

# Dying Buriganga cries out for help

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Exactly seven years ago a man-made disaster struck the villages around Rayer Bazar across the vast low-lying land along the river Buriganga. The Water Development Board and the Dhaka WASA diverted 2,000 cubic meters of daily tannery wastes into fresh areas in the upstream of the river Buriganga. The reason was that of visionless management of the environment at a phenomenal cost from the public exchequer. For nearly a hundred years the toxic tannery waste had found its way into the river Buriganga through a natural canal at Lalbagh in the downstream. This obviously polluted a vast area including the river. But things went wrong at the land management level. On the canal that carried the bulk of the waste from Hazaribagh tanneries, a money-hungry desperado started building a new tannery unit. To the by-standing officials of the WDB and DWASA's sewerage experts the unit meant a disaster. Yet they remained mysteriously quiet. There was no word about what would happen to the deadly wastes.

The WDB quickly came up with a solution. They built a sluice gate on the embankment at Rayer Bazar and soon the vast low-lying areas had nothing to offer. Day and night thousands of cubic meters of toxic wastes started flowing into fresh areas that was naturally gifted with a rich biodiversity. Fishes disappeared and the land during lean period stopped producing crops. Thousands of villagers in Basila,

Waispur, Looterchar, Jhaochar and Kholamora suddenly found themselves cut off from the river on which they had depended for generations. The area that only the other day produced enough fish for the western part of the city, had suddenly nothing left. The tales of egg-laden prawns, puthis, Baillya, bain, boal, shoul, gozar, ruhi and kali baus are today a matter of nostalgia among the villagers. The damage had been done.

Tannery onslaught on the Buriganga is only a tiny part of a sad story about a river that had been serving millions for hundreds of years. According to an estimate done by environmentalists, as each day passes the river Buriganga receives another 10,000 cubic meters of wastes from thousands of informal and formal industries along its banks. The city with an official population of ten million can provide proper sewerage management for only two million people. The remaining untreated sewage, generated by eight million inhabitants flows into the river Buriganga directly.

From Kholamora up to Fatulla, the river Buriganga accommodates one of the busiest river ports in the world. At Sadarghat launch terminal, on an average every day 30,000 passengers arrive from different destinations and another 30,000 depart. The 200 passenger vessels using the port, in addition to thousands of cargo vessels, share a common offence. In the absence of any guideline and awareness among transport workers, these vessels willfully spill oil into the river. The river water near Sadarghat bears the testimony of the spill with

patches of oil floating on the surface amid a lifeless river.

In January 2002, when the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) officials talked about dredging the river Buriganga little did they know what they were confronted with. According to BIWTA experts, a mechanised dredger would not be able to operate on the stretch between the two bridges of Babu Bazar and Gandaria. For up to ten feet on the bed of the river, millions of tons of polythene bags, discarded coconut shells and other solid wastes have been deposited amid a sludge that could not be removed mechanically.

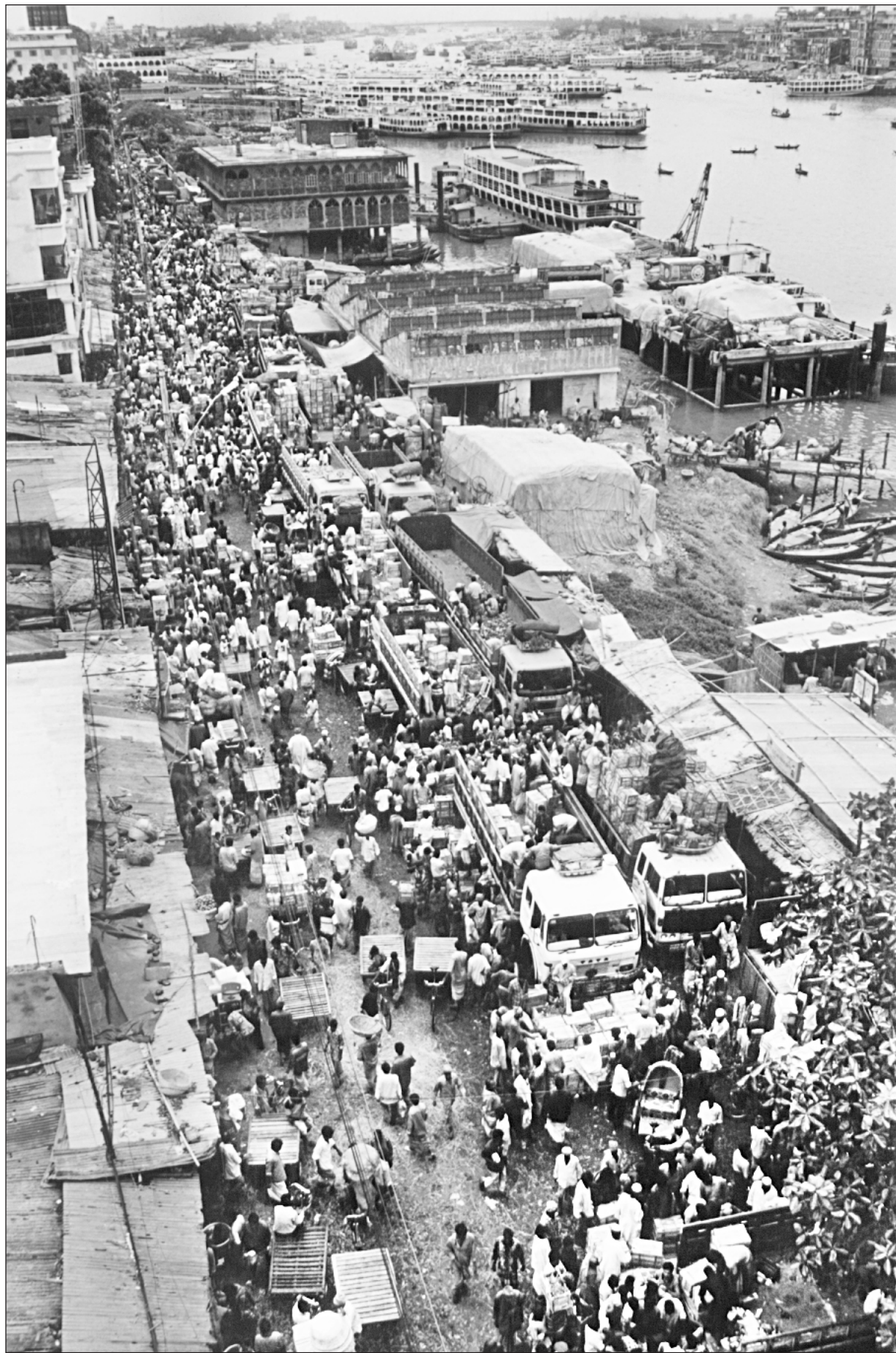
So far successive governments have shown more interest in removing some of the 1,300 listed encroachments from the river Buriganga. BIWTA officials, who now claim the custody of the 17-kilometer stretch of the river, seem quite eager to recover the river shores from illegal encroachments. But none is talking about containing the massive pollution on the river. Earlier this year the authorities were directed by the Prime Minister to relocate the tannery units elsewhere with common waste treatment plants. The relocation remains a far cry, as the influential tannery owners have put forward conditions for relocations that are too extravagant for an apparently cash-constrained state.

Meanwhile, the lifeline of the city continues to head towards suffocation.



Buriganga encroachment at this scale is very common near Pagla.

## Legal cover to plunder Buriganga



Crowded street near one of the busiest river ports in the world.

The head of the task force, Minister for Shipping Akbar Hussain was told by the officials that it would be almost impossible to evict all the encroachers as most of them held "valid documents". The strategy adopted on the day remained confidential, but all eyes were cast on the office of the district deputy commissioner that has largely been held responsible for plundering public land, including the shores, off-shores and the channel of the river Buriganga.

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Few months ago when the recently formed task force to save the river Buriganga went on a river cruise to assess the extent of the problem, the accompanying officials looked worried about a certain aspect of land management. The head of the task force, Minister for Shipping Akbar Hussain was told by the officials that it would be almost impossible to evict all the encroachers from the river Buriganga because most of them held "valid documents" of lease or ownership. The strategy adopted on the day by the group of policy makers remained confidential, but all eyes were cast on the office of the district deputy commissioner that has largely been held responsible for plundering public land, including the shores, off-shores and the channel of the river Buriganga.

All along the river Buriganga from Shoilamachi up to Fatullah and beyond, the shores and off-shores and often the channel, have been registered under the names of individuals. At places, the so called owners have paid land taxes (Khajna) for years and to make things more complicated for those wanting to free the river Buriganga of encroachments, the land has been sold and resold to innocent middle class population of the city.

Syed Jahangir, a businessman in the city, bought such a chunk of plot along the river Buriganga about five years ago along with 'friends' in his community.

Following the task force decision to identify and demarcate the river, a group of officials backed by a magistrate arrived at the site near Looterchar recently. The official delegation soon confronted the angry landowners with 'proper documents' of ownership.

At one stage the delegation had to withdraw without being able to do any work.

Jahangir, who has also signed a petition to the government along with hundreds of other landowners, told The Daily Star that if the government compensated him and his friends he would give up the land for the sake of saving the river Buriganga.

According to BIWTA officials, in addition to the landowners, who have

not built any structures, there are still 600 listed structures visibly encroaching on the river Buriganga.

"Every body knows about the Sena Kalyan Sangstha's massive encroachment because they filled up the river to build a berthing site," said Jahangir adding that hundreds of landowners like him, did not know what to do with their plots in the river or on the shores and off-shores.

While Jahangir innocently became a victim of the floppy land management system of the country, not many are so innocent. There are at least a dozen mosques and madrasas encroaching on the river Buriganga. Banking on people's fear and respect for religion, a section of local religious leaders

At Nawabagh across Kamrangirchar, a local godfather has changed the course of the river by earth-filling a large chunk "with valid documents". The encroachment near Kholamora is so distinct and large that on the other side of the river the diverted water is causing erosion and claiming fresh land every day.

Nowadays earth-filling the river has become so easy with the arrival of locally made mini-dredgers and barges that carry the earth. A large chunk of the river could be filled up within matter of days before the authorities are able to realise what is happening.

The sub-channel of the river Buriganga at Kamrangirchar is fast



along Kamrangirchar and elsewhere occupied the river and built the structures in the presence of police and other officials. Although Akbar Hussain has reiterated his conviction about removing all illegal structures, he has openly expressed his own fear about these

structures. In a conversation with The Daily Star recently the minister said that he did not want to stir religious sentiment.

"I want to involve these religious leaders to grow awareness among the people so that they themselves remove the structures from the channel of the river," Minister for Shipping said.

vanishing as the illegal encroachers have embarked on filling it up in an alarming rate. Local people said that the entire channel has been sold out to influential people.

BIWTA officials recently said that they would soon launch an eviction drive to remove some of the remaining 600 encroachers from the river. Nobody at the policy level seems to know exactly how to solve the deep-rooted problem involving the river Buriganga. For the time being the authorities are haphazardly scouring the surface of puzzle that is leading to a near impasse. Meanwhile many landowners on the river Buriganga are waiting for the right moment to construct.

### Did you know

According to BIWTA the Buriganga is about 17 kilometers long.

λ In 1992 the Department of Environment officially prohibited use of the Buriganga water for both human consumption and all kinds of use.

λ The government now has a plan to divert Jamuna water 172 kilometers through Dhaleswari, Pungi, Bangshi and Turag to raise the water level and keep the river Buriganga navigable during dry season.

λ The DoE in a study found the oxygen level in the Buriganga water at 2 mg per litre of river water against standard minimum level of 4 mg.

λ In the Buriganga water, level of chromium was counted at 6 ppm, which is 60 times higher than tolerable limit to human body.

λ More than 65 organisations and institutions are now united under a single banner called Save Buriganga Movement.

λ The government has a mammoth task of removing more than 1,300 encroachments from the river Buriganga. It also has the task to reform land management laws to recover thousands of acres of "land" inside the river Buriganga, which were leased or sold out to individuals through government loopholes.

λ In dry season it is almost impossible to stay near the river, as an unbearable strong stench is always present in the atmosphere. The stench disappears as the floodwaters enter from upstream.

λ The government is now planning to launch a Dhaka Circular Waterway for commuters.