

Dhaka - The river city



"Throughout human history, great rivers around the world have one time or another been polluted as industrialisation and urbanisation spread. But the realisation that these rivers need to be saved has fortunately always dawned. Efforts have been made and they were saved," says Sharif Jamil, an activist and founder of Buriganga River Keeper.

Sadly though, he cannot say the same for Buriganga – a river which once gave life to Dhaka, was at the centre of a great city and fed its thousands. Now, it is described as a river of death, polluted by toxic industrial waste and all the while diminishing due to mindless land-grabbing. As Sharif Jamil had said, "Buriganga gave life to Dhaka and Dhaka killed it" – truth put in stark simple words and a call to finally take action.

For centuries, the river has been the life to the economy of Dhaka. It served from when this burgeoning metropolis was still in its infancy, cradling its boats and fostering trade. It has been a source of income for the hopeful souls that seek in the river livelihood or just water for their daily needs.

The Old Ganges, is rumoured to have been a great astonishment to the Mughals and brightened the view from the house of the Nawabs. The river bears testament to the history that played out on its banks. And now it is a different story altogether.

The Buriganga could have been turned into part of our national identity – there is a reason the Mughals set up capital next to this river in 1610. Like the Thames, we could have preserved it. The river that was once the main source of drinking water for Dhaka, could have been taken care of

senior visiting official of the World Bank, told AFP in the early 2000s. "This stench is unbelievable, you must do something about it."

Instead we have a river full of industrial discharge. With severe lacking in waste management, sewerage has made the

ants nearby. Health issues are of course, endemic.

The Buriganga is a reflection of our failure as a nation to protect our own and of what could have been. Described almost always as the river of death, this once great river is now the dump for tannery waste and sewage, Buriganga could have been part of a scenic river cruise through the city and its past. Or the retreat for slumped city dwellers on weekends. Or even just a pretty river, with crystal waters that flow through this city, giving it some semblance of beauty.

The Thames is synonymous with London, and Mississippi with America – these rivers have given identity to the great cities and countries of the world. Take a look at the Volga or Danube, the Nile or even the holy Ganges – long after their economic importance had diminished, the water trade declined and the early river side civilisations evolved, these rivers are as much a part of the identity of their land as ever before.

The Ganges, Volga, Thames and Mississippi have all been the subject of songs and rhymes, immortalised in words and in their physical realms. It is time we do the same for the Buriganga – if not in beautiful songs then at least through our deeds.

By Moyukh Mahtab
Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel



and turned into a tourist destination. River boat rides could have been arranged, "A boat ride through history" maybe. It was once a must for visiting dignitaries to take river cruises through Buriganga. Now the situation is best summed up by what Dale Lautenbach, a

water toxic. Illegal structures line the banks. And Sharif Jamil thinks the government is not doing enough to tackle this. Commissions have been formed, laws are there – but the Buriganga is on its death throes. In the midst of this, the river is still a primary source of water for the inhabit-

