

## DECLARING WAR AGAINST THE SUNDARBANS?

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addition, each development is assessed independently without consideration of the accumulated effects." The mission also noted the importance of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA): "The purpose of an SEA is to assess the cumulative impacts at a landscape and regional scale before individual projects are decided upon..."

In the much publicised 41st annual general meeting of UNESCO held in July 2017, Government of Bangladesh (GOB) committed to carry out a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for the entire Sundarbans Region. UNESCO welcomed Bangladesh's decision, adding that it "...requests the State Party to ensure that any large-scale industrial and/or infrastructure developments will not be allowed to proceed before the SEA has been completed."

Barely one month since its commitment to UNESCO, the GOB has given its go-ahead to 320 industrial projects adjacent to the Sundarbans. While the government is supposed to stop all current large-scale industrial development projects including Rampal Coal Power Plant before completing the SEA, in practice, let alone stopping the existing projects, it is giving clearance to hundreds of new polluting industrial projects in the ECA of the Sundarbans, which is tantamount to declaring war against the mangrove forest.

The GOB, of course, tries to assure the people by uttering its usual promises that the people setting up the industries have taken steps to protect the environment, that it will enforce strict terms and conditions to protect the environment and so on. But even if one ignores the violation of ECA rules and somehow manages to keep faith in the government's promises, one cannot believe in its capacity and capability to enforce its promises considering its past and current track records. For example, thousands of tonnes of untreated pollutants from different industrial areas in and around the capital city are being dumped in the surrounding rivers. Most of the industrial units of these areas have no sewage treatment or ETP plants of their own. If environmental pollution of this scale is allowed in and around the capital itself, who will believe the same will not be allowed to happen in remote areas like the Sundarbans?

That's why it is important to cancel all the large-scale industrial projects including Rampal Coal Power Plants surrounding the Sundarbans. There are many ways to develop the country, many places to establish power, LPG, RMG and other industrial units, but the Sundarbans is unique; no one has the right to gamble with this unique mangrove forest and world heritage site.

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PHOTO: STAR FILE

Hilsa was recognised as a geographical indication (GI) product of Bangladesh earlier this month and there are more products in line.

In the last one year, two Bangladeshi products—Jamdani and Hilsa—received Geographical Indications (GI) from the Department of Patents, Designs and Trademarks (DPDT). In addition, the DPDT is currently working on analysing 24 more goods, which might soon join the list.

But what does this recognition stand for and what are its benefits? There seems to be no end to misconceptions regarding the issue.

DPDT registrar, Md Sanowar Hossain admits that one of the most crucial aspects about Intellectual Property in Bangladesh is that it is widely misunderstood in the country, since it still a comparatively new concept.

A GI is basically a sign used on products, which corresponds to a specific geographical location or origin. The product, because of the GI, eventually gets a brand value and that helps in trade. In Bangladesh, as per the GI law that came into effect in 2015, the DPDT is responsible for registering goods under the GI.

Earlier this month, Hilsa, the country's leading fish delicacy became a GI product. Soon after a section of media organisations responded to this news with headlines such as 'Ilish now belongs to Bangladesh' or 'Bangladesh patents Hilsa.'

There is a sentiment amongst the general public that the GI is a certification that the country has received from an international organisation and that no other country, apart from Bangladesh, can receive a GI certification for Hilsa. As Hossain explains, this is not true.

For starters, GI certifications are given to agricultural products like mangoes, natural products like Hilsa or even handicrafts like Jamdani. For a product to receive a GI certification, it has to be produced or be present in a specific area and it has to be solely dependent on the elements—such as a particular kind of soil or climatic condition—of that area.

# AFTER JAMDANI AND HILSA...

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PHOTO: MD MOAZEM MOSTAKIM

Applications have been made for the Black Bengal Goat and Sundarban's honey to receive geographical indications.

Take for instance the case of mangoes of Rajshahi. It is said that the mangoes of Rajshahi are sweeter than the ones cultivated outside the division because of the particular kind of soil that the tree grows on. Similarly, it is said that the climatic conditions in Bangladesh have helped in the cultivation of Hilsa.

As such, Hilsa has received the GI certification and there is a good chance that mangoes from Rajshahi might also receive a similar certification in the future.

What this also means is that countries like India or Myanmar, which produce around 20 percent of the world's Hilsa as opposed to Bangladesh's 70, can also provide Hilsa, grown in their region, with a GI, since they too have been producing it. Sure enough, there will be a difference in the quality of the Hilsa produced there and the ones produced locally, but the provision of the GI depends upon the respective

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