

# Everyone's out to destroy it

## Locals say about the ones who had driven a vital canal in Khulna city into near-destruction

DIPANKAR ROY, Khulna

Those days are long gone when the rich and the powerful used to unleash their army of mercenaries, then known as 'lathials', to occupy a piece of land by force.

Such practice of illegally occupying another's property -- especially public property such as rivers, canals and other waterbodies -- by the rich and the powerful are still all too common across the country. Nowadays, they do not need 'lathials', but a few "friends" in high places.

The situation is no different in the city of Khulna, where a six-kilometre-long vital canal called Khudiar Khal, locally known as Khuder Khal, appears to be in the gravest peril and up for grabs.

As if the authorities have deserted it or it has no legal custodian, influential locals are out to destroy it by encroaching on it or by polluting it, locals said.

The destruction of this lifeline of the city has been going on for nearly a decade, without any visible sign of action by the authorities.

About two kilometres of the canal now looks like a barren land, choked by water hyacinth, bushes and shrubs. While at other places, one would have difficulty recognising it as a canal, with numerous structures built on it.

Devoid of fish and other aquatic life, water in the canal, hardly knee to waist-deep, has turned pitch black -- thanks to dumping of effluent by factories in nearby Khalishpur and Daulatpur industrial areas.

Even signs are posted and demarcation fences are erected at many places of the canal, boasting legal ownership.

The locally 'powerful people' and at least eight real estate development firms have built as many as forty structures into the canal that stretches from Boyra to Beel Pabla (near Khulna bypass road) and falls on the Mayur river, the locals said, requesting not to be named.

While talking to this paper, Hafizur Rahman, a farmer in nearby Deyana village, said Khudiar Khal used to be their primary source of water for irrigation, but now its water is too polluted to be used in crop fields.

With at least ten drainage pipes from the industrial areas constantly spewing out toxic



Citing land document records, a real estate firm put up a sign and demarcation fences right in the middle of Khudiar Khal, a six-kilometre-long canal that stretches from Boyra to Beel Pabla (near Khulna bypass road) in Khulna city.

PHOTO: STAR

liquid into the canal, he said the local farmers now use plastic pipes with small diameters to pump in water for irrigation from ponds or ditches in distant locations.

Nur Islam, another villager, lamented saying that with fresh water streaming in and

teeming with fish and other aquatic animals, the canal used to be alive. "Now all that is gone and people cannot even take a walk along its banks due to putrid stench."

Besides, people living in surrounding villages -- Deyana, Rayermahal, Boyra,

Bastuhara, Daulatpur, Beel Pabla -- once relied on the canal for transporting goods to and from Khulna city.

"I used to take the canal to get to my paddy field in Pashchim Beel Pabla village," said Nazmul Hassan, a resident of Pabla village

under Ward 6 of Khulna City Corporation (KCC).

But over the past 10 to 12 years, the canal has turned into a landfill and a breeding ground for mosquitoes as the KCC does not excavate or maintain it, he alleged.

About a decade ago, Khudiar Khal was the only source of fish for many impoverished villagers who still cannot afford to buy fish from markets, said Hafiz Mollah of the same village.

Now the canal is so polluted that cattle or other animals are getting sick from drinking its water, he also said.

Demanding stern action against encroachers and polluters of Khudiar Khal, Sheikh Ashrafuzzaman, secretary general of Greater Khulna Unnayan Sangram Samannay Committee, said residents of Khulna city had been making the demands for years, but to no effect.

All the canals of the city need to be saved and their state closely monitored by the authorities, he also demanded.

In the meantime, on February 10, 2019, three committees formed by Khulna district administration started conducting surveys on endangered waterbodies in KCC. The committees were formed on February 5.

Contacted, Nuruzzaman Talukdar, estate officer of KCC and member secretary of a committee, said they prepared a list in which they identified 460 illegal occupiers and 382 structures on 26 canals in KCC.

He also said they handed over the list to the deputy commissioner of Khulna as the Khulna district administration is the custodian of the canals and KCC only works as an overseer.

A top official of the administration rebutted the claim made by Nuruzzaman and said it is the responsibility of KCC to maintain and preserve waterbodies in Khulna city limits. "We assist the city corporation during demarcation or eviction drives. However, KCC has to take the initiative first."

Contradicting the KCC estate officer's remarks, Talukder Abdul Khaleque, the Khulna city mayor, said the KCC has already started carrying out drives to recover the 26 endangered canals from the clutches of the 460 encroachers mentioned in the list. "Regardless of who they are, we will take action against the grabbers."



Road communication between Nilphamari Sadar and Chilahati land port has remained suspended since Thursday night after a Bailey bridge near Banunia area in Domar upazila collapsed when an overloaded cement-carrying truck was crossing it. Ignoring warning from the authorities concerned, heavy vehicles had continued using the bridge.

PHOTO: EAMASADUZZAMAN

## Kuakata eco-park yet to be renovated

### Two proposals were sent to the ministry concerned to repair it in 2018

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Kuakata Jatiya Udyan (eco-park), which has been lying in a dilapidated state for long, is yet to be renovated.

However, two proposals were sent to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change to repair the eco-park of the district in 2018, said Patuakhali Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) Md Aminul Islam.

Tourists from home and abroad are losing interest in visiting the Kuakata eco-park, one of the best tourist spots in the country, as its walkways, link road, wooden bridge and tamarisk garden are badly damaged.

The structures have been damaged badly due to erosion in recent years, said locals.

In 2005-2006 fiscal year, Patuakhali Coastal Forest Department set up the eco-park in Kuakata sea beach on 13,984 hectares of land, including Gangamati, Khajura, Latachapple and Fatrar Char areas, at a cost of Tk 2.76 crore.

Five picnic sheds, wooden bridge, culverts, internal walkways, office building and ticket counter were built about two-and-a-half kilometres east of zero-point of



Kuakata under the eco-park land development project.

There are mangrove trees and 42,000 plants of different species in the eco-park, creating a safe nesting place for birds. A tamarisk garden was also made outside the park to protect it from tidal surges from the Bay.

The forest department changed its name as Jatiya Udyan on October 24 in 2010.

During a recent visit to the park, this correspondent found that the wooden bridge over the lake

had been broken totally. Culverts, picnic sheds and benches were also broken.

Hundreds of trees in the tamarisk garden had been uprooted by the tide.

Md Matiur Rahman, a tourist from Khulna, said he visited the eco-park in early 2007 and it was an eye-catching spot.

But now the spot has lost its beauty as its walkways, picnic sheds, wooden bridge and culverts have been badly damaged, said Matiur.

Another tourist from Rajshahi Md Nazrul Islam said "I'm very disappointed to see that the internal walkways, culverts and toilets in the park are badly damaged."

The authorities concerned should take immediate steps to save the wonderful place from the Bay, considering the tourists' interest, he added.

The office building, walkways, electrification system and lake were badly damaged by super cyclone Sidr in November 2007 and Aila in 2009.

Kuakata municipality Mayor Abdul Bareq Mollah said the eco-park is one of the attractive spots here and it should be renovated immediately.

"I raised the matter in the upazila and district level meetings several times, but no steps have been taken yet," said the mayor.

DFO Aminul Islam said most of the infrastructures are damaged as heavy tidal surge from the Bay hits the area every year.

In 2018, they have sent two proposals to the ministry concerned to renovate the park at a cost of Tk 5.56 crore and work will start after approval, said the DFO.

## College girl rescued, captor held

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Police rescued a college girl on Monday, three weeks after her abduction in Kaunia upazila of Rangpur.

Police also arrested the alleged captor, Shakil Bin Ansari, 21, son of late Ansar Ali of Natun Bazar village under Haragachh municipality in Kaunia upazila.

Police rescued the 16-year-old girl from Natun Bazar on Monday night and her mother filed a case with Haragachh Police Station.

Shakil and his aides allegedly abducted the girl on way to her college on February 7, police said.

After several failed attempt to rescue her, the law enforcers finally succeeded on Monday.

"Police sent the girl to Rangpur Medical College Hospital for medical checkup and produced Shakil before a court on Tuesday. The court ordered sending the accused to jail," said Mominul Islam, sub-inspector of Haragachh Police Station, also investigation officer of the case.

## Man lands in jail for torturing wife

### He left for speaking at a religious congregation after breaking her hands following altercation over dowry

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

An Islamic cleric who often gives speech against dowry and torture of women at various Islamic congregations has been sent to jail in a case for torturing his wife brutally over dowry.

The accused is NHM Soyeb Hossain Siddiqi, 40, son of Abdul Hye Mia of Maddachar Baruitari village in Kurigram's Bhurungamari upazila.

Kohinur Begum, mother-in-law of Soyeb, filed the case with Sadullahpur Police Station in Gaibandha on Sunday night.

Soyeb married Somia Siddiqa, daughter of late Ibrahim Sarkar of Dura Mithapur village in Rangpur's Pirganj upazila, over a year ago. Soyab lives in a rented house at Sadullahpur as he is the teacher of a local madrasa.

Soyeb often tortured his wife for Tk 2 lakh dowry after their marriage, said Kohinur Begum.

On January 18, Soyeb beat Somia Siddiqa mercilessly following an altercation over the issue. At one stage, he broke her hands. Soyeb then left the home for attending an Islamic congregation and he did not return since then.

Later, villagers arranged Somia's treatment. On Sunday, Soyeb suddenly appeared in Pirganj upazila of Rangpur to attend a congregation, after one and half month.

Being informed, villagers and relatives of Somia rushed to the spot and caught Soyeb and handed over him to police after giving him a good beating. Both of his hands were broken.

Masud Rana, officer-in-charge of Sadullahpur Police Station, said the arrestee was later produced before a court that sent him to jail on Monday.



Trees in the tamarisk garden of Kuakata eco-park have been uprooted by tidal surge from the Bay. Above, most of the infrastructures in the park have been lying damaged for long due to lack of renovation.

PHOTO: SOHRABHOSSAIN