



## A service: slow but steady



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**T**WO-THIRDS of Bangladesh is a wetland laced with a dense network of rivers, canals and creeks making water transport a popular mode for its people, and is the only means available in nearly 10 percent of the total area. The river network serve as the most important transport artery, playing a vital role in national life. The navigable waterways vary between 5,200 kilometres in the dry season and 8,372 kilometres during the monsoon.

Almost all big cities, towns and commercial centres grew up on the banks of its rivers. Travel by riverine routes became an integral part of people's life, be it for pleasure or business, a journey on the legendary ROCKET SERVICE on a moonlit night is simply alluring. The rhythm of the paddles of steamers brings about a weird, wonderful and mysterious passion adding to the already heavy throbbing of the heart.

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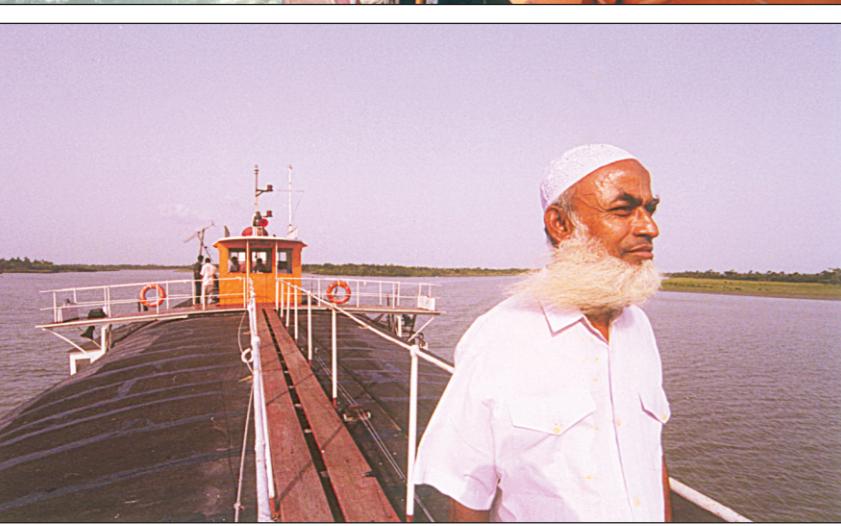
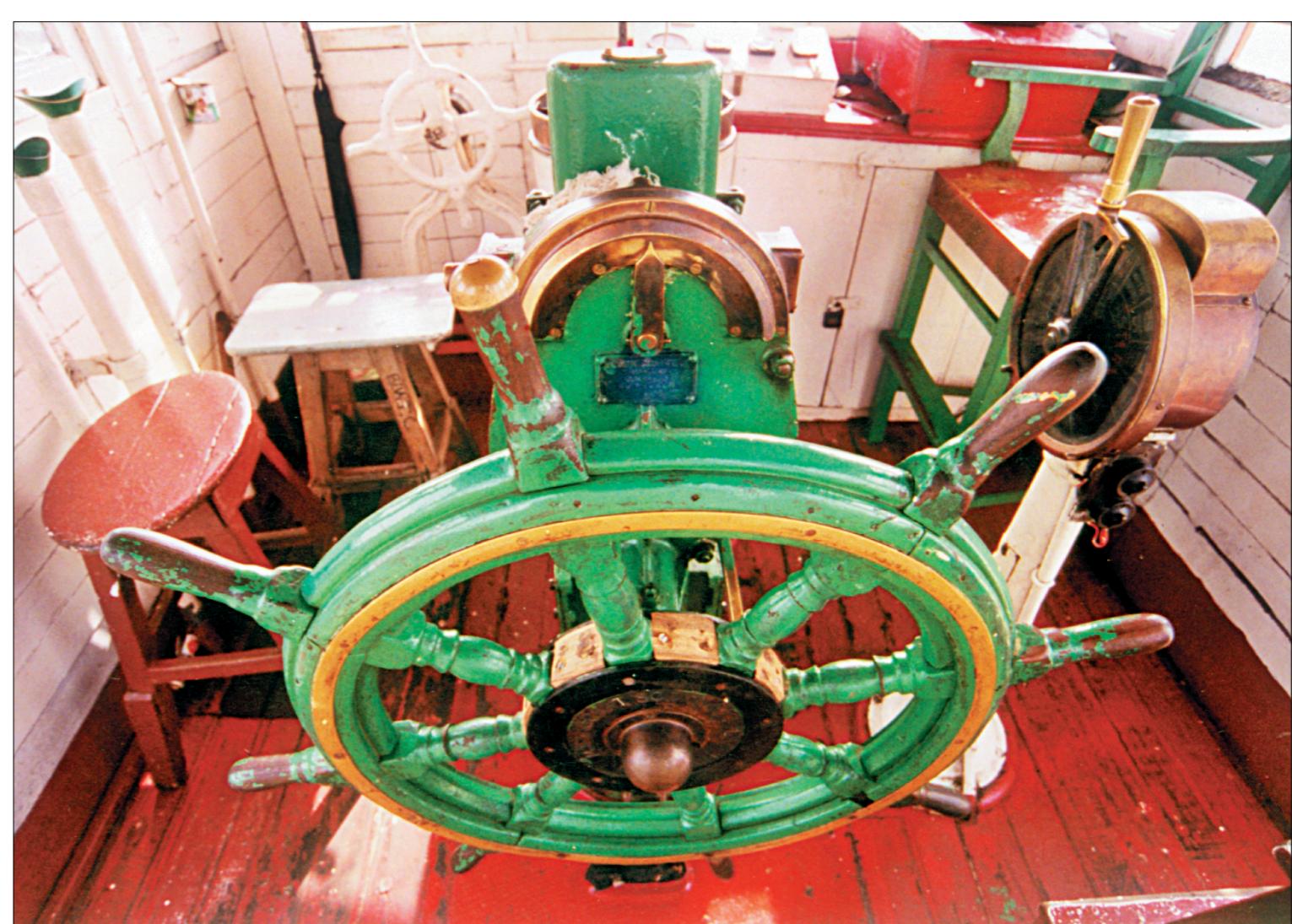
During the 18th century, the Indian General Steam Navigation Company and the River Steam Navigation Company Limited began operating mechanised water transportation in British India. The two companies have been each other's competitors since the inception, dominating the scene throughout the British rule and the Pakistan regime.

Pak Bay, Sinclair Murray and Chalna Lighterage operated the cargo sector while Pak Waterways, the passenger sector in the 1960s. The entire passenger and cargo traffic was carried by the private sector 70 per cent of this managed by the British owned companies.

However, at the end of the 19th century the two companies merged under the name of India General Navigation Ropeway Company. It continued services in India and the then East Pakistan even after the partition of 1947.

Khulna-Barisal Mail Service, Barisal-Dhaka Mail Service, Barisal-Narayanganj Express Service, Narayanganj-

Kokatavi, Gola, Land Sevire, were prominent routes.



Meanwhile, Pakistan River Steamer (PRS) provided a fast moving steamer that plied between Narayanganj and Khulna via Chandpur, Barisal and Jhalkathi in a matter of 19 hours. This was known as ROCKET SERVICE because of short spell of time taken to reach one's destination. Paddle steamers named Kiyu, Masud, Lepcha, Ostrich, Gazi and Turn were some that worked for the Rocket Service. Rocket Toma expanded its services from two to four days a week in 1953.

After independence, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) was established in 1972 with one government-owned ship and nine abandoned private ships. It had 608 water transport facilities of different types. At least 20 of them were passenger vessels. BIWTC started its operations in full swing in 1975. At present it is continuing its commercial operation under four operational units -- P.S. Masud, P.S. Ostrich, P.S. Lepcha and P.S. Turn along with M.V. Shela and M.V. Madhumati ply as the daily

steamer service of BIWTC. provided an uninterrupted passenger service from 1983 to 1987. However, there was a glitch in its system in 1987 and was mended by the Dockyard and Engineering Work with aid, once again, from the Belgian Government. It was then turned into mechanical gear system. At present the vessel is engaged in carrying passengers and cargo on the Dhaka-Khulna rocket service route. Lepcha is 190 feet long and 25 feet wide. It has a depth of eight feet and able to carry 601 passengers and 79 tons of goods.

**P.S. Ostrich:** This steamer was built in 1929 and converted to diesel at the Narayanganj workshop in 1985 with aid from the Belgian government. The steamer is 225 feet long and 30 feet wide with a depth of nine feet. Ostrich is able to carry 900 passengers and 150 tons of goods. The recently added air-conditioned cabins is a new attraction to Ostrich.

**P.S. Lepcha:** P.S. Lepcha was first made in 1938. This steamer too was converted to diesel with aid from the Belgian government. It

*Story: INTERNET  
Photo: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN*