

# Save the lifeline from going deadly and dying

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PROBIR KUMAR SARKER

MILLIONS of people living and working on the Buriganga and those other millions just crossing it by boats or travelling through by launches and other vessels all have been polluting the river by indiscriminately throwing rubbish of all types -- organic or non-degradable -- while the government agencies are also discharging their solid waste and the sewerage everyday, in this lifeline of Dhaka. Moreover, tanneries of Hazaribagh have been given 'authorised' connections to release highly toxic waste into a canal that connects the Buriganga while many other dyeing and washing plants scattered along its banks are also contributing their best to release everything dirty into this 'unfortunate' river!

In parallel, there are unscrupulous businessmen and local goons encroaching on and grabbing lands of the river and making it narrower, thanks to those dishonest and greedy government staff responsible for its upkeep.

It all has given the river "a roughly-used look" with dark black water and strong obnoxious odour blowing from it. The extent of pollution is just beyond your expectation or anticipation. Now, no one wants to go close to the river without urgency, let alone for traditional boat riding fearing contamination.

However, thousands of people living along the river have been accepting whatever they are being given by the merciful God for bathing, washing and other daily activities. Those who directly use this water obviously don't have the scope or ability to purify it before use. Forced to use the toxic water, people are falling victim to different water-borne diseases, and arbitrary bites of mosquitoes.

The river is witness to many historic and cultural events of the capital city which thrive on that

water. It stretches only 27 kilometres -- originating from the Dholeswary (also known as Shitalakkhya) near Kalatia and meeting Turag at Kamrangirchar, near Hazaribagh. The main flow of Buriganga comes from the Turag which meets with the Dholeswary in Munshiganj and together takes the name Meghna to fall in the Bay of Bengal.

Because of its course, the Buriganga receives all the waste water from Turag, which flows through industrial Tongi, Savar and Hazaribagh areas and receives it also from households besides industries and vessels.

Due to siltation, the river's length has diminished from 27 km to 18 km. Eleven of the 18 kilometres fall in Dhaka district and seven in Narayanganj, with a very small portion in Munshiganj.

The present head of the Buriganga, near Chhaglakandi, has silted up and opens only during floods, but the lower part is still

holding water throughout the year. The river's course by Dhaka is stable, fixed by resistant clays marking the southern edge of "Madhupur Tract."

Only 20 percent of the total water supplies to the city comes from this river through three water treatment plants, while the rest is met by underground source.

At and around Dhaka's launch terminal, Sadarghat, dumped waste, mainly non-degradable polythene, has piled up over the years -- courtesy small businesses and different industrial units, the city authorities and the nearby households. The situation has become so severe over the decades of neglect that these waste can't be pulled up easily since the riverbed has become concrete-hard. Now it needs an excavator!

The water apparently stays a little better, naturally, for a couple of months only during the rainy season, due to opening of flow from upstream.

Last year, the government claims, it implemented a project to extract waste from three kilometres of riverbed of the Buriganga and one kilometre of the Turag. It had extracted 8.56 lakh cubic metres of waste at a cost of Tk 16.93 crore under the funding of Department of Environment (DoE) -- the regulatory body concerned. The pilot project was taken in hand when it was revealed that the waste had

created almost a 10 feet thick layer on the riverbed. But no other activity was seen for over a year until recently.

However, the outcry of the environmentalists and city dwellers in general, and awareness campaigns to curb pollution have been on round-the-year.

The government has nearly finalised a plan to go for a big project when three connecting rivers around the city -- Buriganga, Turag and Dholeswary -- are expected to be made pollution-free by pulling out waste from the riverbed, said the national news agency BSS.

Meanwhile, the water resources minister very recently revealed that a project was underway to bring water from Jamuna in a bid to reduce Buriganga's pollution. The Jamuna water would be channelled through dredging 162 kilometres of Pouli, Dholeswary, Bongshai and Turag rivers.

This declaration is praiseworthy, but at the same time raises eyebrow of many because of previous experience of "much talks and less work" and slowing down of activity.

And the main concern lies here: "While you are cleaning the riverbed what about stopping the discharge of untreated toxic water coming out from tanneries, dyeing units and sewerage pipes; as well as dumping of solid debris and other waste?"

Let alone the people, the govern-



Indiscriminate dumping of solid waste not only pollutes the river but desperately shrinks its flow.

ment is reluctant to High Court orders as well. The pace of removal of pollutants and checking further discharge carried out by different government agencies is not as fast as necessary.

Some 150 tanneries are set to be shifted to an industrial estate at Hemayetpur near Savar within one and a half years while 50 more will be left operating at old sites since the new industrial zone can't accommodate them. This is a cruel example of not being practical. Moreover, the tender process for a central effluent treatment plant at the park has been the reason behind delaying in the very urgent shifting of tanneries which was initiated in 2003. The issue is resolved now and the work is underway.

Meanwhile, the High Court in 2009 also ordered authorities to make ETPs mandatory for industries discharging waste water and ensure that those are kept opera-

tional. But in reality, these are hardly ensured by the businesses and the government authorities.

The High Court last June directed the government to seal off all the sewage outlets on the Buriganga within this June. It also directed the authorities concerned to stop dumping waste into the river in the areas under Kotwali, Hazaribagh, Labagh, Kamrangirchar and Demra police stations. The authorities were also ordered to clean up the river and move all the sources of pollution from there. A similar directive was given by the court a year before it, too!

However, when we have problems, we must have solutions too; and it's determination what we need to overcome the hurdles on the way towards solutions. At least because we need the rivers as lifelines, we should save them from going deadly and dying.

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The pitch black water tells the tale of the river's extreme pollution.

## For leading a 'green' life

*The ways of leading green life are many. We must take up every possible measure to preserve the natural environment that sustains our resources remembering that there's still only one earth to live on.*

ABDUS SATTAR MOLLA

WORLD Environment Day (WED) is the main weapon of the United Nations to make people aware of the worldwide environmental degradation, and to attract their attention and action to its recovery. This year over 100 nations around the globe celebrated the event the other day (June 5). Every year, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) coins a theme and its central program has been arranged in a specific place. This year's theme is "Green Economy: Does it include you?" and the venue is the Federative Republic of Brazil.

The UNEP defines green economy as one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities. In its simplest expression, a green economy can be thought of as one which is low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive. In other words, a green economy is one whose growth in income and employment is driven by public and private investments that reduce carbon emissions and pollution, enhance energy and resource effi-

ciency, and prevent the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Launched in late 2008, the UNEP green economy initiative provides a comprehensive and practical working mechanism, through analysis and policy support for investing in green sectors and in greening environmentally unfriendly sectors. The initiative has three main activities aiming at 1) producing a green economy report and related research materials, 2) providing advisory services on ways to move towards a green economy in specific countries, and 3) engaging a wide range of research, non-governmental organizations, business and UN partners in implementing the green economy initiative.

On understanding the green economy, let's attend to the second part of the theme -- if this includes us or not. UNEP has identified 10 important sectors that include agriculture, building, energy supply, fisheries, forestry, manufacturing industries, transport, tourism, water, and waste disposal. We can involve ourselves in these sectors both individually and socially. Agriculture is basic to most

industries including the food industry for feeding the growing population. We all consume agricultural products. Using this consumer power, we can support local, organic (decreasing or even avoiding the factory made food items) and sustainable agriculture. When we buy local, organic and sustainable food products, we send a message to the local producers that we support a green economy for agriculture.

Construction of buildings and other structures takes a large toll on global resources and climate. We need to opt for low-impact construction. For instance, constructing a big, high rise building keeping open space and trees around can accommodate more people and also sustain the natural environment. Developing railways for transport instead of more dependence on carpeted roads can have less impact on the environment.

The current mainstream energy sources -- oil, coal, gas, etc. are not only harmful to health and environment; they are not sustainable in a world of growing energy needs. The best way is to develop and use renewable energy sources like solar, wind power etc. But still these are in the formative stage. In this transitional period, we can opt for austerity, using energy only when it is essential.

Fishes are delicious and healthy; but overfishing is depleting this natural resource from both inland and sea waters. By rule, fishermen and fish business people need to use 'ecolabels' from which buyers

know which one is harvested sustainably and which not. Through buying only those harvested sustainably, we send a message that we support green economy for fisheries.

Forests support livelihoods, societies and cultures, our climate, and a plethora of wildlife and ecosystems. Deforestation accounts for close to 20% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, preserving the forests is of utmost necessity. We need to use wood as less as possible to help sustain the forests; using renewable energy, electronic gadgets (instead of paper) are the ways. Thus, we send a message that we support healthy

environment and sustainable livelihood.

Manufacturing industries have been unwisely rough on the environment, these must smoothen their conduct. As consumers of industrial products, we can support businesses that have sustainability plans, use ecolabels, and invest in renewable energy. By doing so, we send a message that it is time for manufacturers to transit to green economy.

Transport vehicles pollute the environment through emissions, being many on the roads, causing traffic jam as well as accidents. Reducing the use of vehicles is necessary. Taking up public transports instead of riding a car alone is a

way. Walking and riding bikes are other personal ways of leading green life.

Tourism has become a fashion now-a-days. This has positive effects on economy but can have negative impacts on the environment. We can opt for 'ecotourism' by travelling local sites with others and using hotels and agencies that support ecotourism. Thus, we can help achieve economic growth without sacrificing environmental and social well-being.

Water is another name for life. Availability of this essential resource, especially safe drinking water, is decreasing sharply. We need to use water wisely. Some of the ways of more effective water use are turning off the tap when we are not using it; waiting until we have a full load to run our laundry or dishwasher; and limiting the shower time.

Using most things only once has become a way of 'modern' life. A by-product of such unwise 'modernity' is accumulating more and more waste products. Now, there's no space to keep so many and so much of waste products. So, we need to go back to reusable products. We must learn and apply recycling method wherever and whenever possible.

The above ways of leading green life are few of many possibilities. We must take up every possible measure to preserve the natural environment that sustains our resources remembering that there's still only one earth to live on.

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