.

Zakir, a small peasant, leased six bighas of cultivable land for three consecutive seasons from an absentee landlord. The landowner used to live on the islands a few years ago. He then moved to the town and had been running his shop there. When he saw his land emerge with silt, he decided to lease his land to the islanders. He contacted Zakir and asked whether he wished to rent his land for several seasons. Zakir replied positively to the landlord's offer, and they both signed a stamped document to avoid future conflicts. The agreed rent was BDT 15,000 for three seasons. It was difficult for Zakir to pay the amount in one lump sum. Cultural practices regarding such agreements is that the landlords do not expect the peasants to pay the rent in advance since the small peasants cannot afford to pay before harvesting and selling produce. Therefore, the landlords must wait until their tenant peasants harvest crops.

Zakir, as a renter, was supposed to pay that amount of money to the owner in several instalments within three years, which was BDT 5,000 a year. Zakir promised to pay each instalment after producing and harvesting corn. If the river did not erode the land, he might extend the agreement.

It is common that peasants fail to pay rent due to hazards or crop failure. Zakir recalled his past stories about failing to fulfil a land agreement. Once, he had received acres of land on lease and cultivated wheat. Just a few weeks before the harvesting phase, the river eroded the plots and he could not save the crops; "It is common on the chars. We explain our misfortune to the landlords. Also, they are aware of the impacts of the disasters. That is why we usually return the loan in several *kistis* (instalments) after harvesting. Some owners realise our condition; some do not."

In many cases, the landlord, the moneylender, and the trader are the same person, and therefore they indirectly control what crops are to be produced. For example, Shahidul, a middle-aged peasant rented a piece of cultivable land and borrowed money from the same person who owned a warehouse of crops at the boat terminal. The landlord suggested Shahidul should produce and sell corn from his store. Shahidul used approximately four acres of land and agreed to use that land until the river eroded or until the floods turned it into infertile sandy land. Like other small peasants, Shaidul badly needed land and capital (*punji*) to produce corn. He said, "If you have land and money, you could keep all the profit in your pocket. But if you use land on lease and borrow capital, you will have to share most of the profit with the original landowner and the moneylenders." He also said that if a debtor went through loss due to disasters, the moneylenders would not take responsibility. "The moneylenders spy on the debtors to know when they would harvest and sell the crops. They do nothing but receive profit-share sitting on their couch," Shahidul added. Below is an informal discussion between a small peasant, named Liton (L), and the researcher (R) about the moneylenders.

R: *Who are the moneylenders? Are they from this char?*

L: *They are the rich people living on the pashchim par [the area around Balashi boat terminal]. They are boro bepari [big traders]. They run shops at the boat terminal. They also own land on different chars. The char peasants are helpless without the moneylenders.*

R: *How does an islander approach a moneylender?*

L: *The moneylenders know that the peasants will come to them just after the decline of floodwater. The peasants need cash for buying seeds and fertilisers. The moneylenders are always ready to lend money because this is the period in which they earn money by doing nothing. They just invest their lazy cash.*

R: *Is the interest rate higher than a bank?*

L: *It is too high, but we have no other better options. We borrow money not only for investing it in agriculture but also for surviving after floods. We have no work during the floods, and therefore we spend the money earned from agriculture in the previous season. The floods make our pockets empty. Finding no way, we approach the moneylenders. After harvesting and selling the crops, we return their money with interest. If we fail to pay within an agreed time, the interest rate increases cyclically.*

R: *Do the moneylenders have any connection with the islands?*

L: *Many of them used to live on the islands. They own land in different islands, but they have moved to the mainland. They keep an eye on who is leaving the islands because they want to buy land from those movers at a lower price.*

R: *But, the buyers know that those lands would be eroded at some stage!*

One of L's neighbours, *who voluntarily joined our conversation: Yes. Such loss is temporary. The rich can afford such loss, but the poor char dwellers cannot. Some rich people possess a whole island. For example, Mizan owns the entire Paddiara Char. He strategically grabbed khash land. He bought land from the families who had to move somewhere else due to the disasters. The landlords presume that the eroded land will appear again after 5-10 years. Such temporary loss does not matter to those who have huge landholdings.*

R: *What if the farmers fail to return the money with interest to the moneylenders?*

L: *The moneylenders just await the harvesting period. They spy on the borrowers so that they cannot leave the char without returning the loan. They own arat [stores for crops],*

and they are also big paikar [traders]. They directly buy corn from the peasants and sell them to the local markets.

L's neighbour: *We [the small peasants on the chars] cannot run away from the moneylenders because we need them. We are the people who are needy. We cry out for a loan. The poor people must seek pity from those moneylenders to convince them to lend us money. If we fail to get credit from them, we have no other place to go for seeking help.*

L: *We do not have better options other than the moneylenders. The banks hardly give us a loan because we do not have a permanent address. Today, we live in one char. After a few years, we will have to move to another char. So, how can the banks rely on us? The NGOs do not run microcredit on the chars for the same reason. If the NGOs lend us money, they need to collect the money from us through instalments. It is hard for them to find us because we frequently move due to the disasters.*

7.3.3 Corn Traders and Peasants

Verbal negotiation is the basis of dealing between the corn traders and the peasants. As with landlords and tenant peasants, traders and peasants are relationally connected in the "field of corn trading," a subfield of the "agriculture field." As Bourdieu suggests: "To think in terms of field is to think relationally" (Wacquant, 1989, p. 39). There are two types of corn traders in the agriculture field: petty traders who are locally called *bepari*, and big traders who run warehouses or poultry factories in cities. Since it is difficult for the island peasants to take the produce to the market in the town, they depend on the petty traders who come to the islands to see the quality of corn and deploy labourers to take the produce to the mainland. The petty traders work as middlemen: they buy corn from the peasants and sell to the big traders. In the harvesting period, they contact the big owners of the large warehouses or poultry feed companies to ask whether they want to deal with them. The petty traders include wealthy farmers on the island and some seasonal traders living on the mainland. The produce goes to the poultry feed companies from the island peasants via the petty traders. The traders then go to the peasants' households with assistants (day labourers), sacks of plastic, and scales, to weigh dried corn seeds and fill up the sacks with corn. The assistants bring their bicycles with them to carry the loads from the peasants' households to the boat they have

hired. In addition to bicycles, some intermediaries bring horse-drawn vehicles to transport corn.

Moynal, a middle-aged landlord and a headman, has been trading corn for several years. He and his team load many trucks with corn and send those loads to different cities. After receiving the products, the big buyers (in most cases poultry feed companies) send money to Moynal's bank account; then, he pays the peasants (from whom he bought corn in the first place) and the assistant day labourers he hires to accumulate loads of corn from the peasants' households and load and unload boats and trucks. The trading business involves blind trust, since there is no culture of formal contracts or agreement.

Figure 19: A small corn trader transporting sacks full of corn. Photo by researcher.

Moynal explained: "This kind of business depends on trust between the buyers and the sellers. They [big buyers or mill owners] just phone me and give me the address where to send products. If they do not pay for my labourers and peasants, I will have nothing to say. But it has never happened. We keep trust in each other." He shared an example:

Figure 20: A small corn trader transporting sacks full of corn. Photo by researcher.

A mill owner named Nazrul Fakir in Bogura city phoned him. He did not even know where the mill owner had found his mobile number. Nevertheless, he phoned Moynal and asked him to send a truck of corn to his mill in Bogura. As per instructions, he sent a truck loaded with corn, which was worth four *lakh* or BDT 400,000. Then, he went to Bogura to collect the bill. Moynal recalled the conversation between the mill owner and himself:

> He asked me, 'Okay brother, you do not even know me, but you sent the goods which are worth of four lakhs. What if I do not want to pay you now? Because there is no evidence that you sent goods to my mill.' I [Moynal] replied: 'Brother, yes, it is true that I do not know you. But I kept my trust in you. That is all.'

Moynal was happy trading with the big buyer: "He thanked me and called his assistant and told him to arrange cold drinks and snacks for me. He also told his assistant to take me into his air-conditioned office room. I also did business with him this year. He takes orders from different poultry feed mills and asks me to send corn to those mills. This year, I have traded tons of corn."

The island peasants depend on the middlemen traders for selling their produce. As such, they have little bargaining power on the value of their produce. The corn traders have their

mobile phones, and they network with their fellow intermediaries and assistants. Many peasants told me that the middlemen and big buyers control the value: they buy corn at a cheaper price on the chars and sell the produce to the big traders at a higher value. Sometimes, they share the wrong market value of corn with the peasants, and therefore they can manipulate the peasants to sell the produce at a cheaper rate. Moreover, they purposefully create a scene to make the peasants believe that their produce has no market value because the farmers stored the crop in their muddy house instead of a concrete warehouse, that is to say, the crop has (they say) lost its quality and value. However, the rich farmers have "good connections" with the middlemen and the warehouses.

At Mamun's tea stall, an island peasant wittily asked a trader in such a way that his comment could not make him angry: "Why did you not pay us reasonable value? I heard that you [traders] are making huge money by selling our crops." The trader replied:

> What you are seeing is that we are receiving money from the big buyers. But, you cannot see how much we spend at every step until the *mal* [produce] goes to the mill [poultry feed companies]. We must pay the women labourers who fill up sacks with corn; we must pay those men labourers who weigh the corn; we must hire a big boat; we must pay tax at the boat terminal. You do not know how much money I spend on mobile bills for contacting the mills.

The peasant finished the conversation with an artificial laugh and told him: "That is why you are *bepari* [trader], and I am a poor [*krishok*] peasant."

To sum up, this section shows that agriculture, as a social space, includes many actors: landlords, traders, peasants, day labourers and moneylenders. The people in low-income strata (small peasants and day labourers) routinely maintain "good connections" with the dominant actors (wealthy landlords, foreman, and moneylenders) to secure their livelihood. Of course, the field is hierarchized, and it has a subfield, that is, trading, which is dominated by non-peasant actors: the middlemen traders and the big buyers. They predominantly control the value of the crops and the process of hiring. This hierarchized and 'structured structure' is constructed by its constituent elements—the actors.

7.4 Land as Field and Capital

As the islanders' livelihoods are based on exploiting the land, it is an important asset or capital. Agricultural land is inextricably linked with other forms of capital—social and cultural, which are converted into material capital. As Bourdieu (1986, p. 241) argues, "Capital is accumulated labour," which empowers agents or groups of agents "to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour." Bourdieu argues, "A capital does not exist and function but in relation to a field: it confers a power over the field…and over the regularities and the rules which define the ordinary functioning of the field, and thereby over the profits engendered in this field" (Wacquant, 1989, pp. 39-40). In the context of Onishchit, land property is a vital form of capital, even though the existence of the land and its quality (fertility) are subject to floods and riverbank erosion. Both the labour and land are temporally specific, but they have learnt from past experience that the duration of "temporality" ranges from a year to several years. In addition, it repeats. Hence, land is the most important capital or resource they need in order to struggle against vulnerability. Above all, the uncertainty has become a certainty for them.

Figure 21: Ploughing sandy land for producing corn. Photo by researcher.

Debates on land boundaries, land grabbing, and falsification of land documents have been everyday issues. The dominant actors—wealthy farmers, community leaders and kinspersons of large lineage—establish their dominance in the field of the agrarian structure. It does not necessarily mean that the relatively less dominant actors, such as landless peasants, are passive or external actors in the arrangement, however. Sometimes, they capitalise on the power held by the dominant actors by maintaining strategic "good connections" with them; living in the same neighbourhood with the dominant actors; moving to the same higher ground with them; frequently renting their land and supporting them in local government elections. As Bourdieu argues: "As a space of potential and active forces, the field is also a *field of struggles* aimed at preserving or transforming the configuration of these forces" (Wacquant, 1989, p. 40).

Thus, controlling land can be viewed as the transubstantiation of immaterial social capital (large lineage) and cultural capital (knowledge in relation to complex land documents). Large lineages dominate, in that such lineage groups control newly resurfaced land or *khas* (state-owned) land. Bourdieu extends "... the sense of the term 'capital' by employing it in a wider system of exchanges whereby assets of different kinds are transformed and exchanged within complex networks or circuits within and across different fields" (Moore, 2012, p. 99). In addition to the material importance of land assets, it also has non-material aspects—for example, domination, and prestige. Thus, acquiring such domination fuels conflict and violence between the island villagers.

7.5 Forms of Land

As noted above, environmental conditions make the char-dwellers divide the seasons into two: flood (June-September) and post-flood (October-May). The local people also call the agricultural season the "corn season" (*vuttar mousum*) since they mainly cultivate corn. I started my fieldwork in the last week of March 2015 while they had started corn harvesting. My initial approach to talking to them was unsuccessful because they (men, women, and even teenage children) were busy in harvesting and post-harvesting activities, such as drying corn seeds under the sunlight. Many of them said to me: "You have come to us in our busy time. No one would be able to give you time in this corn season. Come to us during the flood

when we have nothing to do.” Most of the people’s main income comes from farming during the post-flood agriculture season.

Figure 22: Corn cultivation on char-land with sediment.

Figure 23: Uncultivable char-land. Red chillies are spread out, to be dried under the sun. Photo by researcher.

Figure 24: Floods transformed the fertile land into low sandy land. Photo by researcher.

The river flooding left the char-land in three forms: a) land with sediment; b) land with deep sand; and c) low land with sand or water. The first one is used for cultivation or building houses. The second and third types are hardly useful, however.

Climate-driven disaster leaves the char dwellers “lucky” or “unlucky.” Those who are lucky find their land with fertile silt after the flood water recedes. In contrast, those who are unlucky find their land with deep sand or deep holes, which is uncultivable. The river-flood leaves some land with both sediment and sand—this kind of land could be cultivable. Producing crops on such land requires removing sand first, which is very expensive for the poor farmers in terms of money and time because they need to hire day labourers. The landowners have no interest in investing capital in transforming the deep sandy land into arable land because the output might be less than the primary investment. There is a large amount of sandy land, roughly the size of four football fields, in between Onishchit and the boat terminal. However, this area remains unused since large amounts of sand cover the agricultural plots. Wild plants including small green grass grow in these large areas where the char people graze their cattle.

7.6 Livestock: A Form of Saving

"If a char-dweller does not have cattle, he has nothing"—this is a common saying regarding livelihoods on the char. Their day starts with taking care of their cattle. The number of cattle varies depending on the economic condition of the households; on average, every household has two to three cows, except for a few landless households. Cattle raising has become a form of saving, as cattle are sold to recover disaster losses. Many households stay on the island only for raising cattle. They find that cattle raising is easier on the islands, compared to the mainland, because of the free natural grasses there. Cattle raising has become a more significant way of securing livelihoods, especially after the CLP's asset transferring project—providing cattle, cattle feed, and veterinary medicine to the impoverished people on the river islands in northern Bangladesh.

Figure 25: A char woman taking out her cattle toward the grazing land. Photo by researcher.

> Char land is uncertain. It exists today; it would go under the river tomorrow. But if you have cows, the river cannot snatch those out of your hand. When the river approaches our homestead, first we move our cows to the higher ground. I have some relatives in the *kayem* (mainland). I take my cows there… The flood washed away my land a few years ago and left me landless. My cows saved my family. I sold two cows and recovered

> my losses. If you do not have cows on the char, you have nothing. *Goru-bachur* (cows and calves) are everything for us (Interview notes, 2015).

7.6.1 Alim and Sabiha's Cattle Raising Project: A Case

Alim's household consists of his wife Sabiha, three little children, and his widowed mother. Alim's household was called *gerestho* (wealthy farmer), as they used to grow crops on a large land holding. The flood in 2015 eroded Alim's acres of land, and therefore his household's economic condition rapidly transformed from "rich farmer" to "landless,"; in their terms, "from king to beggar." After losing agricultural land, Alim and Sabiha decided not to rent land and grow crops anymore. They aimed to raise as many cattle as they could. They thought that cattle raising would bring money in the near future, and therefore they would be able to buy a piece of land on the mainland for building a house. They took the project seriously and hoped that if they could raise twenty or more cattle for several consecutive years they would be able to escape from their uncertain livelihood on the char.

Their large tin-shed hut has a door and four windows, and it was imprecisely divided into two sections: left and right. On the left-hand side, there was a large wooden bed, a table, a black and white television, an old CD player on a small table, and a large trunk next to the table. On the right-hand side, a bamboo bar is placed to tie up their cattle. Noticeably, a strong smell of the cattle's bodily waste (cow dung and cow urine) comes out from the hut.

It was the dry (or post-flood agriculture) season. Alim, in his early forties, was giving dried straw of paddy plant to his cattle, while Sabiha and her mother-in-law were boiling water in a large pot for the cattle. Their two children were playing with sticks and sand around the cattle. The younger son was on the lap of his grandmother, who was sitting down at the clay stove and boiling water for the cattle.

There was a common tube-well in Alim and Sabiha's neighbourhood. When they moved there during the last flood, their neighbour's households shared the expenses to set up the tube-well. Sabiha and other women were collecting water from the tube-well by filling up tin-buckets. She needed at least ten buckets of water for the cattle. She was pouring cold and hot water into two big bowls, and Alim was adding crushed rice and salt into the water for making the morning drink for their cattle.

Recently, their two cows had given birth to four calves. Their neighbours curiously came to see those young calves, aged a few days. They were asking how many cows they have at that moment. A woman was teasing Alim and Sabiha in a friendly way: “So, you are going to be rich very soon.” Sabiha replied, “Our topmost priority is leaving the char as soon as possible.” The couple spent nearly four hours cleaning the cattle waste and feeding them every morning. Sabiha was getting ready to graze those cattle in the grass field. Sabiha took with her some boiled rice and curry in a small box and a bottle of water for her lunch. She would come back in the evening. In the meantime, her mother-in-law would take care of her three children.

Many women and old men took out livestock toward the grass field. Some of them took a small bag that contained food, water, betel leaves and tobacco. Some women took their little child on their waist while taking out the cattle toward the grass field. Everyone had a little stick to guide the animals toward the grazing land. From Alim and Sabiha’s house to the grazing land, it took nearly ten minutes of walking on the sandy riverbed. Some carried umbrellas as they would stay until sunset. Some went to the grazing land for collecting grasses for their cattle and collecting dried leaves or branches, which they would then use as fuel for cooking. Sabiha asked the woman next door whether she was joining her in grazing the cattle. Alim and Sabiha looked confident that the cattle raising would help them escape from their uncertain life on the island.

7.6.2 One Cow, Two Owners

Unlike the modern types of saving (e.g. a fixed deposit which is monitored and regulated by the formal banking system), cattle raising requires investing time, money and the collective labour of family members. Shared ownership of cattle requires no formal agreement but verbal consensus between two people.

Like sharecropping, there is a traditional system of raising cattle or goats in the island villages. They call this system *dam-dhara* or *adi* (sharing livestock). This system of sharing livestock involves the verbal agreement of two parties. The two parties consist of the original and second owner of a cow. For example, the original owner (A) invests money first—he buys a heifer for BDT 10,000. He hands the cow to the second party (B), who usually cannot

afford to buy a heifer with his little income. (B) then takes the cow under his responsibility to raise it until it is ready to sell. According to the *adi* agreement, (B) is supposed to provide the cattle with food, care and medicine. Usually, a heifer becomes a mature cow within twelve to sixteen months. If the cow gives birth to a calf, it unconditionally goes to the original owner, (A). (B) is entitled to take any further calves. They both take the cow to the market to sell when it is ready to sell. The profit will be distributed evenly between the two parties after deducting the earlier investment, which was BDT 10,000 invested by (A). For example, if they sold the cow at BDT 50,000, first (A) will deduct his initial investment (BDT 50,000 - BDT 10,000). Second, they distribute the rest of the value BDT 40,000 evenly between them, that is to say, each would receive BDT 20,000. In such a system, the first party, (A), receives the benefit only of investing his initial capital and a certain period of risk, whereas his counterpart, (B), invests full-time in taking care, collecting grasses, buying necessary cattle feed and medicine. It also involves the labour of the second party's family members. Usually, relatively wealthy island households, in some cases mainlanders, invest their savings through this system of sharing cattle. No formal financial institutions (bank or credit union), return such quantity of profit against the investment of their clients. Like many islanders, sharing cattle has been a useful way to make a living for Shahbuddin. He explained: "Old people, like me, cannot afford to sell physical labour now. At this moment, I can only manage to raise the cattle. That is why I have taken two *adi* cows."

7.7 Operating a Boat

Delwar, a day labourer, mainly depends on the non-farming sector although he lives on the char where the people predominantly work in agriculture. His household consists of his widowed mother, wife, and three little daughters. The household also earns from livestock; mainly his mother and wife, who take care of cows and goats collectively. His parents led a poor life and could not afford to buy meals for three times a day. They had to eat cheaper vegetables like the soft part of the banana tree and some shrubs. Regarding education, Delwar stated: "My father had no choice. He could not afford to send us to school. We, all brothers, used to collect green leaves at the bank of the river and edges of ponds on the mainland. I saw some of my neighbours cooked only flour with water and salt. That's it."

He thinks it was bad luck to be born in such a low-income family. He used to operate a bullock cart owned by one of his relatives when he was ten. After a few years, he had learned how to pull a rickshaw van, and he had bought a van with his income in his childhood. Then he started working as an assistant to a boatman. Since then, he is known as a boatman, and he rents a boat on a daily basis from the boat owner to operate it from and to Onishchit. He starts operating the boat in the early morning and ends in the evening: ten round trips a day.

Figure 26: An engine boat transporting passengers to and from Onishchit.

It was an early morning in the post-flood agriculture season. I had reached the terminal to catch the first boat of the day and was surprised to see that the boat was noticeably full of men. They all had handmade spades for cutting soil and a metal tiffin box. It was not difficult to understand that they were agricultural labourers and going to the chars for work. Delwar became very busy, especially in the first half of those days. He operated two boats: one for carrying only labourers from the mainland to the char and another regular boat carrying passengers from and to Onishchit and the boat terminal. Delwar informed me that it was not

the boat I was looking for; it was only for labourers who were heading to a new char adjacent to Onishchit.

Delwar started the boat with at least fifty labourers, his irregular assistant, and me. The boat got stuck several times, as new small sandbars were raised here and there. A few labourers got off the boat and pushed it to float it again. Finally, the boat arrived at the newly raised char after half an hour. Delwar would collect them just before sunset. Many absentee landlords who used to live on the char but had moved to the mainland permanently due to river bank erosion found that their land had risen again with soft sediment, which is suitable for crop cultivation. They contracted Delwar to carry those labourers who were hired for ploughing and sowing seeds. Delwar rented another boat for this new contract.

7.8 Small-Scale Entrepreneurs

In total, there are eight small shops. The tin shed small shops are smaller than a single bedroom. The shops purchase daily necessary goods from the town and sell those to the char dwellers. Those shops sell spices, vegetables, cooking oil, kerosene, biscuits, children's sweet snacks and buns. Tea, tobacco items, and betel leaves are the most popular products that attract customers the most. A few shops also sell diesel, which is used for the engines of boats and irrigation pumps. The shopkeepers must walk and carry loads on their heads or shoulders for nearly a kilometre when they bring goods from the town to their neighbourhood, and they keep a bamboo stick which is used for carrying goods on the shoulders. They tie up the bags full of goods on both sides of the stick, and they lift the loads with the stick and place the stick on their shoulders. In this way, they distribute the weight evenly. The duration of walking varies depending on the distance of the shops from the place where the boat is anchored. Roughly, they need thirty to forty minutes walking on the sandy land, especially during the dry season. The walking distance becomes shortened during the flooding season because the flood water covers the sandy land and boats can navigate more easily. Some shopkeepers have both land and livestock, such as Anwar and Shanta, a couple who run their shop as well as hiring day labourers to produce crops. When the agricultural work keeps them both busy, their daughter, who goes to an NGO’s primary school, operates the shop for a few hours.

The two shops are very popular meeting places because they are open from morning to late at night regularly. Mamun's shop is one of those. Many influential people hang out at his shop—drinking tea, smoking, gossiping and playing cards. The shop is located beside the river, so the river location attracts more customers. Three boats daily are anchored around his shop. Therefore, many people pass his shop daily.

Mamun even sells fertilisers, cattle feed, seeds of fodder and primary medicine for cattle. Mamun's household consists of his wife and a fourteen-year-old son, who goes to the government primary school located close to his house.

Figure 27: A grocery-cum-tea stall on Onishchit Char. Photo by researcher.

A few years ago, his two daughters got married—one lives on the neighbouring char and the other in Bogura town. He said: "Allah is keeping me well. I do not have to starve. At least I can manage three meals for my family members by running this small shop." When he goes to the wholesalers in the town to collect goods, his wife and son run the shop. The floods of 2015 forced him to move his shop twice. He managed to save a little from his entrepreneurship and would like to buy a small piece of land in Bogura, where his daughter lives.

Figure 28: Char peasants taking a short break during the farming season. Photo by researcher.

He thinks the wholesalers in town, from whom he buys goods, mistreat small entrepreneurs. The wholesalers offer mainland businessmen a lot of products on credit, but, in contrast, they avoid offering the same to char businessmen because they think char dwellers would be defaulters: “They are right though. We lose everything due to disasters, and we become defaulters easily.”

7.9 Occasional Fishing

Many people, especially young men, go fishing occasionally for family meals. In the dry season, people repair their nets, personal canoes and other accessories for catching fish. Although they live on a char— which is surrounded by water—only a few people have chosen fishing as a main livelihood because professional fishing requires bigger engine boats and expensive nets. I found only two fishermen on this study’s char. Jahangir was one of

them. He joined a group of fishermen who live on the mainland. He and his fellow fishermen very often set a large net into the river in the night and come back with fish in the morning at the boat terminal.

Another fisherman, named Aziz, catches fish occasionally. It was a sunny morning in May 2015. I saw Aziz digging out sand, while I was walking on the sandy river bed toward the char villages. He was collecting a special insect that is locally called *uchinga*, which looks like a scorpion. He uses it as bait for catching prawns. He knew the spots where those insects took shelter. For catching *uchinga* under sandy land, he needs three objects: a thin stick to measure the holes where the insects remain, a shovel to dig out the sandy land, and a cage to collect the insects. After catching an insect, he broke its teeth so that it could not bite him. Usually, he worked as a day labourer in agriculture and caught fish irregularly.

7.10 *Valo* (Decent) Jobs

The decent jobs involve teaching at the primary schools, working for NGOs, and being self-professed land surveyors (*amen*). Nowadays, a few households send young boys and girls to college. Some of the college-going young people work for NGOs' primary schools and development projects on Onishchit. Those who got a job on the mainland in Gaibandha or other parts of the country left the char permanently. For example, Shajahan's brother, a member of a relatively well-off household, moved to Gaibandha town when he got a teaching job at a government primary school on the mainland. Sadik, a teacher at an NGO's primary school, is widely respected. His father-in-law said: "At least Sadik will not have to face the hardship of char life forever. If the school moves to the mainland, he would be living on the mainland."

There are two middle-aged men who proclaim themselves to be *amen* or land surveyors for char lands. They both have no institutional training, except for a few days training arranged by the local government. Mia, an influential person, as well as a local land surveyor, is quite often called by his fellow char dwellers when they need to trace the boundaries of newly resurfaced land. The char dwellers face difficulties in tracing their land boundary after the flood water recedes, or when a new char is raised from the river after a long time. Since

the service of the surveyor of the government office requires a lengthy process and a bribe, the char-dwellers approach the local surveyor instead.

They learned the skill from their everyday experiences of land disputes and from experienced villagers. The charge varies according to the size of land they measure. One day, in the middle of a conversation between Mia and me, a young man came to him, and he requested to go with him to end a land-dispute by tracing newly emerged land. Mia learnt the techniques of land surveying from his father. He managed to have a photocopy of the land map of the char from the land office and then educated himself about the map and the basic vocabularies relating to land. He earns a sufficient amount of money by selling his land survey skills, as his service is very important in tracing the land boundary as well as ending land disputes.

However, there is a rumour that local surveyors take advantage of government surveyors' unprofessional responsibilities, meaning disinterest in observing and dissolving the land-disputes following an emerging new char. In the absence of government officials' land services, then, some char dwellers educate themselves with the know-how relating to understanding and measuring uncertain land. However, although they participate in solving land-disputes, their service remains informal and uncertified.

7.11 Conclusion

The agrarian structure is not fixed. Rather, it is moving; it is constructed and reproduced by its practitioners—the landlords, the tenant peasants, labourers, traders, moneylenders, and land administration. The remote island villages are not separated from the rural agrarian structure. This chapter shows that agriculture, as a social space, exists through the unequal involvement of the actors. They compete with each other in the power-laden space, where relatively dominant actors have been "winners." However, it cannot be stated that the less powerful actors are merely "losers." Rather, they strategically deal with the absentee landlords to utilise agricultural land for growing crops; they exercise "good connections" with the moneylenders to convince them to lend them money in the agricultural seasons, and they also keep "good connections" with foremen in order to be hired in the future. These practices are not new for them. Rather, they have been exercising these practices over

generations in order to survive. Thus, unequal interrelationships are deeply embedded in the social space of agriculture, which is reproduced through the peoples' habitus or routinized actions.

Their level of participation in the social space of agriculture shows that the distribution of economic and social capital is uneven, and the multiple interactions between the actors keep social structures structured. Social capital is used in grabbing and occupying the land, which is the most important economic capital in their land-based livelihoods. There is no doubt that the landowning class and land-grabbers have been dominant actors, who have greater access to the different forms of capital. As such, maintaining a "good connection" with the land grabbers implies that mutual patron-client relationships work as a pragmatic way of gaining benefit from the state-owned land. To a great extent, then, "tigers" (land bureaucracy) and "crocodiles" (land-grabber) generate the ways that leave small peasant households vulnerable. However, these powerful actors are capitalised on by some island peasants to gain material benefits such as using someone's land unfairly.

In the livelihood practices, cattle raising has also become a form of economic salvation. Like sharecropping, traditional cattle-sharing implies that its practitioners creatively show their agency to escape from impoverished conditions. In their social structure, they face multi-dimensional constraints. For example, it can clearly be seen that the landowners control the land, the moneylenders control the informal credit system, the intermediary traders control the price of their corn, and the land bureaucracy and landgrabbers control access to land. However, the island peasants practise their livelihoods despite these constraints by using their creativity, which implies that they are not simply vulnerable or passive victims in such hazardous island villages. In addition to their traditional livelihood practices, the local NGOs have introduced new livelihood development ideas to them, which are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

Development Projects and Human Agency

8.1 Introduction

Asma, a woman living on Onishchit, said, "NGOs' *unnanyan* [development] project is not making us rich. But, unlike the past, we have been able to escape from the *monga* [seasonal food insecurity]." She has actively involved herself with the NGOs' income generating project and has been able to change her household's economic condition from "bad" to "good." However, her "success" story does not necessarily mean that development projects have changed all households' socio-economic conditions evenly.

This chapter focuses on the interactions between the char dwellers' agency and the recent development programmes of two NGOs: GUK and Friendship. The household members' agency is relevant in order to change the households' economic and social conditions. The following questions will guide this chapter: How do char dwellers practise their agency when they interact with NGOs' development projects? Are they simply inactive receivers of the development ideas introduced by the external actors? How do they motivate themselves in regard to external ideas in order to reduce their livelihood vulnerability? How do they evaluate external development ideas?

8.2 GUK and Friendship: The Two Local NGOs

The two development organisations have been implementing various projects on the islands to reduce poverty and change the social condition of women and children. GUK is a widely known local NGO, which is based a few kilometres away from Gaibandha town. Nearly a hundred motorbikes, bicycles, jeeps, and microbuses can be observed at the premises of the organisation's office. Logos (such as those of the European Union, DFID, Christian Aid, and Oxfam) on those vehicles indicate that the organisation works with those international agencies. It has been materialising various projects in the northern districts, particularly in

flood-prone areas, for decades. Its development projects address many problems such as poverty eradication, sustainable livelihood, women's empowerment and access to local resources, primary education, and sanitation. The organisation recently celebrated "30 years (1985-2014) of fighting poverty." According to its online publication, two of the major achievements are: a) over 30,000 women and men from impoverished families were provided with skills and human development training; and b) more than 1.5 million families were provided with information about health, agriculture, disaster preparedness and management, climate change, and so on. Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) is one of the recent longitudinal projects, which has been implemented by the organisation.

Friendship, founded in 2002, has also been working on the islands. It built an extraordinary and modern complex, named the Friendship Centre, on Balashi Road in Gaibandha. The complex is nearly two kilometres away from Balashi boat terminal. Like GUK, this organisation also works to address fundamental human problems. Friendship is well-liked for taking hospital ships to the islands and providing free primary and emergency health care to the islanders. It runs three hospital ships: a) Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital, which was originally a river barge (later, it was converted into a hospital ship with the support of Unilever and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA); b) Emirates Friendship Hospital funded by Emirates Airline; and c) *Rongdhonu* (Rainbow) Friendship Hospital, donated by Greenpeace International. The hospital ships have modern technologies: paediatric rooms, pathology laboratory, x-ray rooms, operation theatres, chambers for doctors, and gynaecology units. Trained physicians and nurses provide health care year-round to people in remote areas, including the river islands.

Apart from GUK and Friendship, there is another big NGO called SKS Foundation, which is also based in Gaibandha. It widely operates poverty eradication programmes including microfinance. Regarding the interactions between the NGOs and the char dwellers, the study limits its discussion to GUK and Friendship as only these two NGOs have been implementing development projects in the study site.

8.3 "Development" as Discourse and Human Agency

Like other anthropological concepts, "development" is a contested concept. In the field of anthropology of development, Ferguson (1994) and Escobar (1995), influenced by Foucault's discourse theory, argue that the concept of development is interconnected with knowledge and power. According to Foucault (1980), discourse refers to the construction of knowledge that ultimately influences people's behaviours and thoughts. Foucault focuses on the question of power: how power is exercised through multiple relations in societies, as relations of "power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of discourse" (Foucault, 1980, p. 93).

Ferguson's (1994) work *The Anti-Politics Machine* argues that the discourses of rural development programmes depoliticise significant human problems, whereby the development projects insufficiently understood the actual problems of Lesotho such as low wages and employment rights. The development discourses characterise Lesotho as a less-developed country that had a traditional subsistence economy. Ferguson argues that the development apparatus hardly addressed Lesotho's political and bureaucratic problems. Instead, it suggests enhancing technical assistance. In this way, development projects reinforce the bureaucratic power of the state and repeatedly construct the people as "backwards". He writes:

> By uncompromisingly reducing poverty to a technical problem, and by promising technical solutions to the suffering of powerlessness and oppressed people, the hegemonic problematic of 'development' is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politicized in the world today. (Ferguson, 1994, p. 256)

Escobar's (1995) work, *Encountering Development*, argues that the discourse of development is a mechanism in which the "Third World" is produced. He writes: "Development had achieved the status of a certainty in the social imaginary" (1995, p. 5). Influenced by the ideas of "power-knowledge" and "orientalism" of Foucault and Said, respectively, Escobar explains how western development discourses produce the socio-economic realities of the Third World. He calls it a "hegemonic worldview of development" that affects economic, social and cultural phenomena of Third World countries (Escobar,

1995, pp. 17-18). Escobar's approach ("development as discourse") unpacks the interrelationships between "the forms of knowledge," "the system of power," and "the forms of subjectivity" in the field of development practices (ibid., p. 10).

One of the pitfalls of discourse theory is that it pays less attention to human agency, which tends to disappear in the theory. A society is not always the passively recipient of development discourses; people localise ideas of development and fit the policies to their own worldview (Gow, 1996, p. 168). Many scholars have criticised postmodernist development theorists, arguing that they "demote agency" (Moose and Lewis, 2006, p.4). An individual can use his or her creativity and potentiality to empower him or herself. Actors are then able to both adapt and oppose the development policies presented by other powerful actors such as NGOs and governmental bodies. The postmodernist paradigm ignores the social actors' negotiating capabilities by which they show inventiveness and imagination about their aspirations. Postmodern approaches to development are "playing academic games" rather than working with the problems that the poor face (Willis, 2005, p. 121).

There are chances that certain concepts or discourses of development would or would not correspond to the people's ways of life. In some cases, external development ideas have appeared as "contingent, contradictory, and not always effective" (Gardner & Lewis, 2015, p. 107). An ethnographic study can thus sketch the local people's perceptions and actual practices of development ideas, as imported by external actors. There are ways in which the meaning of concepts of development have been shared, constituted, and reconstituted. People can practise new ideas (e.g. on poverty reduction, education development, and women's empowerment); they can rethink those ideas, and they can manufacture new development ideas through practising and editing the prevailing development ideas in their society. People can actively think and act, and ask themselves what they think, how they think, and the appropriateness of what they do (Chambers, 2007, p. 185).

Char dwellers' own understanding and the NGOs' narratives of the idea of "development" have amalgamated on the ground. It is hard to slice the local population's "own" understandings from the mainstream connotations of development ideas because of the ubiquitous presence of the NGOs' discourses of development including "investment in productive sector," "education for all," "women empowerment," "reducing poverty," and so

on. Some common phrases are found in the locals' everyday discourses such as changes "from low-income to higher income," "from illiterate to literate," and "from uncertainty to certainty." The NGOs' development initiatives have contributed to these changes, and some individuals use the terms "development" and "improvement" interchangeably.

Below is a conversation between the researcher and two participants, Samad, a senior man, and Amina, a mother of three children, in different sessions about what they mean by development or *unnayan*.

Researcher (R) [to Samad]: *What do you mean by unnayan?*

Samad (S): *Unnayan means: one has come out from a low-income phase. Unnayan means: a family is doing well. Say, Munser [his neighbour] is doing well. He has grown more crops this year compared to the last year. He sent his younger son to Dhaka for good education. I cannot afford to send my children to Dhaka for education. Now he has more cows. Now he can afford to move to kayem [the mainland]. His family does not have to wait for relief [during the disasters] and the NGOs' support to survive.*

R: *Is your family doing unnayan?*

S: *I do but not like Munser's family. I raised two cows last year. This year, I have been raising five cows. When the flood comes, I face a difficult time. I do not have another shelter except this house [on the island].*

R: *Did you receive cows from the CLP?*

S: *No. They gave cows only to very low-income families, who had no cows. I had cows when they collected information about the families' income and expenditure.*

R [to Amina]: *What do you mean by unnayan?*

Amina: *Everyone tries to do unnayan. No one wants to die of starvation. Everyone is doing something. Say, we [she and her husband] are running this grocery shop. The NGOs' brothers [male workers] are giving us some ideas about how we can increase our income. They have guided us to form a cooperative group [called Village Savings Loan Group (VSLG) that consists of 15-20 women]. We arrange regular meetings with our members. Everyone submits their share-money and forms a big saving. We [VSLG] lend some amount*

of our savings to the non-members on the condition of interest. Then we distribute the income [interest] among the group members. The members also take loans from the VSLG saving. I have borrowed money twice and purchased some products for our shop with that loan. Some women are doing unnayan by taking credit from the VSLG; some are not.

The above conversations imply that 'development' refers to positive changes in their household's economic and social conditions. Samad thinks his neighbour Munser's household is ahead of him in terms of development because Munser owns more land and cows, is able to send his son to Dhaka for education, owns land on the mainland and does not have to receive assistance during disasters. His neighbour is "doing development" by utilising factors such as a large land holding, the collective labour of family members, and having more cattle. Amina finds development in the process of positive changes in her household's economic condition. In her case, the changes have come from both external factors (NGOs facilitation in forming the cooperative society) and internal factors (family members' collective effort in utilising the credit).

Like Amina, many households have been going through the process of economic changes with the financial and ideological support of the NGOs. In the context of Onishchit, the study defines the idea of development regarding economic, social, and ideological changes at household and community levels through discourses of development.

8.4 Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP)

The CLP was a massive livelihood development project for the island villagers in north-west Bangladesh. It was a longitudinal livelihood development project jointly funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) and Australian Aid, sponsored by the Rural Development and Co-operatives Division of the Government of Bangladesh's Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives, and implemented through Maxwell Stamp Plc.[10]

[10] For details: http://clp-bangladesh.org/work/overview/ (Accessed on 17 June 2015).

The CLP was a six-year-long (2010-2016) development project. Its purpose was to assist the "extreme poor" of the islands in improving their livelihoods; food security; water, sanitation and hygiene; nutrition, and women's empowerment. The project selected "beneficiaries" (the target group) who fulfilled the following conditions: a) they have been living at least six months on an island; b) they are landless; c) they have no regular source of income; d) they have no more than two goats or sheep, ten fowl, or one shared cow; e) they have not received a significant amount of credit from the microfinance organisations; f) they have not been receiving assets from other development programmes; and g) they are willing to attend weekly community-level meetings for a period of eighteen months.

The project included various activities: plinth raising; nutrition sessions; satellite clinics; adolescent group meetings; livestock training and services; fodder growing; homestead vegetable gardens; sanitary latrines; asset purchase (such as cattle); village savings; tube-wells; and stipends for buying daily food. The implementation of the longitudinal project involved a series of events and actions.

At first, the CLP started to improve the islanders' livelihood through "asset transfer" whereby the asset would be distributed from the donor to the local islanders via the local NGOs. For example, the CLP provided cattle to economically vulnerable families so that they could raise them until they become mature enough. The project presumed that giving them assets (in most cases, animals) was not sufficient, however. The "beneficiaries" would just lose the asset if the river eroded their homesteads, and therefore, the project raised the cattle recipients' homes on a plinth above the highest known flood level.

The CLP offered seventeen ideas on income generating such as raising cattle, operating sewing machines, starting grocery shops, and buying rickshaws or vans. However, most of the island families chose livestock as the main way of generating income partly because it is relatively easier to manage on the islands and partly because traditionally rural people are accustomed to raising livestock. The beneficiaries were invited to share their success stories with the villagers so that they would be encouraged to rear cattle and earn money by selling milk from the animals. It was suggested they invest their profits in productive sectors using the CLP's guidelines.

In most cases, the CLP provided a heifer to the selected families. It was valued at BDT 16,000 (nearly €170). It also provided cattle feed for nearly two years. The recipients were guided to take care of the animals until they became mature. A woman, for example, received a heifer. After two years of raising it, she sold it at BDT 36,000 (€375). Then, she invested a significant amount of the output into buying two heifers, assuming she would earn more than BDT 100,000 (more than €1000) from selling the two cows within a year.

According to a Program Manager on the project, most of the recipients have improved their economic condition by raising the cattle provided by the CLP. They followed the instructions of the project: raised the animals, sold them when they became mature enough, and invested in productive sectors such as buying more cattle. However, some households failed to follow these instructions because they had to spend the cash provided by the CLP in reconstructing houses and in family members' consumption. In addition, some recipients lost interest in attending the follow-up meetings, and eventually they sold the first cattle without informing the CLP's field level workers. Although the animals were given to the female members of the households, male members, in some cases, took control of the asset. Some male members sold the cattle and spent the output of the asset on gambling (*jua*) instead of investing it in any productive sectors. The CLP's official website published many "happy" stories of the beneficiary households, highlighting those households who had changed their social and economic conditions by actively participating in the project over the years.[11]

This researcher found some participants who actively engaged in the project and for whom it made a difference in their household economy. For example, Asma, noted earlier in this chapter, is considered an exemplary participant in her neighbourhood. She received a heifer a few years ago. Before that, her household had no cows. She and her husband used to work as day labourers. Her heifer gave birth to three calves; "every year I sell a cow or bull and earn a good profit." Now, she has been raising eight cows. She and her husband take care of the cattle, and they do not need to work for others like in the past. It is true that Asma was provided with a heifer and cattle feed; she was instructed to raise the animal according to the project's instructions; her cattle raising was monitored by the field level employees of the

[11] http://clp-bangladesh.org/households/ (Accessed on July 20, 2016).

project, and it was suggested she attend community meetings about cattle raising methods. It does not necessarily imply that Asma was an inactive or passive receiver, however. Rather, women "beneficiaries" have invested their hopes, time, ideas, and labour. Moreover, interacting with such an external project required the women who received cattle to argue and negotiate with the traditional patriarchal structure of society, as well as the household. It is people who can make choices; in all cases, "it is people who have ideas and who influence institutions" (Douglas, 1980, p. 60).

Development can be seen as a "complex whole," to use a phrase coined by Edward B. Tylor (1871) to define culture. Development as a complex whole includes relationships between multiple actors at international, national and local levels. The relationship between development policies and practices are not so straightforward that ideas from the top are directly transmitted to the bottom; instead, it is more complex (Mosse, 2005; Mosse & Lewis, 2006). The versatile actors include international aid agencies, national and not-state bodies, local government, local NGOs, civil society, community leaders, and the target groups. For these actors, "development constitutes a resource, a profession, a market, a stake or strategy" (Oliver de Sardan, 2005, p. 11). As Mosse and Lewis write:

> [I]nternational development as a complex set of local, national, cross-cultural social interactions; and it is no longer possible to isolate interactions in the realm of development from those related to state apparatus, civil society, or wider national or international political, economic, and administrative practices. (Mosse & Lewis, 2006, p. 1).

In the context of Onishchit, a high number of formal and informal interactions among the multiple actors in development practices can frequently be seen. The actors include the local NGOs, the employees of the organisations, local civil society, target groups, and community leaders. The local people see the development projects, as with social occasions, as a platform for interacting with insiders (fellow villagers) and outsiders (project managers, researchers, consultants, and field level development workers). Ongoing dialogues between the NGO-workers and the local people generate ways in which the projects receive social and cultural approval.

I attended several community meetings and workshops organized by the CLP's livestock development project. Two young men in their early thirties had recently joined GUK to work for the CLP on the islands. One of them held a Field Level Worker (FLW) position and the other a Business Development Officer (BDO) position for the project. The former had completed an undergraduate degree at a regional government college and the latter a postgraduate degree in Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Science from a reputed university. They welcomed me to attend their meetings with the "beneficiaries." Apparently, the CLP's community-level meetings looked somewhat like a daylong festival: a meeting involved several people doing different tasks, and it included several sessions -- an introductory discussion, a tea break, a long discussion and a feast. The CLP provided the expenses of the food and logistical support. I attended four consecutive meetings at the community level. The meetings' purpose was to encourage impoverished families in general, and the cattle recipients in particular, to form an effective cooperative society that would connect the islands with the mainstream commercial livestock market.

8.4.1 Meeting One: Forming a Business Committee

It was a rainy day in August when I met the two NGO-workers on the boat heading to Onishchit. Before getting on the boat, I saw them buying sweet snacks and dozens of bananas at the boat terminal. When the NGO-workers buy such food items in a large amount, anyone at the terminal can presume they are going to the island villages for facilitating meetings or workshops. The NGO-workers called an islander before the meeting day and told him to come to the boat terminal by early morning and wait for them there. The islander, a man, was told to assist them in carrying the shopping bags full of snacks. In addition to the snacks, they bought a few kilograms of rice, seasonal vegetables, beef and dozens of eggs, which were to be cooked and distributed to the attendees at the community meeting. The boat started, they were sharing the meeting's agendas, and I was sharing my purpose of observing the meeting. We all got soaked by the rain as the boat had no shed, and our umbrellas were not enough to protect us from the heavy rain. The boatman anchored the boat at a safer place close to the usual departure point at the island. Most of the passengers got off the boat and started walking toward their neighbourhoods. We (two NGO-workers, a female primary school teacher, and the islander helping them carry the shopping bags) waited on the boat

until the rain stopped. The boatman gave us a large polythene sheet; we managed to protect our bags under it. The NGO workers and the helper tied the bags with some small polythene shopping bags so that the rainwater could not damage the snacks and food items inside.

Finally, the rain stopped, and we started walking into ankle-deep water toward the house that would host the meeting. The NGO-workers told me more about the CLP's sub-projects while we were walking. The CLP facilitated in forming a business committee at the community level to encourage the island villagers to think of "milk businesses." This endeavour was called the "milk development project." The first meeting I attended was about forming an executive committee to run the project on Onishchit. In doing so, they were already registered for the cooperative society or committee, and they named their organisation Char Business Centre (CBC), with the guidance of the CLP, in 2013. The committee included eighteen registered members who paid a BDT 100 registration fee to join the committee. They had managed to save BDT 20,000 (nearly €240) by 2015. The NGO-workers were repeatedly encouraging local people to make the CBC a fully-fledged business institution. However, the local people were unhappy with the ineffective top-ranking members of the CBC. One of the NGO-workers told me that some influential people spontaneously attended the initial meetings and claimed the top positions of the CBC committee. They assumed they would be given an honorarium. However, they found that they were given nothing but some business ideas, and after that they stopped attending the meetings.

A three-hour meeting took place in a tin-shed hut. Two women, who were registered members of the CBC, brought two orange coloured thick plastic sheets and spread them on the earth floor of the hut so that the members could sit together for the meeting. The orange coloured polythene sheet can be found in almost every household; corn or rice are spread out on such polythene sheets under the sun. The interior of the house was decorated with a large colourful poster of a big Arabian mosque, a large poster of a green landscape, and two medium-sized pictures of the newly married couple who owned the hut. A small table fan, powered by solar energy, was on a small table. We were asked to sit down on the bed, which was set up at the right side of the room. The NGO-workers informed the participants that they were not supposed to sit separately; they needed to sit all together on the floor.

The NGO-workers were afraid that the members might not attend the meeting because it was raining again, and the walking paths had become muddy. They contacted the members many times to attend. Although it was raining heavily, thirteen (five women and eight men) out of eighteen members managed to attend the meeting. The men sat in the first row, and women voluntarily sat behind the men. It could be assumed that the women preferred to sit in the back row because they needed to manage their sarees. Besides, they were also assisting three fellow female members who were cooking rice, vegetables and beef curry for the attendees. The meeting started, as it fulfilled the quorum—it required two-thirds of the members to be in attendance to begin the meeting. The members were asked to state their names, current occupations and positions in the CBC committee. One of the NGO-workers read aloud the draft constitution of the CBC, which had been prepared two months earlier at a previous meeting. In that meeting, the CBC members had elected several fellow members for the positions of Advisor, Secretary, Treasurer, Executive Members and General Members to execute the CBC to start a livestock business.

Among the attendees, two men were very vocal and proactive. Amir was one of them. He was a very popular person on the island for his organisational and communication skills. He became a prominent member of several committees formed by several NGOs on Onishchit. He was selected as a member of the School Management Committee (SMC) of a local government primary school on the island; he voluntarily organised sports events for young boys, and he had attended many seminars organized by the development organisations at local and national levels. His pumpkin production was highly praised by the Agricultural Extension Office of the sub-district level local government. He also participated once in the UP election as a Member candidate. He claimed himself to be a "development activist" (*unnayan karmi*) for the islanders. In addition, he had been a field level NGO-worker for Friendship. Farhad, another proactive field level NGO-worker, had been working for Friendship for a project on good governance. Both had completed their college educations and were pursuing a career with NGOs. The local NGOs often seek their assistance while they need to arrange community meetings on development activities on the island. The meeting was going on with a dialogue between the NGO-workers and the local participants, especially the male members. They used the terms "CBC," "business committee," "livestock business committee," "cooperative society," and "milk development project"

interchangeably. From now on, the term “business committee” will be used. The discussion in the meeting was as follows.

NGO-worker: *Above all, you [the attendees] are the key persons to run the business committee. GUK is just guiding you how to think and make a plan for business activities. You would become great entrepreneurs and businesspersons very soon. Look at the successful entrepreneurs of Bangladesh. Many of them are not highly educated, but they have creative minds. They took initiatives and made a long-term plan. You did not have access to education because of living on the remote island. Another reason is that your parents could not afford to send you to school. But, you have creative minds. You fight against floods every year. Do you not think that you can be successful businesspersons? You just need a strong mentality to work in a group for a long term. We will provide the business ideas and plans. What do you think? Do you agree with me?*

Local participants: *[They chorused] yes, yes.*

NGO-worker: *You sell milk to the local goala [milkman]. The milkmen collect milk from door to door then sell it at the market at a good price. Why does not the business committee collect milk as well as sell at the market? In this way, you can earn more profit. To do so, you need a substantial amount of capital and an office to run the business. The committee already has saved a capital. The capital will be bigger if more members join by the next few months. You should ask your relatives and neighbours to join the business committee. Do not you think that running the milk business would improve your economic condition?*

Therefore, you need a bigger capital and an office. What else? At first, you [the business committee] need to open a business account with a bank. We have already talked to a government bank. Opening a business account requires an office, address, and documents relating to the constitution and the structure of the committee. Now, we need a generous man who would allow us to set up a small office on his land.

Local participant (Farhad): *My father will allow us to set up the office on his land. He will join us shortly [It seemed that Farhad informed the NGO-workers earlier about this].*

NGO-worker: *Do you agree with this offer that Farhad's father is going to allow us using his land?*

Local participant (Amir): *It is good news that one of us giving us land at free of cost. We should thank him.*

NGO-worker: *Now, we need to do a deed between the business committee and the land donor. We would like to request Farhad's father [the land donor] to join us and say something.*

Local participant (the land donor): *[He entered the room and signed the deed, which was prepared by the NGO-workers] I am happy to donate a small piece of my land. The business committee is now allowed to set up an office room on my property. You can use it until 2020 without paying rent.*

NGO-worker: *Thank you very much on behalf of the CLP and GUK. We would like to honour him by offering the Advisor position of the business committee. I would like to request him to join us for lunch. Could you applaud to his generosity, please? [They all were clapping]. I have observed that the women members are silent today. Do you want to say something?*

Local participant (a woman): *[giving a shy smile] what should we say? Everything is going well. We got a place for our office. We do not have to arrange a meeting in someone's house anymore. We will be able to organise upcoming meetings in our own office.*

NGO-worker: *Please two or three Executive Members come to GUK tomorrow morning. We will take you to the bank in the town to open a business account for the business committee, and we will order a seal and letterhead pad for the committee.*

At the end of the meeting, I was requested to say something about the potential of the livestock business. I took it as a chance to share my identity and purpose for joining the meeting. I thanked them for allowing me to join the meeting and expressed my willingness to attend forthcoming meetings regarding the project.

Overall, the CLP aims to connect the island villagers with the mainstream livestock and dairy market by forming such business committees or cooperative societies on the ground. To do so, they are asked to attend community meetings regularly, follow instructions,

which come from top employees via the field level workers to the local people. However, the question remains: what would happen if disasters displace them? In addition, how will members of the committee communicate with each other for conducting group meetings, as well as operating business activities, when their priority would be, usually, to move to higher ground?

I shared those questions with the two NGO-workers, while we were going back to catch the boat in the evening. They told me that they were also concerned about the potential of the proposed milk business, knowing that the CLP would end by 2016. One of them said that they were asked to inspire and organise the char people to connect them with the milk and cattle market, acknowledging that "the char people have potentialities to come out from poverty, but they did not have adequate access to the cattle market; information on raising animals scientifically; and information on where to go to ask for livestock treatment."

8.4.2 Meeting Two: More Milk and More Meat

The meeting took place in early November in the same year. The meeting was supposed to be held earlier but a sudden flood prevented them from organising it. Moreover, they had built an office room immediately after the meeting in August, but the flood eroded the land that was donated by the local donor.

Afterwards, they disassembled the tin-shed office room and moved it to a relatively safer place. In the meantime, they had to convince another landowner to let them use his land for the office of the business committee. The next meeting was conducted in the tin-shed office room, and the size of the committee progressively increased, from eighteen in August to thirty in November.

Since they were busy protecting their houses from flooding and collecting grasses for cattle, all the members could not be present at the one time. Twenty-seven members, most of them female, attended the second meeting. One of the field level NGO-workers conducted the meeting. His colleague (BDO) was sent to another char to do the same session. As usual, the NGO-worker brought sweet snacks, bananas, eggs, rice, vegetables, and meat, and a group of women started cooking the communal meal for the participants. They looked happy,

feeling that they finally had their own office. A long blue coloured polythene sheet was placed on the earth floor so that they could sit.

Figure 29: Community meeting at the CBC Office. Photo by researcher.

The purpose of the second meeting was to introduce the islanders to Sweet Jumbo Seeds of Grass, a hybrid fodder made in Australia. The NGO-worker presented a packet of the seeds and shared what he knew about its usefulness. The bottom line was that the hybrid-fodder, when fed to cows, gave a huge quantity and a better quality of milk and meat than from cows eating only the naturally available grasses. Consequently, the islanders could earn more by feeding their cattle the hybrid fodder. He critically reviewed the islanders' traditional practices of grazing and rearing animals, and suggested growing the hybrid fodder. He repeatedly suggested selecting at least a small plot of their agricultural land to cultivate the hybrid fodder as an experiment.

NGO-worker: *Today, I would like to present how you can grow fodder on your land. You go out in the very early morning to collect kashia [a long and hard wild grass] to feed your cows. You must spend a lot of time for collecting this kind of grass every day. The thing*

is that you collect grasses from somewhere, but you never produce it. What if you produce grasses on your land? I know so far almost everyone has at least a small piece of land. The size of land varies, of course. But I am sure if you select a small piece of land for this fodder, you could get benefit from it. Many people in different islands already have been getting the benefit by producing the fodder.

Figure 30: The CBC Office. Photo by researcher.

Do you know that Momena has already selected a big size of land to produce the fodder? We [GUK and CLP] are helping her family to produce the fodder—that would be a demo for you so that you can understand and see the experimental result. We collected the fodder seed from a company and handed it over to Mamun [the tea-cum-grocery shop owner]. We suggested Momena to buy at least a half kilogram of Sweet Jumbo seeds from Mamun's shop. Mamun bought several kilos of the seeds from us. You can buy the seeds from his shop. The CLP does not give the seeds free. We are supposed to show you a good fodder seed which is available in the market.

Local participant (a woman): *I do not have enough land to grow the fodder. We collect kashia, which is available on the char, and we do not have to pay for this. Moreover, the river eroded a big size of our land in the last year. Therefore, I cannot afford to produce the fodder.*

NGO-worker: *Who was not affected by the flood? I think, everyone was hit by the flood on the char. I know that you cultivate corn in every season here. Try to grow the fodder this season as an experiment. I am not telling you to grow the fodder on your entire land. Just select a small portion of your land for the fodder. It will save you time and energy that you use for collecting the grasses from somewhere else. You work hard for six months for cultivating corn, which requires you to borrow money from the moneylenders. If your cattle give more milk by eating this fodder, you do not have to grow corn with such pain. Besides, you do not have to borrow money from the moneylenders if you raise more cows and sell more milk.*

I will talk to the male members of your families to suggest them to select a small portion of land to produce the fodder. Believe me; I know many farmers from the chars who have cultivated the fodder and have been receiving the expected benefit. They sell more milk in every month than in the past. Moreover, they would earn high value when they would sell their healthy cows. We are going to show a demo of the process of the fodder cultivation process, as I told you earlier. Momena and her husband have allowed us to use their land to show the demo of the fodder cultivation.

This kind of fodder is rare in the local market. You could collect grasses more than ten times from a single plant a year. I would like to suggest you leave a place for this grass cultivation while you cultivate corn. Do you find grasses during flooding, except for a small amount of kashia?

Local participant (a man): *No. But the kashia is available on the char.*

NGO-worker: *Yes, it is true. But you need to spend several hours to collect the kashia. Collecting kashia is very tough when it becomes very tall. Moreover, you collect kashia from the unused land, which is owned by others. How long will you depend on the free supply of kashia? It is uncertain that you would collect kashia from the vacant property forever. You*

also fed the cattle dry straw and grasses. A cow requires a tremendous energy to chew those thick and dry grasses to digest. The Sweet Jumbo grass is very soft to eat and easy to digest for the cows. Let me give an example. We drink milk, don't we? We do not need a huge energy to drink a glass of milk. But think about the nutrition we get from a glass of milk! The Sweet Jumbo grass is just like milk to a cow. A cow does not need to use an enormous energy to chew such a soft kind of fodder. Besides, you do not have to take out your cattle under the hot sun for grazing. Do you have any idea how the hot sunlight severely affects the cows? It burns the fat of their body. That is why the char cows look skinny compared to the cows of other places.

There are some prepared foods for the dairy cows in the market. I would suggest feeding your cows that kind of food. Do you know about the six components of nutrition? Protein, mineral, fats, vitamins, water and carbohydrates are the six elements. The dry grasses do not give the cattle six elements. Readymade cattle-feed and green fodder contain all the components. If you want more milk from your cows, you need to grow the high quality of green fodder and along with naturally available grasses. If your cows are unable to give more milk, how can you develop the dairy business on the char? Producing the fodder will save your money as well. I know you spend a lot of money for buying dry stalks for your cattle. If you produce the fodder, you do not need to buy the stalks.

You know that the floods keep you worried and anxious over the instability of your house and assets. Under the worrying situation, it is difficult to collect grasses from somewhere else. Moreover, not everyone can afford a boat, so you cannot go out to collect grasses. If you produce the fodder on your land, you can preserve it in your house. If you earn money from selling dairy milk, you will afford to buy the cattle-feed. I would like to suggest you not to spend money on buying the dry stalks. Let me tell you a joke: There was a fisherman who was trying to catch small fishes moving in front of him, but he was missing bigger ones running behind him. Certainly, the fisherman did not intentionally lose the bigger fishes, but he did not have access to the knowledge how to catch those bigger fishes. Likewise, you do not have access to the scientific knowledge on raising livestock so that you produce more milk and more meat. So, who is going to produce the fodder?

Local participants (a few members): *[They chorused] yes, yes, I will do.*

NGO-worker: *Mamun vai [brother] collected some packets of Sweet Jumbo seeds from us. You should buy the seeds from his shop. Please, do not think that it is free.*

8.4.3 Meeting Three: Annual Planning of the Char Business Committee

The third meeting took place in the same month, November. As usual, the NGO-worker was worried as to whether or not the members would attend the meeting since the char people had started corn cultivation. We got off the boat that was reserved by the schoolteachers who travel from the mainland to the island regularly. As usual, the NGO-workers called a member of the business committee to assist them in carrying the bags filled with food items. The member had been elected as the Publicity Secretary of the business committee. He received the call and replied that he was sowing corn seeds on his land and he would come as soon as possible. We were waiting at the riverbank where the schoolteachers' boat was anchored. He arrived, and we approached the tin-shed office. We found that a goat had managed to enter the room through a loose joint between the tin walls. The NGO-workers looked worried and pointed out to the secretary that the tin sheets should have been tied tightly.

The secretary then handed over the food bags to the women members. The secretary went door to door to call the fellow members to attend the meeting. He told the NGO-workers angrily that it was tough to go to every members' house. "Why do the members not come to the office on time? Everyone has something to do in this agricultural season. I was sowing corn seeds on my land. I left my job while I was called," he said loudly to get everyone's attention.

Mamun, a prominent member of the business committee, arrived on time with a few dozen eggs that would be boiled and served with the communal lunch. The NGO-workers looked very anxious, as the attendance was not satisfactory. One woman attended on behalf of her husband, who had recently started driving a rickshaw van to earn money in the town. He had been elected as the Treasurer of the business committee. Some members suspected that he might have invested the business committee's savings on buying his van without informing the committee. A teenage mother joined the meeting on behalf of her husband as well. Her husband was unable to attend the session as he was ploughing his land. The meeting

started with a small number of members compared to the last meeting, since they were busy with agriculture work.

NGO-worker: *We have had a few meetings. Now the committee needs annual planning to see its possible success. Today I would like to talk about a potential annual plan that would be materialised for generating income and savings of the committee. Would you like to listen to me with full concentration?*

Local participants: *[They chorused] yes, yes.*

NGO-worker: *We [the CLP] applied for a trade license for the committee. After having the permit, the committee will be able to trade seeds, fertilisers, and other agricultural accessories. But your biggest problem is that you have not yet achieved confidence about running the business on your own.*

Local participant (a man): *Yes, you are right. We have not reached our confidence as well as unity yet. We understand that the business will bring a huge profit, but we are not working according to the rules of the committee. I cannot figure out why the members are not serious enough yet!*

Yesterday, I was at Mamun's shop. I told some people that Mamun sells good quality of cattle-feed. You should buy those cattle feed that will make your animals healthy. It will bring more profit.

NGO-worker: *The char people feed their cattle the local grasses and leftover rice and vegetables. These are not enough for the cattle to become motataja [fat]. You invest a small amount of money on the cattle but expect more profit. Why do you not buy cattle-feed with more or less the same sum of money you spent for buying the dry stalks?*

You must invest a little bit of money if you want to earn more. Please do not misuse your little savings. As cattle are the primary asset, you should invest your savings on it. You know that "choto choto balu- kona bindu bindu jol gore tole mohadesh sagor otol [Grains of sands and drops of water together can make a continent and an ocean]. Look at Mamun; he runs his own business on this char. He depends on his shop. Therefore, he must invest his saving in his shop and save money to run his business. Otherwise, he would not be able to buy products from the wholesalers in the town.

Local participant (a woman): *You are right. The top members of the committee are not serious; they do not call a general meeting. They only attend the meetings when you offer food. It seems to me that the members only attend the meetings only for having free food.*

NGO-worker: *Anyway, you need to be united and be confident if you want to run the livestock business. Your business would not be limited to only selling cows and milk. It should be multipurpose. You should identify the non-serious members and take the necessary steps according to the rules of the business committee.*

Local participant (a man): *Someone asked me a few days ago: what are the benefits of attending the meetings? I replied that there were many advantages. For example, you sell your cattle to the local cattle traders. They come to your house and buy your cattle at a lower price. You do not have an idea about the current market price of the cattle. You might receive less benefit. On the other hand, if we [the business committee] buy cows from the char families and take them to the market collectively, we could sell the animals at a higher value. If we run the business seriously, we would be aware of the current market price of the cattle, be able to control the price of our cattle, and be able to avoid the trap of intermediaries involved in the livestock business. Would not it be a benefit for us? Under the cooperative society, we can even trade our animals at the markets in Dhaka. Just imagine: we would hire a bigger truck loaded with our cattle, and we would be going to big markets to sell those.*

NGO-worker: *Actually, you [Amir] are a very knowledgeable person. Amir understands about the future outputs of the livestock business. Now we should think about our next steps. What can we do for the next year from now?*

I have many ideas as I conduct the meetings on the same issues on other chars. But, today I am going to listen to you. You should share your thoughts. For example, a few months ago, you decided that you would cultivate corn in this season. Besides, you would decide what crops you would grow in the next season. Likewise, you must make a plan for the business. Please share some ideas.

Local participant (a man): *We need to make huge savings. Otherwise, the cooperative society will not exist.*

Local participant (a man): *How can unnayan [development] come to us if we do not make a big capital?*

NGO-worker: *What about the women members? Could I have your attention, please? Do you not want to sell milk and cattle through the business committee?*

Local participant (Amir): *[pointing toward a woman] do you not need credit for cultivating corn? Do you not need credit to buy cows? Do you want a loan from our cooperative society [the business committee]?*

Local participant (The woman): *[Motivated by Amir's questions] Yes, I need a loan. We cannot cultivate crops without receiving money from the moneylenders. If we get credit from our business committee, then we will not be at the mercy of the moneylenders anymore.*

A participant, named Rahman, one of the boatmen on Onishchit, received a call on his mobile. He replied that he was in a meeting. The NGO-worker requested him not to leave the meeting. Rahman responded that he needed to go to his field because he employed a few labourers to plough his land. He was worried that those workers would not work properly without his supervision.

The NGO-worker phoned Farhad, one of the important members of the committee. Farhad was very busy on that day, as he had hired three labourers to build a small tin-shed office room for Friendship's "good governance office." As noted earlier, Farhad was a salaried employee of Friendship. The local branch of the organisation informed him that a visiting team of Friendship's Head Office would visit its "development" activities on the chars, including Onishchit, very soon. Of the chars in Gaibandha, Onishchit is considered a unique island village because Friendship runs a vocational training centre, a primary school, and other health-related projects there. The NGO-worker wanted Farhad to attend the meeting, but he could not make it. Farhad came back and forth to the meeting. He apologised to the attendees, saying he had no option but to supervise the labourers. The NGO-worker announced the end of the meeting then, announcing that a public workshop on livestock technology would be held very soon with the assistance of the business committee.

To sum up, this section has shown that development discourses have reached the island villagers from international aid agencies via local development organisations. As such, the

development discourses about the livestock business have influenced local people to change their traditional behaviours regarding raising livestock, whereupon they are encouraged to replace their conventional ways of raising livestock with more scientific methods.

8.5 Public Workshop on Livestock Technology

A daylong meeting-cum-workshop took place in the playground of a primary school so that anyone could join. The business committee hired a professional decorator team from the town to set up a marquee and microphone for the workshop. A banner, titled "A Workshop on Technology Extension through the Char Business Committee," hung on the stage so that the audience could see the subject matter of the workshop. The workshop aimed to introduce livestock technology and products to the locals. When I reached the workshop venue, I heard Amir repeatedly reciting certain phrases rhythmically to attract the neighbourhoods to attend the workshop: "more meat, more profit," "more milk, more profit," and "feed your cattle the Jumbo Grass, if you want your cattle healthy." The NGO-workers allowed him to run the workshop as a moderator, although one of them guided him so that he could maintain order in the sessions. A gathering of a huge crowd of local people, the sound of the microphone, the snapping of pictures, the local people's speech, and the exhibition of livestock accessories (e.g., cattle-feed, milk container, veterinary medicine, and hybrid fodder) gave the workshop a festival look and feel. In their speech, the local people highlighted the advantages of a livestock business as interpreted by the NGO-workers in the earlier meetings. As Mosse (2005, p. 158) argues, development interpretations are "made and sustained socially."

The NGO-worker invited some beneficiaries (who had received the CLP's cows), field level NGO-workers, development volunteers, college students, small peasants, local influential persons, a former public representative, a Freedom Fighter, a local veterinarian, and all the members of the business committee. Most of the attendees were female—which was a very familiar scene at the community meetings arranged by the NGOs. In the case of the CLP, only the women were provided with cattle, and therefore they were invited to attend the workshop. I wanted only to observe the session, but the NGO-workers requested that I participate as one of the guest speakers at the meeting. More than ten plastic chairs and a

long table were set on the stage of the marquee for the "special guests," consisting of the above-noted local influential people.

Figure 31: Community workshop on livestock technology. Photo by researcher.

They were requested to give a short speech regarding the importance of using modern technology (veterinary medicine and hybrid cattle-feed) in livestock. Moreover, the NGO-workers invited a field-level marketing officer of a well-known company that produces cattle feed and veterinary drugs. The NGO-workers suggested the marketing officer deliver his speech on the advantages of livestock technology. They asked Amir to start off the discussion session of the workshop.

Amir: *Assalamu alaikum [peace to you, a common greeting among Muslims]. Many of us could not afford to raise cattle in the past. We know that the CLP gave us heifers. We must utilise the asset. I know one of my neighbours who had no cows before. The CLP gave her a heifer. Now she has seven cows. Think how much you will get if you sell all the cows. You are receiving milk, which is good for your children's health. Now the livestock has become our fortune. We need to be more knowledgeable on how to gain more benefits by raising the livestock. You know that you sell a litre milk at BDT 20 to the milkmen, but the city people*

buy the same milk at BDT 70 and more from the milkmen. If we run our cooperative society, we would be able to sell milk at the market at more than BDT 70.

The thing is, we move from one char to another to survive. The disasters make us helpless. Therefore, we should be united under this char business committee. The CLP's brothers [employees] took some of us to Rangpur. There, we saw that the farmers were united and had been working together. They have been running a cattle farm. They are doing profitable milk business. If they are able to run the business, we can do it too. What we need to do is to be keen to run the livestock business here. Today, we have many special guests. They will talk about how we can improve our livelihood. They will discuss how we can improve livestock by using adhunik prajukti [the modern technology]. Here we have a guest who will introduce us to the modern veterinary medicines and cattle feed.

First, Amir called forth the Freedom Fighter, one of the special guests, aged over seventy. He is not only a respected person but also a self-trained veterinarian (*gorur daktar*) on the island. He had no institutional degree or training in livestock medicine. He only received short training on livestock raising, arranged by the agriculture department and some private veterinary medicine companies. He shared his view that the islanders lack sufficient knowledge about cattle breeding and in identifying the diseases the animals suffer with. He cited the problem of calling the animal doctors at the last minute, with the consequence being the animal subsequently dies. He suggested his fellow island villagers call the veterinarian as soon as they see abnormalities in their livestock and not depend only on their common sense. He added that many medicines were invented and available in the local market at the boat terminal.

Several beneficiaries of the CLP were called to give their short speeches one after the other. All the speakers mentioned the same issues. They acknowledged that the CLP provided them with heifers at the beginning of the project, and that they have now several cows, bulls, and calves. They shared their plans for improving their livelihoods by utilising livestock. One of them was Mamata who was one of the proactive members, a well-known woman known for her ability to talk to the public.

Mamata: *[She made sure of covering her head with her saree] The CLP gave me a heifer. Now I have several cows. I attend the CLP's meetings regularly. From the meetings,*

I have gained knowledge about the cattle diseases. I know what type of grass is right for my cows. I have been receiving the profit from selling milk and cows. I had no idea about the grain-food for the animals in the past. I have known about that from the community meetings. [The moderator was inspiring her by saying "carry on, carry on, you are speaking well.] Mamata replied: "What else I can say? I have said enough. If I say more, I would be saying nonsense." Her sense of humour made all laugh.

Mamun: *Mamata is right. We did not know how to produce more milk in the past. In the past, you had one cow that gave 10-litres milk per day. Now, you have 2-3 cows, and you get 20-30 litres milk per day. Is it not profitable? I never sold the cattle feed in the past. I have started selling a few packets of the cattle feed. I made many people understand that the veterinary medicine is good for cows. I observed that the people come to my shop and ask for anti-worm drugs for their cattle. They look for whether I sell the fodder seeds. Some people asked me why I do not keep more cattle feed in my shop. It seems that the char people are becoming conscious about using the livestock technology to make more profit. One thing is missing on the char. We do not have bedeshi [foreign-breeding] cows. I saw in Rangpur that the farmers have foreign-breeding cows that produce more milk than our deshi [local] cows. I hope that the CLP will provide the bedeshi cows to the char dwellers in future.*

The chief guest was known as a headman, a prosperous farmer, and a cattle trader. He requested the moderator, Amir, not to call out his name to deliver his speech. He told me that he was shy and felt nervous to talk in public. Finally, one of the NGO-workers held the mic and sought the audience's full concentration. He introduced the different types of cattle feed, anti-worm tablets for animals, and milk containers. He repeatedly stated that if they wanted to earn more from livestock, they had to know about cattle feed products, symptoms of cattle disease, veterinary medicines, scientific ways of collecting milk, and market prices of milk. The workshop ended with a distribution of sweet snacks among the audience, including the children playing nearby the workshop venue.

8.6 Theatre of Development

On the island, I observed some flying visits of the development organisations. Usually, the visiting teams consist of top-ranking officers of the projects, foreign delegates of donor

agencies, and field level workers. I had the privilege of observing the visits of Friendship twice. During my fieldwork, I came across two of my acquaintances who have been working for the organisation. The field level workers were found there almost every day until the week of the visits on the island because they were supposed to encourage the local participants, with the support of the employees and volunteers from the island. Several places were selected and marked with banners representing the name and purpose of the projects. The field level workers were supposed to invite as many participants as they could because it was believed that the extension of the projects depend on a large attendance at the meetings. Besides, such extension of the projects extends the job of the field level workers and local volunteers.

Figure 32: An employee of Friendship explaining the goals and outcomes of the organisation's development projects to a foreigner. Photo by researcher.

Let me highlight the details of one visit of Friendship on Onishchit. As noted earlier, Friendship has been running several projects: a) Friendship Primary School; b) Satellite Clinic; c) Vocational Training Centre (VTC); d) Nutrition; and e) Paralegal Booth. Amir, Farhad, and Aisha started their morning by informing the people in their neighbourhood about a visit and asking the beneficiaries and other people to attend the meeting. They fixed

some venues (house courtyards and playground of school) to display their participation through role-playing so that the visitors could understand the outcomes of the projects. Along with several NGO-workers, Amir, Farhad, and Aisha suggested the participants rehearse what they had been taught to respond to some common queries of the visitors. As Mosse (2005, p. 165) writes, in the context of his working experience with the British funded project in India, the Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project: "In selected villages everyday life gives way to project time, space and aesthetics. The village is organised to resemble the project text so as to be pleasingly read by outsiders."

Figure 33: Community meeting on health and nutrition. Photo by researcher.

Some of the participants replied in a somewhat parrot-fashion when they were asked about the consequences of the projects; however, some women passionately described the benefits of the projects they have experienced. The visiting team appreciated the local people's active participation with the projects, as the development's success is not "just about what a project does, but also how and to whom it speaks, who can be made to believe it" (Mosse, 2005, p. 158).The field level workers arranged four spots to show the participants

various roles they play. The four sites were distributed into four projects: education, health, good governance and income generation. They structured the one-day-visiting-program in a way that the visitors could see all the projects one after the other on the day. Under the education project, the team visited the school named Friendship Primary School. The school compound was cleaned, and all the students were called to attend on the day. The school facilities consisted of a new signboard that represented the name of the school. Only one teacher, named Samad, had been teaching the students under the supervision of a supervisor. They were both present and took extra care of their clothing on that day. They made themselves ready to demonstrate how they have been teaching the students by using accessories (e.g. posters and colourful books) provided by Friendship. They also cleaned the school toilet and the concrete floor adjacent to the tube-well. They wanted to share the positive consequences of primary education: "reducing child marriage and increasing awareness of the importance of sending children to school," Samad stated.

To exhibit the health project, a banner titled "Friendship Satellite Clinic" was hung in the open yard of Samad's house. Both Samad, the schoolteacher, and his wife Shefali, used to work as volunteers and were then recruited as employees for Friendship. Shefali received training from Friendship on women's basic reproductive health and child health. Usually, she and her husband host the meetings at their courtyard during such visits. Shefali wore a long white nurse dress to signify that she was providing free suggestions on women and children's health. Along with Shefali, a few women who worked as volunteers wore the same apron. They exhibited some accessories (such as a stethoscope, a syringe, a first aid box, and a blood-pressure reading machine) on a table in Shefali's houseroom. Outside the house, a local woman was seen conducting *uthan baithak* (an open-yard meeting) with more than thirty fellow islanders, and many locals gathered at the meeting. As usual, the local people seemed curious to see the foreign visitors. The meeting conductor was repeatedly talking about what nutrition could be found in the available food items. The participants were chanting loudly what the meeting conductor was talking. A child health awareness poster was hung behind the meeting conductor so that the participants could understand her speech. The poster showed images and texts describing the importance of washing hands with soap before eating, after sneezing, after touching chicken, ducks, or eggs, and after using the toilet.

The visitors were then taken to another gathering just behind the vocational training centre to show off the nutrition project. Nearly forty children sat on the floor in a U-shape on a courtyard, placing their plates in front of them. *Khichuri* (a nutritious food item cooked with rice, lentils, and spices) had been cooked in order to be distributed among the children. When the visitor-team arrived at the courtyard, a group of volunteers distributed the food into the plates placed in front of the children. One of the members of the visiting team requested the foreigner (an American) to serve the food to the children. Then, many members of the team took pictures. This kind of food is offered to the char children on a weekly or monthly basis under the project.

Another group meeting on paralegal services was taking place close to the food distribution spot. Aisha arranged the meeting at her house courtyard, which was frequently used for such group meetings. A group of nearly twenty women presented at the meeting. A field level worker of the organisation was showing them some flip charts containing legal issues, for example, the definition of early child marriage, the nature of the state-owned land, and the name of the government offices that provide services on these issues. A member of the visiting team showed the flip charts to the American consultant and translated these legal topics into English. Finally, the team visited the vocational training centre. One of the team members said to the foreigner that women were encouraged to take training in dying, tailoring, and printing so that they could make themselves self-reliant and contribute to household income. The project hoped that such skill training and primary education for women would make the local people aware about women's right to education and to earning wages.

8.7 "Something is Better than Nothing"

Many islanders appreciate the NGOs' development initiatives. In their everyday casual conversations (or gossiping), they compare the contributions of the state and the non-state bodies to their lives and livelihoods and put the NGOs ahead of the state. This is partly because they observe that the NGO-workers very often come to the char and talk to them, whereas government people (e.g. police, veterinarians, public representatives and physicians) hardly visit the islands to know the char people's socio-economic problems. Many people

acknowledged that the NGOs at least have been providing some assets and had brought changes in income generation to a certain extent. Moreover, it is noticeable that several young men and women work on a contract basis for the NGOs on the islands, such as Amir, Farhad, Aisha, Shefali, Samad, and others.

Amir is quite enthusiastic about the development projects, and he is able to describe the projects' implications on the island. He bashfully smiled and told me that before the arrival of the NGO he had never used a sanitary latrine because there had been no such toilets on the islands. In fact, it was the NGO that introduced the sanitary latrine to the char people. They used to go into bush or crop field for defecation. He excitingly stated: "Today my little son even knows how to use the sanitary latrine. He washes his hands with soap after using the toilet. We did not have that knowledge in the past. We learned many things from the NGOs." He added:

> Many people do not like me because I put a veto on the children marriages. Some people accused me that I had welcomed the Christian people's [foreign NGOs] aid to the chars; I encouraged women to attend NGOs' meeting; and I encourage women not to be silent on the children marriages and women's rights. [He started smiling] One day I requested a family not to force their little girl to get married. Can you guess how the parents reacted? They said that I stopped their daughter's marriage, and they would take revenge when I would arrange my daughter's marriage. They intentionally spread bad rumours about my daughter so that no one comes with a marriage proposal for my daughter.

He proudly told me that he met the founder of Friendship once and he suggested to her (the founder) that she initiate the development of "school ships" (specifically high school) like the hospital ships so that the char children can get access to education. He noted that the parents of the island villages are not interested in sending their daughters to the high schools located on the mainland, as traveling to the mainland by boat is risky for the little children, particularly for the girls. It is also costly in terms of money and time. Amir thoughtfully explained: "It is a big problem for the schoolgirls. They go to school, taking their lives at risk. They have long hair, and they are always in a long dress. What will they do if the boat is affected by the floodwater? Would they save their lives or manage their long dress?"

Sajjad used to attend community meetings and workshops organised by the NGOs. He finds the activities of the NGOs positive except for the microfinance or microcredit system. Many people have strong views on the microfinance system. The NGOs do not find microfinance systems profitable or realistic on the islands because they require collecting regular instalments, which is incompatible with the precarious income methods of the islanders and the uncertain existence of the islands. This is partly why the local NGOs do not run microcredit systems on the island. Sajjad likes the NGOs' way of interaction with the local people such as group meetings, trainings, and workshops in neighbourhoods. In addition to the participatory nature of the NGOs' work, Sajjad's family members are involved in the NGOs' development projects: Shefali (his daughter) and Samad (son-in-law) have been working for Friendship's health and education projects, respectively. He positively commented on the development projects:

> The NGOs are doing something better than nothing. Many educated young men and women from the chars work for the NGOs. The government jobs require *janashona* [social network] and bribe. Therefore, it is not possible for the char people to get a government job. The char people is not enough literate. The NGOs do not mind hiring less educated people. Unlike the public sector, the corrupt people cannot get the NGO jobs.

The CLP's asset distribution and homestead plinth raising are remarkably noticeable on Onishchit. Many people acknowledge these initiatives. In the past, the people had to spend money on plinth raising to protect their houses and cattle from flooding. Those who could not afford to raise plinths had to move to a higher place, but this miserable situation has changed to some degree. At least now they can be somewhat sure that a less strong flood might not affect the house platform like in the past.

A couple running a grocery shop attached to their homestead evaluated the development projects positively, particularly the education project. The couple are parents of two teenage daughters and a little boy. Two children go to the primary school run by GUK, and the elder daughter goes to a high school on the mainland. The husband told me that the NGO-schools out-numbered the government schools on the islands; "the NGOs run their schools seriously with regular supervision." His observation corresponds to my view, as I

travelled to several chars and found the same. His wife recalled that she had to get married in her early age. She acknowledged that the NGO-schools at least are attempting to educate the char children and encouraging the parents to send their children to the schools. However, animadversion against the NGOs' development intervention process can be observed in the neighbourhoods.

8.8 Mixed Reactions to Development Process

As noted above, the development organisations regularly interact with the local people to implement the projects. The local participants involve the target population (particularly impoverished and marginalised households), influential individuals (e.g., headmen, schoolteachers, members of the landowning class, and public representatives), and proactive volunteers. The public representatives and political people are powerful compared to the others. As such, it is reported that the NGOs purposefully maintain "good connections" with influential individuals to avoid unexpected pitfalls. The NGO-workers fear that influential persons might veto projects in the communities. The NGOs find influential local individuals to be a gateway to entering the local communities. In a very different context, Latour writes, "For a project to materialise, it must at once recruit new allies and at the same time make sure their recruitment is assured" (1996, p. 71).

The field level workers of the NGOs are supposed to facilitate the local people to form different types of committees (e.g. the char development committee) at local levels so that the target population can feel ownership and attached to the projects' series of events and actions. However, it can be observed that only educated and proactive individuals, who are from relatively wealthy households, hold positions in the committees. For example, Joynal, a landlord and headman, his daughter and wife have been privileged to have easier access to the projects' events. Joynal's house is locally known as "Member *Bari*" or the house of the Member since his wife was elected as a representative of UP.

Figure 34: The islanders seeing off the visiting team. Photo by researcher.

As the Member is a public representative, the field level NGO-workers are supposed to inform her when they initiate any projects. In addition, for some projects, she by default holds an honorary position (e.g. advisor) of the village level committees. Her daughter works as a volunteer for Friendship. Another organisation, GUK, recently recruited her as a teacher of the non-formal school project. The compound of Joynal's house is seen as a meeting place of the NGO-workers, volunteers and the target population. The courtyard of Joynal's house is repeatedly used for community meetings and workshops, partly because the location is larger and partly because his daughter Aisha, as a volunteer, can easily invite her neighbours to the community meetings. Moreover, coincidentally, several employees (Farhad and Amir) and volunteers have been living in the same neighbourhood. The general people find that the NGO-workers, no matter the organisation, visit the neighbourhood first. A farmer commented:

> The government officers or the NGO-workers visit the char. They always come to the Members' house [or Joynal's house] in the first place. They do not come to the poor peoples' house in the first place. They talk to the *provabshali* [influential] people while they run a project. This year, during the flooding, the NGO-people anchored their boats at the Member's house. They brought reliefs. Why do they not come to the poor people

> in the first place? We heard that aids came for us, but we were not provided with the reliefs. So, do you understand the *duniar khela* [inevitable fortune]? The Chairman-Member, as well as the NGOs, do not place importance on the poor. They maintain good connections only with the influential persons.

Many people criticised the unfair selection of the target population. For example, the CLP selected households who were considered and labelled as "extreme poor." There was a rumour that the NGO-workers picked the potential recipients according to the suggestions of influential local individuals. Many "actual poor" people were excluded, whereas some wealthy families were included in the project. Many of the non-poor took their cattle to their relatives' house on another char for a while, and they pretended that they had no cattle so that the NGO-workers selected them as "extreme poor." Many islanders believed that either the NGO-workers were unfair in selecting the "extreme poor" households during the initial survey, or that the local people gave the wrong information to the surveyors regarding their socio-economic status.

The NGO-workers also find themselves "helpless" and "others" on the remote islands, where most of the people are not like them. They are, in general, from the mainland, accustomed to an urban lifestyle and college education. They find it difficult to mingle with the char people, and although it is their job to build rapport with the islanders, they face constant "cultural shocks." They are supposed to be calm and gentle whatever situation comes to pass while they translate the projects' purposes. In an early evening during flooding, two NGO-workers and I reached the riverbank to catch the last boat of the day. A Member, who was waiting for the boat, asked the NGO-workers what projects they were working for. One of them was newly recruited and therefore did not recognise him. He asked his identity. Suddenly, the influential man furiously told him, "You are working on my char, and you do not know who I am?!"

Many people show a cynical approach toward the development NGOs' honesty and transparency. The locals see many foreigners from many parts of the world visit the projects' field level activities on the islands. Thus, they are aware that the NGOs receive a significant amount of funds from the richest countries such as the UK, the USA, Australia and some European countries. The local organisations take foreigners (donors, consultants, journalists

or researchers) to the islands and show them the islands' vulnerabilities to disasters. They take pictures of their everyday activities such as farming, raising plinths, grazing cattle, moving tin roofs, cattle and so on. A professional camera operator, who is called very often to take photos of the NGO's activities on special occasions, stated: "The char people have become a good model for still photography. They know how to pose while I take photos." On the island, I met two professional photographers who work for the leading NGOs located in the capital city. They were there with high-tech cameras for completing their official assignment: a visual representation of lives and livelihoods on the chars.

The islanders, specifically women, felt uneasy when I sought their permission for taking their photos. It was a sunny day in April. A group of labourers were uncovering the corn stem. Then they separated the corn kernel or seed attached to the main stem. Most of the labourers were women. I approached them for seeking their permission for taking some photos of their work. The women looked shy and tied up their saree, whispering with each other. One of them told me not to take their pictures. She asked for money for the taking of pictures. According to her explanation, many people (such as journalists) snapped their photos and inserted them on calendars. They take their photos free of cost, but they sold the calendars at a higher price. She stated: "You would earn money by taking our picture, but you will not give us anything." Another woman then shared an interesting story on gender violence:

> Our *purush* [male members in household] do not want us working outside. If you publish our pictures, they might come across those pictures, and therefore they might torture us. It has happened to a woman. She was beaten by her husband, after seeing her picture on a calendar.

The local participants in the development projects are the main witnesses of the implementation of the projects on the ground. Seeing the process of implementation in their community, they can assume "in times of [economic and social] changes who wins and who loses? How does this happen?" (Gardner & Lewis, 2015, p. 110). Questions about the distribution and usage of the NGOs' funds are widespread. A char dweller simultaneously acknowledged and accused the NGOs, saying: "The NGOs took our pictures and sent them to *bedesh* [abroad] to ask for donations. The NGOs received a huge donation. But very little

came to us." One day, I was seeking permission to take a group picture of young people who were playing cards at a grocery shop. One of them was jokingly saying:

> Take pictures of us as many as you can. It is not new for us. They [the NGOs] take thousands of pictures but give us nothing. They buy bananas for them but give us *mula* (radish, one of the cheapest vegetables) by spending the foreign donations.

By *mula*, he refers to "false promise." In everyday conversations, the phrase *mula jhulia rakheche* (radish is hung) is popularly used by Bengali speaking people both in urban and rural contexts. The phrase refers to "giving promise repeatedly but materializing nothing". The same man told me another day:

> We know very well that our pictures are sold in London and America. They [the NGOs] only take photos and photos. Oh brother! do you know what happened yesterday? We took out our cows for grazing. A helicopter was coming down on our char. How windy it was! It was hard to manage my *lungi* [man's traditional long garment, sort of skirt]. We got scared, and we started running. Our cattle were also scared and started running. Some people were taking pictures of us from the helicopter. What a strange matter!

Many people doubt whether the NGOs effectively employ foreign funds. At a tea stall at the boat terminal, three primary school teachers and I were waiting for the boat. One of them shared his thoughts on the misuse of the funds provided by the foreign aid agencies to the local NGOs. The schoolteacher was critical of the fact that most of the funds are used for constructing the NGOs' offices, opening branch offices, buying luxurious cars, and paying the salaries of the workers. He told me that the national NGOs work as a "broker" (*dalal*) between the foreign donor agencies and the target population, and the "broker" group control the distribution and use of the funds. He thought distributing the total funds among the poor would be more useful for the poor, rather than spending the funds on office decoration and buying cars. One of his colleagues disagreed instantly: "But if you give cash to the poor, they will spend it buying food rather than investing in the productive sector."

A few people, particularly the wealthy farmers, thought that the NGOs' cattle-giving project lowered the islanders' self-esteem. They argued that the landless people did not want to work as day labourers anymore since they had received livestock from the CLP. A wealthy farmer stated that all the islanders had been vulnerable on the islands: "Some people pretend

to be poor to receive support from the NGOs. The NGOs are making the people lazy. The poor people are not willing to do work now; they only want to receive the NGOs' support." Supporting his remark, another wealthy farmer revealed his class position:

> We cannot find the *kamla* [day laborers] after the NGOs came to the char. Unlike the past, they now demand higher wages. Whereas, they [the poor day laborers] used to look for work door to door in the past. These NGOs are making them to dream of being rich. Becoming rich is such easy!"

Many of them also criticized the NGOs' role on women's mobility. They found it to be the catalyst for breaking down traditional family values: men for earning and women for managing the household work. An elderly man at Mamun's teashop stated: "These NGOs take out the women from *ghar* [house]. It is anti-Islam." The conversation prompted Mamun to respond: "Why do you say like that, brother? Do you not think that women are human too? They also have two hands to work, don't they?"

8.9 Conclusion

The chapter has shown that the inhabitants of the island actively interact with external development ideas brought to them by local development organisations, which are funded by national and international aid agencies. Income generating programmes of the CLP and other social development projects cause changes in traditional male-controlled households and in society. That is to say, women's participation in the community meetings, forming a cooperative society, raising cattle, and gender awareness required women to negotiate and argue with the pervasive social structure. Some households managed to develop (or change) their socio-economic conditions from "bad" to "good." It does not necessarily imply that the locals uncritically observe the activities of the development organisations. Rather, they criticize the process of the implementation of the projects. Everyday interactions between the char dwellers and the CLP suggest that the local people (or beneficiaries) are not merely passive receivers of the development projects. Rather, they actively participate in a series of activities. For example, they attend meetings at local and national levels, arrange meetings in their communities, share their views, and criticize the projects' implementation process.

Chapter 9

In Search of Place and Livelihoods in Dhaka

9.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with frequent and seasonal rural-urban migration, which has been made based on practical choice. This willing rural-urban migration has been a long-practised response to rural poverty and unemployment. Four decades ago, anthropologist Brian M. Du Toit (1975) reminded us that one of the unique characteristics of humans is their "tendency to migrate," and that their cultural adaptability allows them to adjust to environmental changes by applying their mental abilities and technological know-how (p. 1). There are two major forms of migration: forced and voluntary. Forced migration happens due to war, slavery, or eviction. Individuals or communities such as seasonal hunters and gatherers, riverine agriculturalists or nomads voluntarily move from one place to another for survival (Du Toit, 1975, p. 2).

Uneducated, unskilled, landless and unemployed rural people migrate to Dhaka with the hope of obtaining employment (Begum, 1999). However, rural-to-urban migration is caused by many factors, including the search for better economic opportunities, greater freedom, an urban lifestyle, training or schooling; or owing to displacement. This study observed that many islanders, both men and women, frequently migrated to Dhaka for better livelihood opportunities because of the precariousness of their homes and livelihood options on the islands. Having no formal skills, most of them have been involved in menial jobs in various sectors such as carrying loads, carpentry, road construction, transport, garment factories, and domestic service Nowadays, the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector in Bangladesh has absorbed millions of women labourers. Most of them have migrated from rural to urban areas. The migrants end up living in slums, mess (nearly slum), shantytowns, and rickshaw garages, as they cannot afford a "decent" accommodation with their low wages. This chapter focuses on how the islanders as migrants create space for living and obtain

livelihood opportunities in the city of Dhaka, and how social capital plays a significant role in the processes of creating spaces there.

9.2 Dhaka: A City of Hope and Despair

Dhaka is one of the most densely populated cities in the world, with a population density of 44,500 people per square kilometre (Brodie, 2017). Modern infrastructures (high-rise buildings, flyovers, and big corporate offices) and shantytowns can be seen in a single area. The city is "noted for unacceptable proportions of urban sprawl" (Siddiqui et al., 2016, p. 30). Islam's (1986) study on poor people's access to residential space in Dhaka shows that 30% of Dhaka dwellers (consisting of "rich" and "upper middle" classes) own 80% of the total land, whereas the same number of "poor" population own no land. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' (BBS) census report on slum dwellers states that more than a million people end up living in slums, and they were originally from rural areas, where they faced poverty and natural disasters (BBS, 2014). The report shows that the residents of the slums mainly depend on menial jobs: rickshaw pullers (17%), small businessmen (16%), garment workers (14%), service (14%), construction labourers (8%), wage labourers (8%), and others (24%). Roughly, 3,000,000 to 4,000,000 migrants, mostly the poor from rural areas, arrive in the city annually, and it is projected that Dhaka's population size would be 25 million by 2025 (Ahmed, 2017).

Most of the slum areas lack basic amenities, electricity, water supply and schooling. It can be observed that poor people settle on public property such as roadsides, the edges of railway lines, or unused state-owned land. Incidents of fire in the slums are quite common. It is alleged that landowners, be they state or non-state, intentionally set fires in the slums in order to acquire these lands without taking any effective rehabilitation plans. For example, the residents of Korail Slum in Dhaka experienced several incidents of fire; the slum dwellers suspected such incidents to be arson (Dhaka Tribune, December 24, 2016). As Siddiqui and his colleagues' (2016, p. 410) sociological study argues, the state acts a "tiger" when it deals with the powerless group of people, including the poor and the women, but it "is generally given to surrender and cowardice when confronted by powerful groups" (p. 410). Siddiqui et al. write about the "social cohesion" in Dhaka city:

> The population had increased enormously and spread out over a much larger area. Face-to-face contact had declined because of traffic jams, rising transport costs, and fear of becoming a victim of crime during travel; of course, with the spread of the mobile phone network telephonic contact had increased quite considerably. The increase in population since 1985 was massive and originated from all over the country. A very large number were from the poor and lower middle class, faceless, anonymous, powerless, and struggling to settle down in an inhospitable environment. They neither counted for much, nor had they developed roots in the city, and as such were largely isolated from the better-off parts of the population. (Siddiqui et al., 2016, p. 44)

Hossain's (2010) study on urban poverty in slum communities in Dhaka shows that slum dwellers face extreme poverty and vulnerability regarding employment, consumption, housing and access to infrastructure and social services. As the slum households live close to extreme poverty, any decline in income leaves them distressed. In such situations, slum households need to find practical strategies, including moving more members into the labour force, working more hours, reducing household expenditure, taking loans, leasing assets, selling assets or begging (Pryer, 2016). In bad times, poor households rely on "informal insurance" that "involves a mutual support network of members of a community or extended household, or among members of the same occupation" (Pryer, 2016, Kindle location, 512-513). Similarly, this study also finds that social networks provide ways in which islanders can create spaces in Dhaka, particularly in impoverished areas.

9.3 A Shantytown and Two Rickshaw Garages

Faidabad (a pseudonym) is located at one of the busiest bus stands called Abdullahpur; from that point, a good number of buses head to the northern districts (Sirajganj, Bogura, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram) and the north-east districts (Gazipur, Mymensingh, Kishoreganj, Jamalpur) of the country. A bus journey from central Dhaka to Abdullahpur bus stand crosses into modern areas consisting of wider concrete roads, flyovers, high-rise residential buildings, garment factories, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, and big shopping malls. However, some slums and low-cost houses are located around the bus stand. From the bus stop, an incomplete and dusty road on a dam leads to many small-scale shantytowns, of which Faidabad shantytown is mainly populated by

islanders (or migrants). Slums are scattered on both sides of the road and the nearby railway line. There are hundreds of auto-rickshaws and rickshaws going back and forth across the dusty road. The pedestrians on the street wear masks (like surgical masks), and some of them hold handkerchiefs on their noses to avoid inhaling dust on the road. In addition, many heavy vehicles transporting goods to and from garment factories can be seen on the road, as there are several garment factories in Faidabad.

Some roofless huts in the slum areas give the impression that their inhabitants had recently been evicted. Many of the slum dwellers looked busy moving their belongings to somewhere else. After an eviction, a government body called Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) places a signboard stating that the property belongs to it, which means it would not allow illegal settlement anymore. A group of slum dwellers sat at a tea stall near the railway line. The tea-stall owner told me that most of the slum-dwellers were from northern Bangladesh (*uttar banga*). The slums have expanded along the rail tracks. Strong smells came out from a large dumping place, which was just behind the slums. The tea seller knew many of the slum-dwellers who had migrated from the chars of Gaibandha. After the recent eviction, they moved to different slums. He added that the government evicts slum dwellers without providing any sort of rehabilitation: “We heard that the government had allocated houses for the homeless. We do not have any connection with the political leaders, and because of this we will not be given any place for living.”

Apart from the slums near the rail track, hundreds of men and women have been living in the shantytown. There is a big garment factory, named Ajmeri, just next to the shantytown. Many inhabitants of the shantytown work for the garment factory. Many people, including islanders and others, dream of settling there permanently but most of them can hardly afford to do that. There is a popular tea stall named Jalal’s Tea Stall in the shantytown. Jalal is originally from the embankment at Balashi boat terminal, Gaibandha. Several relatives of his, who were from the islands in Gaibandha, have settled in the shantytown. The reason behind the popularity of his tea stall is that many day labourers, who are originally from Gaibandha’s chars, find regional ties with Jalal, and they visit his tea stall regularly, especially in the evening when they come back from work.

Jalal's family members earn from different sources. He, his wife and their elder son jointly run their tea stall. The elder son also occasionally earns from working in construction as a day labourer. The younger son stays with his grandmother back in the home in Gaibandha, and he goes to a high school. Jalal moved to Dhaka when the 1988 flood affected his homestead. Although he has a regular income in Dhaka, he hopes to move back to the homeland and run a grocery shop there: "Life is tough here. Everything is costly. You must pay at your every step. Dhaka is only for surviving, not for happy life."

In addition to running the tea stall, Jalal's wife makes and sells traditional spicy snacks every evening next to the tea stall. When the garment factory breaks for the day and the day labourers come back home, Jalal's tea stall and his wife's snacks shop get busy. They hang around the tea stall for socialisation, where common conversation topics include: in what kind of job they have currently been involved, the amount of wages they receive, how long they would stay in Dhaka, when they would go back home, and when they would come back to Dhaka again.

Like Jalal, Ajgar, a rickshaw garage owner, migrated to Faidabad after losing his homestead in the 1988 flood. The flood washed away his thirty acres of croplands in Kalo Sona Char. Along with his parents, he moved to the embankment at Balashi boat terminal, where they had taken shelter. Now he is in his late fifties. He recalled the difficult situation during the flood:

> The flood left us starving. We had starved for three consecutive days. I was in a queue to pursue a packet of food distributed by army officers. It was hard to get a pack of food among the thousands of the flood victims. My *khala* (maternal aunt) suggested me to come to Dhaka if I wanted to survive.

Ajgar's aunt requested her husband to take Ajgar to Dhaka. Her husband (Ajgar's uncle) used to work and live in Faidabad. He took him to Dhaka and provided immediate support—food and accommodation. Before owning the rickshaw garage, Ajgar used to earn from various sources: pulling a rickshaw, *kuligiri* (carrying loads, usually at a busy place, for example, a bus stop, train station or bazaar), and from a full-time job in a garment factory. He quit the job because he could not adjust to the congested working environment in the garment factory; he had asthma.

A few years ago, his parents moved back to a char from the embankment, where they took shelter temporarily. He has visited his parents once or twice a year and wants to bring them to Dhaka, but he cannot afford accommodation for them. He attempted several times to go back to the island when a few acres of his land resurfaced from the river bed. However, his mother did not encourage him because there was no guarantee that the land would last for a long time. Finally, Ajgar decided to settle in Dhaka because moving back to the island would hamper his children's education in Dhaka. Moreover, his children and wife do not want to go back to the uncertain islands. He has made a lot of friends and well-wishers in Faidabad where he rents a place for parking rickshaws, and he owns over twenty rickshaws.

Like other rickshaw garage owners, Ajgar charges the rickshaw pullers the same rent. There are two types of rickshaw: rickshaw van which is used for transporting loads, and rickshaw which is used for transpiring passengers and loads. A van puller rents a van for BDT 100 (approximately €1) and a rickshaw puller rents a rickshaw for less than BDT 100 per day. No matter what amount they earn by driving the rickshaws, they are supposed to pay the rent every evening or night when they return the vehicles to Ajgar, the original owner.

Shukkur, another rickshaw garage owner, is also a well-known name to the rickshaw pullers. He is from Gaibandha town, and he had no history of disaster vulnerabilities. Some of his relatives used to live in Kalo Sona Char, and he has regular contact with the islanders, who come to him and rent his rickshaws. Like other garages, Shukkur's garage offers free accommodation for the rickshaw pullers. It was the last week of April in 2016. Shukkur told me that the island peasants were busy on the islands for harvesting and that was why his garage looked quiet in April; "The garage is not busy now. The char people are busy with harvesting on the chars. Flood will come just after the harvesting. Then, they would come to Dhaka, and my garage would get busy," he stated.

As islanders (or rickshaw pullers) frequently come to Dhaka, they usually do not rent a room in the slums or the shantytowns. They stay in those rickshaw garages. A large wooden plank, which is used as a common bed—made of ten to twelve wooden sleepers and bamboo—has been put along the boundary wall of Shukkur's garage. It is a semi-open and common bed. At least ten to twelve persons can sleep at a time on that large bed. A tin roof protects the rickshaw pullers from rain and sunlight, but there are no walls except the

boundary walls of the compound. Old rickshaw accessories (such as wheels, rods, bearings, tires, rims, spokes, and seats) are kept under the bed. As they live in the open, they do not keep valuable things with them. They do not keep money with them for a long time; they send their weekly savings home by mobile banking. Most of them use a cheap mobile phone to contact their family members left behind.

There is a small cement-made platform on a corner of Shukkur's garage. The platform is divided into two tiny parts: one is used as a shower place, which is not private and the other is a tin-shed latrine. A big plastic bucket and a small plastic mug were put in the bathing-place to collect the tap water. The shower-place is also used for washing rickshaw tires and tubes. It does not matter to them who sees them while they are taking a shower. They stand in a queue every morning to use the latrine, and shower every afternoon. To shorten the queue, a few men share the shower-place at a time. Wet clothes are hung on the body of the rickshaws parked in the garage to be dried.

Figure 35: Cheap travel on the roof of the bus heading to Dhaka from Gaibandha town. Photo by researcher.

The islanders' migration practices can be categorised in two: "temporary" and "permanent" migration. The former includes two forms, "frequent" and "seasonal migrant." The frequent migrants are on the move, they move to Dhaka and stay from a fortnight to a month. They frequently go back and forth to Dhaka. The seasonal migrants only migrate during flooding when they do not have job opportunities back in the home. They stay in Dhaka until the flood water recedes. The small peasants on the islands, who have borrowed money from the moneylenders for agriculture, find the seasonal rural-urban migration a way of returning credit and saving capital for the following agriculture season. Thus, rural-urban migration allows rural flood victims to avoid a debt cycle (Rayhan & Grote, 2007). A few people, who can be categorised as permanent migrants, have managed to settle in Dhaka permanently. For example, Jalal (tea stall owner) and Shukkur and Ajgar (rickshaw garage owners) firmly hope to settle in Dhaka permanently.

Figure 36: A rickshaw garage in Faidabad, Dhaka. Photo by researcher.

9.4 Social Capital and Job Opportunities

Anthropological and sociological migration studies have acknowledged that kinship and friendship networks provide social capital that plays a significant role in the migration process, be it internal or external/foreign (Brettell, 2008). The islanders have been using their social networks for obtaining jobs in the clothing factories, rickshaw garages, and other non-farming sectors such as road and building construction. Kinship ties, coming from the same place, the same experience (e.g., flood-victims), friendship, and residing in the same island, and belonging to the same occupations are factors in building social networks, which produce "social capital" for the islanders or migrants. The range of social capital depends "on the size of the network of connections," and it "exerts a multiplier effect on the capital possessed in his own right" (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 21). Many people, especially young men and women, hope to assimilate into urban communities by employing their social capital. Some young men find migration to be a way of temporarily escaping from the responsibilities required for moving household possessions back in the home during disasters.

More than a thousand people from the islands, including Onishchit, settled in Faidabad after the 1988 flood. Most of them are related to their kinship network. For example, Ajgar, e owner of a rickshaw garage, assisted several relatives in finding jobs in the construction sector in the same area. He used to share his bedroom with his island relatives until they found their places. He stated:

> Many people of my char come to me without giving me a prior notice. They arrive at my garage and tell me that they are from my char [where he used to live in the past]. They ask whether I am looking for rickshaw pullers. I let them stay in my garage and rent my rickshaws.

It was a hot summer day in May when the average temperature remained at 30° Celsius in Dhaka. In Ajgar's garage, several rickshaw pullers were taking a break after pulling rickshaws under the hot sun. They were making fun with a young man, who came to Dhaka for the first time in his life on that day. The man, wearing a *lungi* (traditional lower garment for men), full sleeve shirt and plastic sandals, came from an island where Ajgar's parents were currently living. They were teasing him in a friendly way while he was calling his wife

several times to share the type of job and accommodation Ajgar had offered him. One of the rickshaw drivers said:

> He is our new brother from Gaibandha's char. It is his first time in Dhaka. He left behind his wife and children on the char. I am sure he would not survive here with his such soft heart. After arriving here, he made many calls to his family.

The new migrant managed to get the mobile number of Ajgar from a returnee, who used to work for Ajgar's garage, and phoned Ajgar to see if he needed rickshaw pullers. After obtaining an affirmative response from Ajgar, he decided to come to Dhaka and seek his assistance. Ajgar let him to use a rickshaw and stay in the garage. Ajgar admitted:

> It is good for my business when people from my char come to me and rent my rickshaws. It is good for me to employ the rickshaw pullers from my village. Unknown people might cheat us [garage owners]. They might run away with my rickshaws.

Migration scholars have described that social networks help the migrant in a variety of ways, including sharing job information; contacting the migrant; providing food and lodging for a temporary period; introducing potential employers; providing orientation to life in the city or town, and providing moral support (Wilson, 1994, p. 271). In the case of the islanders, potential migrants prefer to go to those places where their fellow villagers already migrated to because they would find favour in finding jobs and accommodation from old migrants. The forms of networking vary according to the skill and education status of the potential migrants—for example, illiterate people contact the rickshaw garage owners, and educated people (those who at least completed primary education) contact those who work at garment factories. It does not mean that illiterate people are disqualified from garment jobs. It is just that there are certain types of employment (such as supervisor) that require having a minimum education. In whatever sectors (formal or informal) people seek jobs, social networks play a significant role in the initial stage of migration. In the context of international migration, Wilson (1994) argues that social network-based migration does not necessarily mean the migrants of one origin place have limited options on where to migrate, but rather they may have many destinations. Wilson puts it like this:

> In sum, network-mediated chain migration does not necessarily mean that prospective migrants or migrant families are given only one or a few options as to where they will

> go. One can postulate a 'foraging pattern' (Graves & Graves, 1974, p. 119) on the part of some migrants who seek work first one place, then another, where they have kin and friends. In retrospect this can appear as a step migration pattern to an ultimate destination to which a migrant recurrently returns or where he/she finally settles in with or without his/her family. (Wilson, 1994, p. 272)

Old migrants provide information about the availability of jobs to potential migrants when they go back home. They take not only economic remittances home, but also "social remittances": skills, experiences, a knowledge of urban culture and social networks in the cities (Levitt, 1988). In the context of international migration, migrants send four types of social remittance to their place of origin: norms, practices, identities and social capital (Levitt, 2001). Afsar's (1995, p. 182) study of causes, consequences, and challenges of rural-urban migration in Bangladesh argues that "the role of family and also fellow movers, friends, and acquaintances of the same district emerge as a prime factor in the migration decision-making process." Thus, old migrants have been effective actors of the social network in receiving societies (urban), keeping social ties both in sending and receiving areas.

For example, Kadir, a caretaker of a premises located near the shantytown, did not know anyone directly when he had first moved to Faidabad. In his initial stage of migration, he used to pull a rickshaw and sleep in a garage. He has become familiar to his fellow rickshaw pullers and the owners of the rickshaw garages now: "I used to come back and forth here. A lot of char people came to me and sought my help for looking for jobs here," he said. He added, "Without a good connection, it is hard to find a job here. We keep our ears and eyes open whether someone is looking for workers." He used to work in construction and had good contacts with contractors who used to hire labourers for building construction. He managed jobs for his fellow villagers on the char via the contractors. According to his experience in Dhaka, "Everyone needs to maintain good relationships with potential employers [e.g., contractors in construction sector] for finding work in Dhaka."

The social network does not always provide opportunities, but sometimes powerful actors in it discriminate against other actors. For example, a foreman is a chief actor in searching for jobs outside the islands. He contacts employers (rich farmers, landowners or

contractors in construction sectors) in Dhaka and other districts to see whether jobs are available there. After obtaining confirmation from a potential employer, a foreman contacts his fellow villagers and lets them know the type and duration of the job and the amount of wages. He is responsible for taking the workers to the employer. Usually, an employer is expected to provide a certain place for building a temporary hut for his labourers or employees. After completing the job, a foreman's responsibility is to receive payment from the employer on behalf of his fellow labourers. Later, he is supposed to distribute the wages among the labourers. He is supposed to have the capability to negotiate with the employers about reasonable salaries and to have leadership qualities in order to complete the job within the given period. It is no surprise that both foremen and contractors or employers deprive and deceive labourers. Since the workers are not supposed to contact the employers for claiming their wages, they do not know the exact amount they are being paid. Many islanders (or migrant labourers) said that they had been cheated by foremen on wages.

The following three cases are examples of the significance of the social network for creating spaces in Dhaka.

9.4.1 A Rickshaw-Puller

Although rickshaw pulling is quite an arduous job, thousands of migrants are involved in this sector. Easy entry and exit are common reasons for why illiterate and unskilled people have engaged in such a laborious job in the city of Dhaka (Begum & Sen, 2005). Moreover, the "promise of higher income," "non-availability of suitable jobs," "regular flow of income," and "peer pressure" also influence the people to take up rickshaw pulling (ibid., p. 16). However, rickshaw pulling does not provide a permanent route to escaping poverty (ibid.). Recently, the auto-rickshaw (powered by rechargeable batteries) has enticed many people, especially young men, into this occupation.

Like other rickshaw pullers, Motaleb, in his late thirties, seasonally comes back and forth to Dhaka. His parents, wife and children depend on his income. After finishing the harvesting period on Onishchit, he moves to Faidabad and stays in Ajgar's rickshaw garage seasonally. He goes back to the island when the floodwater recedes and the agricultural season starts. The gap between the harvesting period and the following agriculture season is

five to six months—the duration of the islanders' economic migration. In the meantime, he visits home once or twice in a month to make sure his household, which he left behind, is safe. His wife calls him if the flood water comes into their home or if they need to move immediately. In Dhaka, he earns nearly BDT 300 (approximately €3) a day, which is nearly twice the income back at home. Of the income, BDT 80 must go for renting the vehicle, and BDT 100 is spent per day for food. The rest of the income, less than fifty percent, is left with him. He stated:

> It is hard to pull a rickshaw every day. I take two or three days off in a week because my legs need rest. In some weeks, I work every day. I want to take rest, but I cannot afford it. My family puts hope in me that I would go back home with enough money. Other than working outside the home, we have no options but starving during the flood.

It was a mid-day of hot summer in 2016. Motaleb was taking a break for a few hours, as he had started pulling a rickshaw from the early morning. He managed to earn rent (*joma*) for the day and extra money from the morning shift. He would go out again and pull the rickshaw when the offices break for the day. Urban dwellers badly need rickshaws, normally two times a day—going to school or office and coming back home. Motaleb's rest involves drinking tea adjacent to the garage, smoking with fellow rickshaw pullers, or taking a nap for an hour. Then, he would take a shower and have lunch at a *mess* (family run diner) where he had already ordered meals and paid in advance. After the evening shift, he along with other fellow rickshaw pullers would hang around the tea stall and watch television attached to the stall. He stated:

> I cannot afford to rent a room with my little income. I need to save money for my family. Renting a family room costs half of my monthly income. We are lucky that the garage-owner does not charge us for living in his garage. Although mosquitoes disturb my sleeping, I sleep here to save my money. Besides, I live on my own here; I do not need a separate room. Those who brought their family here rent a room in the slum.

9.4.2 An Auto-Rickshaw Driver

At Shukkur's garage, I met a young man, called Karim, aged in his early thirties. Karim moved to Dhaka five years ago. Before that, he used to pull a rickshaw and van in Gaibandha town and worked in agriculture in different places, including Onishchit and the mainland in

Gaibandha. His father works as a wage labourer in the agricultural sector on Onishchit. Karim's migration to Dhaka adds something of an income certainty or hope to his family. In the process of generating such hope, kinship networks play a significant role for him. Karim's father contacted his relative Shukkur (one of the garage owners) to see whether he could manage to get a job for his son, Karim. Shukkur suggested he send Karim to his garage in Dhaka, and he would see what he could do for him. Now Karim rents a single room, adjacent to the garage. He earns from driving his auto-rickshaw there and sends money to his parents and wife left behind on the island. There is no furniture in his small room, except a small wooden table. He sleeps on the floor; it does not mean he cannot afford a wooden bed but that he has plans to save money for the future instead.

Karim thought that he had taken the "right decision"—moving to Dhaka and creating spaces for him and his family. He stated: "I came here [Dhaka] with great sorrow, leaving behind my wife and parents in the home. At first, I wanted to go back home. But, I had slowly made my decision that I needed to do something." The auto rickshaw he has been driving belonged to his *ostad* (who teaches how to drive vehicles). He used to drive it with his *ostad*, who paid him daily. His *ostad* started a new business and sold it to Karim at a lower price. Karim was not able to pay the price at one time, however. He asked the owner if he would allow him to pay through monthly instalments. He agreed to Karim's proposal. Since then, Karim has been owning and driving the *auto* or auto-rickshaw. Recently, his nephew, aged fifteen, has joined him. Karim taught his nephew how to drive the *auto* and now Karim and his nephew drive the *auto* in turn. He arranged accommodation for his nephew in his small room. He dreams of buying another *auto* and permanently settling in Dhaka. He also dreams of setting up a grocery shop for his father at the boat terminal in Gaibandha, so that he can escape from low-paid wage labour. He hopes he would be able to rent a family house and bring his wife to Dhaka with him. He thinks it would not be difficult for his wife to get a job in the clothing sector in Dhaka. Karim stated:

> At first, I need enough money to rent a family room. Many people live in the slums. I do not want to live in the slums with my family. I would rather wait to rent a good room in a mess. If this plan fails, I would sell my *auto*, go back to my home, and start a grocery shop there.

9.4.3 A Garment Worker and a Street Vendor

Aslam is a second-generation flood victim. Along with his parents, wife and children, he moved to Onishchit after losing everything on Kalo Sona Char. In 2010, he migrated to Faidabad shantytown with some fellow islanders and started working as a mason in the construction sector. He used to share a room with some garment workers in the shantytown. One day, one of his acquaintances in the shantytown asked him whether he was interested in working for his fish shop in the local bazaar. He took his offer and started working for the fish shop, which involved carrying fish from the wholesalers, cleaning the fish for customers, and cleaning the shop at closing time. He worked for him for three years.

One of his roommates asked him if his wife or sister wanted to work in a sweater factory. He took his wife from Onishchit and asked the man to arrange the job for her. His wife was offered a job in the sweater factory in Faidabad. Aslam and his wife rented a separate room for themselves. As the living cost is higher in Dhaka, compared to the island, they could not afford to take their two children with them. Aslam arranged accommodation for their children at his parents' place on the island. Aslam visits his parents and children often. They plan to bring their children with them to Dhaka and send them to a school. Aslam left his job at the fish shop and started his own business—selling vegetables on the roadsides. Both Aslam and his wife saved a little money from their income; they invested their savings in buying an old rickshaw van. Riding his van every morning, he goes to the wholesale vegetable bazaar to purchase seasonal vegetables and sells them at the roadsides. Every so often, Aslam moves around the nearby residential areas to sell vegetables. Aslam stated, "Going back to the home on the char is too risky. The river might return our land, but it will erode again—that is the river's *dharma* (characteristic)." He recalled that his father could not lead a better life due to riverbank erosion. He cannot remember how many times his parents had to disassemble their house to move it to other chars:

> We went through a *jajabar jibon* [nomad life] on the chars. I do not want my children to have the same pain we have experienced on the chars. That is why we are working hard in Dhaka so that our children can settle here.

9.5 A Diner in the Shantytown

Having meals in the roadside restaurants is expensive for the day labourers, requiring BDT 100 for three meals a day. The other option is having meals in diners that charge less than BDT 100 for three meals a day. Some families run these diners in their living room, which are also called *mess*. The term "mess" has two different meanings: a shared room and a diner in someone's living room. In addition, a mess consists of several one-bedroom rooms and a common bathroom and a kitchen. Some families use their bedroom as a diner. The meals depend on the cook's decision. Usually, people with lower incomes have food in such diners. There are two systems of paying in the diners: one can pay after eating, and one can pay for three meals a day in advance. The latter is relatively cheaper than the former. The operators of the diners ask the customers to pay in advance because they need the money for buying rice, lentils, vegetables, fish or meat.

For example, Momen and his wife Marjina run a diner in Faidabad shantytown. The couple moved there a few years ago. The husband works as a day labourer in construction, and his wife used to work at a garment factory. She left the job after giving birth to a child and started the diner. She is responsible for running the diner and her husband assists her with the shopping for the daily food items. Most customers have three meals a day. She cooks for at least ten people per day. The living-cum-dining room was nearly twelve feet long and twelve feet wide. There were two small tables in the room. A small television was kept on a table, with some big pots containing boiled rice and cooked curry on the other table. There was also a small refrigerator full of bottles of water. There was no dining table in the room; a plastic sheet was placed on their bed on which the customers sat in crossed-legged position to eat. A big bowl of boiled rice, curry, lentils, extra salt, green chillies and bottles of water were kept in front of the customers. The customers were given a certain amount of curry and an unlimited amount of boiled rice and watery lentil soup.

Marjina described that she frequently faced an awkward situation when some customers came to eat without informing and paying in advance. In such cases, she had to run to cook for them. She said: "What can I do in such situation? They come here with a hungry stomach, can I refuse them?" She added, "Cooking for the rickshaw-pullers does not provide benefit since the rickshaw-pullers eat more rice than others." Indeed, rickshaw-

pulling is an exhausting manual job that requires tremendous energy. Such diners are popular to rickshaw-pullers for having cheaper food compared to the roadside restaurants.

Figure 37: The rickshaw-pullers in a rickshaw garage. Photo by researcher.

9.6 Migrant Labour as "Other"

Dhaka, like other megacities in the world, attracts cheap labourers mainly for the informal sectors, which hire workers through flexible contracts and pay low wages. In the context of international migration, Kwong (1998) shows that capitalist industries in the United States create a demand for cheap labour, which illegals can provide. The Chinese "snakeheads" (who smuggle people) supplied many illegal Chinese immigrants for the capitalist industries at below-minimum-wage jobs (ibid). However, many undocumented immigrants exercise their agency to "navigate the terrain of work and society" in the United States, which is a strategy to "mediate constraints and enhance their well-being" (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2010, p. 295). Rural-urban migrants face constraints and social and economic marginalisation too.

Figure 38: A rickshaw-puller in Dhaka. Photo by researcher.

Rural islanders find difficulties when they exert themselves to establish a sense of belonging in the city. Sometimes, the local people in Dhaka denigrate the migrants by labelling them as "day labourers," "people of the flood-prone areas," and "*mafiz*." The term "*mafiz*" has become a widely used term that refers to poor labour migrants from the northern parts of Bangladesh, including Rangpur and Gaibandha, those who usually travel to Dhaka and their places of origin on the roof of a bus at a cheaper fare.

There is a story behind such labelling.[12] There was a man called Mafiz who used to work as a broker at a bus stand in Rangpur. He used to contact and organise passengers who travelled from Rangpur to Dhaka but did not know which buses were heading to Dhaka. One day, he saw many passengers at the bus stand who were looking for a Dhaka-bound bus. He asked them why such a large number of people had wanted to go to Dhaka. They replied that floods and riverbank erosion had left them landless and homeless, and therefore they wanted to migrate to Dhaka for better livelihood opportunities. They also asked Mafiz if he could arrange a cheaper fare for them. He requested some bus drivers to allow them to get on the

[12] http://my-pirgachha.blogspot.ie/2015/10/blog-post_48.html (Accessed on July 28, 2017).

roof of the buses at half fare, BDT 50. They all agreed. Since then, traveling to Dhaka on the bus roof became a cheaper way. Mafiz, the middleman, became familiar to the bus conductors and drivers, as he was good at contacting and organising passengers who wanted to travel on the bus roof. The bus drivers and their helpers dubbed the migrants "the people of Mafiz," and now just "*mafiz*"—that indicates the poor who cannot afford a seat on a bus. In addition, the slang, *mafiz,* is used for referring to "poor," "unsophisticated" or "migrant day labourers" in Dhaka. The islanders do not know exactly the history of *mafiz*; however, they are aware of why they are called *mafiz;* "He is a *mafiz*" means he is impoverished, illiterate, unsophisticated, fool or traveller on a bus roof.

The hope of staying in Dhaka depends on the availability of jobs and the capability of creating spaces for family members there. Many migrant families have been living in shantytowns, hoping to settle in Dhaka permanently. Their low income does not satisfy their hopes, however. Despite this, the second generation of the households in the shantytowns, who came to Dhaka with their parents at an early age and who became habituated to urban lifestyle, do not want to go back to the island. For example, Jalal, a tea shopkeeper, wanted to go back to the island villages and produce crops in his land, but his two sons wanted to build their careers in Dhaka.

The people involved in manual jobs are culturally less valued, which is revealed in everyday public conversations. Urban locals treat them as *chotolok* (lower class; uncultured), *geo* (rural inhabitants), and *din-majur* (wage labourer) as if those professions were fixed only for the poor migrants. In fact, the phrase *rickshaw-wala* (rickshaw-driver) is widely used as slang both in rural and urban areas to indicate "uncultured people." In short, they are labelled as the lowest socio-economic class in the class hierarchy. Ajgar (one of the owners of the rickshaw garages) stated that no government bodies have yet to come to them to know about their living conditions. He stated:

> The local politicians only come to see us at the time of political elections. Here, we are at least 600 listed voters who are from Rangpur and Gaibandha. They come to us just before the elections and ask for our votes.

Kader and Arifa, a married couple, migrated to Dhaka a decade ago but they very often visit their parents who have been living on Onishchit. Unlike the other inhabitants of the

shantytown, this couple has been living in a bigger tin-shed house arranged by their employer. The employer bought the property and recruited Kader to take care of his land. Before working as a caretaker, Kader used to pull a rickshaw, and his wife used to work as a housemaid. Arifa stated that she got married when she was only nine. She had been staying in Dhaka for more than ten years. Arifa said:

> I do not want to go back to the char. It is true that life is difficult here. Everything is costly. But, at least we do not have to move from one char to another during the flooding. Sufferings are everywhere. Unlike the char, at least we have a regular income here [Dhaka].

Kader added:

> Living in Dhaka has helped me avoid the repeated task of disassembling my house and moving it somewhere else. I had moved my house at least twenty times. I wanted to go back to the char, but when I visualise the picture of the flood and the riverbank erosion, I convince myself to stay in Dhaka. But, staying here is uncertain.

The caretaking job provided them with free accommodation. Apart from Kader's income, his two teenage daughters work in the same garment factory. The family grows vegetables at the open courtyard in the property they look after. Kader stated that day labourers like him have come to Dhaka and worked hard but own nothing. He said, "We are *vindeshi* [outsiders] here. We are just labourers. The local people do not count us. We are hired only for working for others. But, on the char, at least we can say that we have land." He poetically described their status of marginalization in Dhaka:

"*kamla nij grame thakur*

aar vinno grame kukur

[day laborers are priest (*thakur*) in their own village

but dog (*kukur*) in different village]

He used the analogies of "priest" and "dog" because priests hold important social status in every society, whether in rural or mainland contexts. On the other hand, animals, particularly street dogs, are mistreated in Bangladesh.

9.7 Migration and Gender

Island women, who have migrated to the city, compare their lives on the island village and the city. They used to take care of cattle, children, and other belongings during flooding when the male members had migrated to the city for earnings. They used to wait for their husbands' phone calls and remittances. Many of these women migrated with their husbands or parents and engaged themselves in employment. Now, they look forward to settling in the city. Unlike some men migrants, women do not want to go back to the island village. Research on female workers in the garment factories (Amin et al., 1997) and NGOs (Haque, 1998) shows that earning opportunities of women has provided access to independence, mobility, information and new status in family and society, negotiating male-dominated households and the social structure in order to "empower" themselves. The women garment workers are the largest source of "cheapest labour" in the clothing industry in Bangladesh. Although they are unhappy with the low wages and the unsafe working environment in the city, many women do not wish to return to rural areas, where they face greater gender discrimination.

In the city of Dhaka, millions of women garment workers with their tiffin boxes walk in groups in the early morning toward their work place, garment factories. Most of them have moved to Dhaka from rural areas. These women have networks with their fellow labourers, as many of them share the same neighbourhoods. Karim (2014, pp. 153-154), based on her study on women's empowerment in the sectors of microfinance and the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh, puts it this way: "Despite low wages and the sweatshop-like working conditions, women in the ready-made garment industry have gained greater autonomy and self-awareness compared with their rural counterparts who are engaged in microfinance activities." Their ability to earn small wage gave them sort of "practical freedom" (p. 165). In addition, they are aware that they are "labour actors" in the industry and they are entitled to certain rights (ibid). Other positive changes have appeared in these working women's lives such as them choosing their own partners, and their families having adopted new gender roles (ibid). Karim concludes, "[G]arment industry women are comparatively more empowered than their rural counterparts, they still remain subject to a work environment that fails to offer them a 'life with dignity'" (Karim, 2014, p. 165).

In general, women (and young men) find the city of Dhaka to be a better place compared to the island villages, and they do not want to go back to the sending area. One of the main reasons is that they exercise the freedom to be actively involved in employment, such as working as garment workers, selling snacks at roadsides or being housemaids in the city. Some temporary men migrants hope to return home and start a new business or buy more agricultural land, but the women are reluctant to go back home. In a comparative study of returning migrants, Gmelch and Gmelch (1995) find a significant gender difference in the satisfaction and readjustment of returning migrants to the three societies: Barbados, Ireland, and Newfoundland. According to the study, women were less satisfied than men to be "home," and they had inadequate employment opportunities and a range of social factors that constrained readjustments in their places of origin.

The extreme influence of patriarchal society in the context of rural Bangladesh creates ways in which women experience hurdles in going out to look for jobs. In contrast, living and working in the city of Dhaka is relatively free from male-controlled surveillance. For example, as noted above, Kader's two daughters have been working in the same garment factory and have been able to support their parents. Their mother, Arifa, was afraid of going back to the island community because her daughters would lose their jobs and freedom of mobility. In addition, they would face social pressure to get married as soon as possible, whereas, in the city, such social structures have little influence on their lives. Therefore, they have agency to be involved in employment and make choices about their lives. Compared to the rural islands, they can exercise authority over their own decisions to a certain extent. Of course, working in the garment factory on a minimum wage does not provide the women workers immense empowerment. Nonetheless, it is considered an initial step towards controlling one's life and making choices.

9.8 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to show how the islanders create space in the city of Dhaka, and how they gain access to social capital that facilitates their mobility. Like other capital cities in the world, the city of Dhaka is an attractive place for obtaining living and livelihood opportunities in Bangladesh. It is one of the fastest growing megacities in the world.

Thousands of rural people, most of them impoverished, migrate to the city frequently and seasonally. They end up living in the shantytowns, slums, mess (like slums), and pavements. Many of them are unskilled and illiterate, and they depend on low paid menial jobs such as rickshaw-pulling and selling labour in the construction sector. Nowadays, many people, mostly women, have migrated to the city to work in garment factories. Like the other rural poor, both men and women from Onishchit Island move into the city. A large number of the islanders frequently and seasonally migrate to Faidabad, and they live in the shantytowns and the rickshaw garages with limited access to basic civic amenities.

Despite the menial employment and low wages and accommodation in penurious conditions, the islanders find the city to be a temporary way out from unemployment situations back home. Getting jobs in the informal sector predominantly depends on their access to social networks, consisting of old migrants, acquaintances, and people from the same place of origin. Rural-urban migration is an ongoing process of creating their own space in the city, where the migrants hope that they would not face unemployment and displacement any longer. Social capital provides ways in which they come to know about information regarding employment opportunities, and it gives temporary support (food, lodging, and moral support) in the initial stages of migration. The process of creating space in the city is not uncomplicated; mainstream society in the city has labelled the migrant workers from northern Bangladesh as "other." They are called "*chotolok*," (poor, illiterate, or people in the menial jobs), "day labourer," and "*mafiz*." The city provides the women migrant with a somewhat greater agency compared to the rural islands. They can involve themselves in the garment industry to earn, and they can exercise freedom in going out and choosing their partners. They suspect that they would lose such agency if they went back to the island village.

While living in urban areas, they connect themselves with the islands by going back and forth, sending remittances, and contacting family members over mobile phone calls. In the same year, the same individual may work as a peasant in his island village and as a migrant labourer (rickshaw-puller or garment worker) in Dhaka, and, therefore, his or her livelihood practices cannot be mapped to a single place. As Gupta and Ferguson (2012) argue, the spatially localized culture and community, which was offered by earlier

anthropologists through their ethnography, needs to be reconsidered because the differences between "'here' and 'there,' center and periphery, colony and metropole, become blurred" due to the local-global connections, through capitalism, migration, and mass media (ibid. 377). This study finds that hazards trigger the islanders' mobility, and the trajectory of their mobility connects various island villages, embankments, neighbouring districts, and the capital city. Therefore, their ideas of "homes" and "community" are constantly on the move.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

My aim in this research has been to illustrate char dwellers' disaster vulnerability and the everyday agency they practise for reducing such vulnerability. Keeping in mind that the physical agents—the river and floods—weaken char dwellers' agency, this study has begun by examining the structures that have been historically responsible for creating the conditions under which people, specifically poor and landless peasants, labour in temporary island villages. However, this is not the end of the story, as there is much more to be said about the everyday agency that underlies their survival in the uncertain char landscape. Understanding the complex agency of char dwellers has required a multi-sited ethnographic study, where I have observed their lives and livelihoods in three places. The first two chapters have described the parameters of this study and discussed many of the literatures and debates that have informed this work. Chapter 3 has described the local understandings about environmental changes and Chapter 4 delineates the socioeconomic setting of the char lands.

The idea of agency does not merely focus on actors' "diverse motives" and "diverse intentions" (Ortner, 1989, p. 193). "A theory of practice is a theory of history" (ibid.).The history of agrarian structures in rural Bangladesh is necessarily an account of how human-environment relations shape and are shaped by economic, political, and social structures. I have discussed the historical processes informing agrarian structures in chapter 5.

Bangladesh as a low-lying river delta region is prone to annual floods and other climate driven hazards. The tension between the rivers and land is a defining feature of the country (Schendel, 2009). The instability and uncertainty of the river islands makes Onishchit char multilocal for its various inhabitants, as discussed in chapter 6. The very same flood events have different meanings and different consequences for different Onishchit inhabitants.

Chapters 7 and 8 have mainly focused on the multiple livelihood practices of the char dwellers. The livelihood strategies traditionally are land-based. Recently, the CLP has

implemented income-generating projects including livestock businesses. Chapter 8 has shown that char people do not accept the NGOs' practices and ideas passively and uncritically. Rural-urban migration adds a further dimension to their livelihood strategies, which has been discussed in chapter 9. In addition to looking for livelihood options, some of the migrants have tried to settle in the city of Dhaka in order to escape the chars.

This study considers why the inhabitants of Onishchit Island continue to live in this hazardous place while knowing that their homestead and livelihoods are recurrently exposed to disasters. Their answers vary according to their socio-economic positions, of course, but also according to their accumulated previous experiences. In essence, disasters produce both "uncertainty" and "hope" in their lives. Hazards in such areas are likely to lead to more adversities and disasters, which can be called *certain uncertainty*. At the same time, even the disasters can deposit fertile sediment for growing crops, and sometimes return previously lost lands. All of this can be called *uncertain certainty* -- the hope that they might be able to grow crops, raise cattle, and settle there again. Thus it remains a conundrum for them—should they live in these hazardous islands, or just leave them permanently? Many of the islanders, particularly the landless and small peasants, cannot afford to settle on the mainland. As we have seen in the previous chapter, migration to Dhaka also offers no real escape from this conundrum. Below, the two interconnected ideas—*certain uncertainty* and *uncertain certainty*—are clarified in the context of the uncertain island.

Human beings' "capabilities of actions and perceptions," which are called "skills" by Ingold, are the product of biophysical and sociocultural domains (Ingold, 2000, p. 5). In other words, people have skills to connect themselves with living and non-living components in their surroundings, and environmental elements have the capacity to shape humans' ecological perceptions and actions (ibid.). Both domains—biophysical and sociocultural—are inextricably interconnected (Ingold, 2000; McLean, 2011). McLean (2011; 2015) emphasizes the capacities of matter (e.g., land), which interacts with human affairs. Fertile silt, as an abiotic element of the environment and as a physical agent in the islands, influences the islanders' mobility, emplacement, and agriculture. It drives their uncertainty, but also gives them hope. Some islanders take calculated risks—they stay there and rent agricultural

plots temporarily for corn production, since sediment in the islands can lead to large crop yields.

10.1 Certain Uncertainty

Onishchit Char, like other chars in the rivers of Bangladesh, is geographically isolated in terms of communication. As the island is in the middle of the Brahmaputra River, it and its inhabitants have been recurrently exposed to natural disasters: river floods and riverbank erosion are extreme events that the islanders expect to experience annually. The sustainability of such islands varies according to the intensity of disasters, which can destroy the homes and land-based livelihoods (corn cultivation and cattle raising) of the islanders. These natural disasters trigger and exacerbate socio-economic causes of vulnerabilities. In other words, peoples' vulnerability varies according to their access to natural resources (land) and social resources (social capital). The islanders observe that their "disaster calendar" (predictions about the flood season and its duration) does not work anymore, which may be indicative of global climate change. These realities — of the natural and of the social environment—leave islanders in vulnerable situations, which are seen as certain and cyclic.

Disasters generate not only displacement and precarious livelihoods, but also land-disputes between the island households. Powerful individuals and households and the people with strong connections to dominant groups assert control by occupying re-surfaced land, be it owned by the state or by absentee landlords. They use and control those lands by bribing the people in charge of surveying and verifying land documents -- practices of corruption are endemic in the pursuit of ownership of char lands. As Gupta (2006, p. 212) observes, based on his ethnographic work in Alipur village in North India, corruption is not "a dysfunctional aspect of state organizations," but rather "a mechanism through which 'the state' itself is discursively constituted." He argues that the discourse of corruption is lived, not only in geographical places (national, regional, and local), but also in public cultures and everyday practices of various actors, including villagers and lower levels of bureaucracy. People capitalise on power structures to gain benefits, and thus the actors actively construct and reproduce these structures. Corruption is similarly present in everyday practices in the char lands, in land occupation but also in illegal sand extraction, which combines with short-

sighted mono-cropping to accelerate the process of river erosion and thus decreases the sustainability of the islands.

10.2 Uncertain Certainty

Under these uncertain conditions, the islanders pursue livelihood strategies in search of certain outcomes, by cultivating corn, raising cattle, and through temporary labour migration. Disasters divide a year into two seasons: a) flooding and riverbank erosion (uncertain period); and b) the post-flood agriculture (certain period). In the certain period, they try to earn as much as possible by growing crops, especially corn, and raising livestock, especially cows and bulls. The island peasants are aware that traditional moneylenders, wealthy landlords, and intermediary actors (traders and land-brokers) take advantage of the critical conditions caused by disasters. They strategically interact with landlords, moneylenders, and crop traders to rent land, receive loans, and trade crops, respectively.

In the uncertain period, they, especially young male members, migrate to neighbouring districts and different cities (such as Dhaka) for economic opportunities. In the process of migration and seeking employment, social capital plays an important role. Recently, raising cattle has become a form of saving on the island, which is used for recovering disaster losses.

Although the islands are exposed to hazards, these places appear as multilocal, meaning the wealthy farmers seasonally live, raise cattle and cultivate corn there; some mainlanders lease agricultural plots on the islands; some, who had moved to the mainland, want to come back to the islands if they remain intact for longer periods; while landless families just hope to escape from these hazardous islands.

The non-state actors (development organisations) have implemented livelihood development programmes, in which the local people have actively participated to bring about a change in their socio-economic conditions. They receive support from the development organisations, but also criticise and evaluate the implementation process of the programmes. Their participation in development projects includes arranging community meetings in their neighbourhoods and working as both volunteers and field level employers. In this way, the development discourses are lived and exercised through everyday practices. They have their suspicions about whether development organisations spend the allocated funds at the local

level. To understand the local people's understanding of development discourses, it is important to "consider their perspectives as central to their respective worldview rather than 'peripheral' to those of the developers" (Crewe & Axelby, 2013, p. 17). Development discourses are not merely "owned and controlled" by the actors (e.g., experts and agencies) of the global North; anthropologists (e.g., Pigg, 1992) have documented "how actors in the global South shape new understandings as well" (ibid., p. 18). As Crewe and Axelby (2013, p. 19) put it: "The reality is of a multiplicity of voices, some louder than others, but all worthy of attention."

The islanders exercise their agency in making a living in multiple ways, including growing crops, raising cattle, participating in social and economic development projects, and moving to different places in search of a "better" place and living. They practise their agency without losing sight of the consequences of the extreme events and social constraints they have been living through over the generations. In reviewing anthropological perspectives on disaster vulnerability, Faas concludes that ethnographic approaches can "uncover the historical production of disaster—particular constellations of environmental, social, economic, discursive, and political processes—without rendering people as passive victims, but active agents capable of maneuver" (Faas, 2016, p. 24).

10.3 Vulnerability and Agency

The rural economy of Bangladesh, as developed during the British colonial period (1757-1947) and later the Pakistan period (1947-1971), has shaped unequal land distribution between smallholders and landlords. The postcolonial state has taken some steps in land distribution policy, but those steps have done little about the state of landlessness and the state of vulnerability to hazards and disasters in some areas—for example, the river islands.

Relocating to the remote lowland provides ways in which the inhabitants learn how not to be governed by the apparatuses of the modern state (Scott, 2009). In his recent work, *Against the Grain*, Scott (2017) re-examines state power, arguing that sedentary livelihoods (e.g., producing grains in a certain area) have made people consent to state power. In contrast, those who move frequently (e.g., hunter-gatherers) were free from the governance of state institutions. Although char dwellers are forced to move frequently, chars cannot be taken as

an example of "borderless" or "stateless" ecology. The ethnographic findings of this study suggest that the inhabitants of Onishchit know how the state runs its local government bodies; how the state excludes them (char dwellers) from state-run developments; how the state practises corruption (e.g., land related corruption); and how the state can twist policies relating to land redistribution. In addition, they have an expectation of "good governance" to be provided by the state in land redistribution, infrastructure development, and social security.

This study has argued that the rural economy, which is predominantly based in agriculture, renders poor peasants powerless and makes landlords and other landed middle class (traders and moneylenders) powerful. In addition to the structured disparity, climate change is exacerbating the precariousness of livelihoods on the islands. In such structural conditions—produced by economic structures and environmental changes—the islanders have limited agency to recover from disaster losses. The choices—corn cultivation, cattle raising, and in-migration—they make and/or have to make, of course, are not the "best," but at the same time, they are not the "worst." The status quo is that they, particularly the landless and poor households, hardly have the "best" choices to make. They make some practical choices to survive. For the poor households, the choices they make are narrow, and to a certain extent, the choices are humiliating, whereas the rich households calculate hazard risks and stay on the islands for raising cattle and cultivating corn. Living with precariousness, regardless of whether people are poor or rich, they still live in hope of seeing new land.

This study argues that portraying the islanders as simply "vulnerable" disregards the differences among them and their everyday adaptive capacities in the context of the hazardous islands. As such, representing them as just "vulnerable" can be considered as a "political act" (Hilhorst & Bankoff, 2004, p. 7). Similarly, Escobar (1995) argues that the ideas of "poverty" and the so-called "Third World" were created through "development" discourses and practices after the Second World War.

Finally, although this study shows that disasters create precarious livelihoods and habitation for the islanders, it does not mean that the catastrophes are solely responsible for their vulnerability, which was already created by the socio-economic structure. This study observes that the inhabitants of the island villages are not just suffering subjects, victims,

vulnerable, and passive aid receivers. Instead, they practise their agency, albeit *limited*, to utilise their limited resources (land, livestock, and social capital) in order to survive in such a fragile but fertile environment.

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