



The Indian Perimeter

GEOGRAPHY

The Water of Life

The nation of Bangladesh sits just a few feet above sea level on one of the world's greatest river deltas. The flooding of these rivers and violent cyclones from the Bay of Bengal have resulted in some of the greatest natural disasters on Earth in recent decades. Here, however, the author focuses on the benefits that water provides for the people of Bangladesh.

Water completely defines Bangladesh. Every year floods sweep across much of the land. Catastrophic tropical cyclones bring storm surges as well as murderous winds. Yet the power of the water to destroy is almost equally matched by its power to create.

I began to understand this on a *char*, a sort of pancake of land, in the middle of the Jamuna River. Chars change shape continually as the rivers move silt—two billion tons a year—into the Bay of Bengal. During flood season most chars rise only a foot or so above the water. Almost always they disappear within a decade.

Yet many people have no choice but to live on these temporary islands: Bangladesh is among the most densely populated countries in the world, with 2,000 people per square mile (a density comparable to putting half the population of the United States into the state of Wisconsin). . . . Many people told me that despite the risk, they prefer chars to the squalid [dirty and wretched], crowded city slums.

Manushmara char was only 2,000 feet long and 70 feet wide, yet 475 families lived there. . . . On another char, near the confluence [junction] of five rivers, a man named Abdul Aziz took me to the water's edge. Great cracks ran from the bank back toward a small settlement. Chunks of land crumbled into the water. . . . Before a char is engulfed [swallowed up by the river], its residents must look for another. . . .

Land is the real hunger in Bangladesh. Eighty percent of Bangladesh's population is rural. Sixty percent is landless. Just 10 percent of rural households possess more than 50 percent of the arable [farmable] land. . . .

Many sections of land are like saucers, with riverbanks forming their rims. Silt raises the riverbeds, not only creating chars but also causing the rivers to spill over their banks, sometimes carving out a new course. The resulting floodplains make Bangladesh one of the most fertile nations in the world. Everywhere among the . . . rivers are bountiful fields. Bangladeshis call their land *sonar Bangla*, or golden Bengal, for the gold of ripening paddies.

In many places peasant farmers grow three rice crops a year, thanks to a combination of hard work, river-brought fertility, and high-yield rice introduced by international aid agencies. . . . When the rivers swell with monsoon rains and snowmelt from the mountains of India and Nepal,

much of the land goes underwater. Villagers wait for the water to subside [fall back], then plant again. . . .

The rivers form a vast transportation network for the entire country. Huge rafts float bamboo and jute. Other watercraft carry rice, wheat, wood for fuel, coal for waterside brickmaking kilns (ovens). And, of course, people travel in boats of all kinds. The waterways offer better connections than Bangladesh's limited road system. And so I was traveling . . . up the Meghna River to Chhatak just below India. . . . Roads and rice fields were underwater. Here and there clusters of small huts huddled on tiny patches of higher ground. Every so often a tree or a telephone pole jutted out of the water.

The monsoon rains had come, and even the river . . . was underwater. It had . . . become a freshwater sea as far as you could see. . . . All day I had been traveling across flooded rice fields, and in my mind that added up to catastrophe, disaster. But to Rajendra [a local fisherman] the flood meant good things: the chance to use his boat to visit neighboring villages, rather than walking all day; an abundance of fish; and sediment left behind that makes the land bountiful [highly productive] and gives him the chance to grow his own rice. "Such water," he said, "what the Lord has given us."

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What is a *char*? What function do they serve for landless Bangladeshis?

2. What causes the rivers of Bangladesh to flood? How does flooding benefit farmers and shape their lives? In what other ways do the rivers benefit Bangladeshis?

Activity

Water also can bring tragedy to Bangladesh. Research library and other resources to find and photocopy headlines and photographs from magazines and newspapers. Then make a collage that illustrates the results of cyclones and other floods in Bangladesh.