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Summer last year *The Daily Star* published a report titled “CETP at Savar yet to be ready” outlining how leather factories in Hazaribagh were being pressurised to relocate to the proposed tannery estate despite the Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) being incomplete.

A year later, this report can be titled exactly the same and it would technically be correct, save for one change—the factories already moved there last April. A report however shows that the tannery zone has been functioning for five months—salting hides, processing leather, making finished products—without a fully operational waste management system.

The factories were disconnected on April 8, 2017 to be exact. The deadline given to the Chinese firm Jiangsu Lingzhi Environment Protection Ltd for finishing the CETP project was August 25, 2017 according to documents submitted to the court last week. Between April and August is a time-period of five months. The question that arises is this: how did the government decide that it is completely alright to let factories work without making sure the environment will not be harmed?

The leather factories were forcefully moved by the government, when the Department of Environment completely cut off the utility connections to the tannery zone. The measure was meant to coerce the



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Solid waste is being dumped openly at the Savar Tannery Estate

Regardless of whether they meet the deadline or not, environmental activists and experts fear that the plant does not have enough capacity to handle the tanneries once they start functioning at full capacity, or when Eid-ul-Azha comes around.

tanners to utilise the land allotted for the new and supposedly environmentally-friendly tannery estate. The former project director Abdul Qayyum puts the size of the place at 200 acres. This is to be shared by 155 tanneries according to Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC).

According to a progress report prepared by the Bureau of Research, Testing and Consultation (BRTC) and Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology (BUET) published this month, much of the work was still incomplete in April.

Most of the physical construction was complete—yet what was left was the actual functionality. Broadly categorised as ‘mechanical works’, the report shows, for example, that the mechanical progress of the Common Chrome Recovery Unit was at 90 percent in April. Even the power generation unit supposed to fuel this unit was not finished. About 90 percent of the work of the transformer base and pole was done in April, and 95 percent work of the panel room was completed.

‘Mechanical works’ refers to equipment functionality, states the current project director Ziaul Haque. Chromium removal from waste is absolutely essential for this industry which uses chromium salts as tanning agents for the creation of ‘wet-blue’ leather. Expelled into the

environment, it can get into the water-table, soil and food-chain, as documented by scientists over the years.

“Chromium is a carcinogen and increases the chances of cancer in adulthood,” Dr Zafar Mohammad Masud, the head of the oncology department of Bangladesh Medical College Hospital told *Star Weekend* in April. A study conducted in 2011 through a collaboration between Japanese researchers and Bangladesh Agricultural University researchers found the sediment of the Buriganga river to contain such high levels of chromium that it could be considered “heavily polluted”. Buriganga has for years been the dumping zone of the Hazaribagh tannery district which has always operated without any sort of consideration for the environment. Studies conducted through the years have also documented how heavy metals seep into the ground-water and then end up in the food-chain.

Going back to the progress report of the CETP, other waste management units whose ‘mechanical works’ were not complete by April 2014 were the Sludge Thickening Tank, Sludge Drying Bed/Sludge Reaction Tank, Chlorine Dioxide Tank and Disinfection House, Aeration Equalisation Tank, B-Zone Oxidation Ditch and Equalisation Tanks. All of these had progressed between 90 to



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

The CETP plant which is the centre of controversy

95 percent. Only the Chlorine Dioxide Tank and Disinfection House and the Equalisation Tanks had 98 percent and 99 percent of the work done in April respectively.

As can be understood from the names, all of these units function to filter, strain, disinfect, oxidise and treat chemicals of leather effluents. A pipe from the CETP plant leads directly to the Dhaleswari river, outputting all of the liquid there.

Fast-forward to July 30, 2017. According to a progress report prepared by BSCIC, one of the modules of the Common Chrome Recovery Unit still did not have a permanent electrical connection. Nor did the actual power distribution room, which is the hub of all electrical equipment.

“We questioned whether the present operational capacity of the waste

treatment plant would be enough to handle all the factories, but our word was overruled and we were forced to relocate in April,” says Shaheen Ahamed, the chairperson of Bangladesh Tanners Association, also managing director of a tannery himself.

The problem does not end there

Two weeks ago, representatives from Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation, and the Development Corporation Ltd, the local agent of the Chinese firm, convened at the High Court to answer one question.

Will they be able to meet the August 25 deadline for the completion of the project?

Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed quoted a piece of correspondence sent on July 2,

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2017 from the ministry of industries to the chairman of the Chinese firm, expressing fears that they will miss the deadline. “The joint venture enterprise was accordingly reminded that the failure to complete all modules and units within August 25 would create a situation that would be ‘uncontrollable and very complex,’” it read. Justice Mohammed Selim was also on the bench.

The Tannery Estate project director Ziaul Haque expressed his belief that some of the work will be completed by the upcoming Eid-ul-Azha. By work he was referring to the activation of two more modules of the CETP. Currently there are two modules running.

The representatives of the Chinese firm were not even at court, sending in their

How did the government decide that it is completely alright to let factories work without making sure the environment will not be harmed?

modules are in operation by August 31, 2017. Project director Ziaul Haque assures *Star Weekend* that electrical work is in progress.

Too little too late?

Regardless of whether they meet the deadline or not, environmental activists and experts fear that the plant does not have enough capacity to handle the tanneries once they start functioning at full capacity, or when Eid-ul-Azha comes around.

“The maximum capacity of the plant is 25,000 cubic metres. When Eid comes, the waste will be several times more because right now only 70 tanneries are producing as much as 15,000 cubic metres of waste,” says Sharif Jamil, general secretary of Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon. The expert had visited the plant along with engineers and Abdul Qayyum to learn about the shortcomings of the plant.

The math makes sense—the total number of tanneries in the zone will be 155. Less than half of the factories are operational in the zone right now but are already producing more than half of the projected waste amount, according to Jamil.

“When the tanks threaten to overflow, the CETP can open the pipes to prevent flooding of the tanks. This will discharge untreated waste directly into the Dhaleswari,” says Jamil.

A recent visit in mid-August to the

discharge may be more than even what Sharif Jamil’s calculation suggests.

Perhaps one of the biggest problems is that for the past five months the CETP has not removed any salt from the waste, nor will anything be done about it by the government in the near future. Leather tanning requires its weight in salt.

“The module needed to remove salt is very expensive to maintain and would not have been feasible,” explains Ziaul Haque,

action for dealing with solid waste is this—dump it all in an allocated field. This may be considered a slight improvement from Hazaribagh’s solid-waste-management technique of dumping it anywhere and everywhere around the neighbourhood—in drains, on streets, by the river-bed, etc. On the downside, this contaminates the environment, as Sharif Jamil suggests, more specifically the soil. “According to a tender signed in 2015



A worker processes leather



Cottage industries like small-scale tanners and illegal chicken-feed producers have sprung up. They are not connected to the CETP

stead the local agent Anwar Shahid.

“This court is given the understanding that Mr Anwar Shahid has no preparation to make us understand the situation. He is further unable to meaningfully assist this court to arrive at any conclusion of the progress actually made in meeting the deadline or petitioning the Ministry of Industries to obtain an extension,” said the bench.

Officials from JLEPL choosing to remain anonymous told *Star Weekend* that one of the reasons for the delay in the equipment installation is the fact that some of the equipments were stuck at the Chittagong port for one and half years because of bureaucratic red-tape. The company paid demurrage worth BDT 3 crore for keeping the ship containers on hold.

In a subsequent hearing, the bench ordered the company to make sure all four

area shows that many of the factories are operating below capacity because they are still relocating. This includes many large factories. According to the BSCIC progress report, by the end of July, out of the 155 factories to move, only 52 had fully completed construction of the ground floor, with another 27 having completed the second storey as well. Only seven factories have structures higher than two stories, according to the report which may indicate full-scale production. Karim Leather and Tajin Leather enterprise have large factories in Hazaribagh but are yet to enter production in Savar, at a quick glance.

Several tannery owners also said that most of the factories are choosing to expand when relocating to their new spot in Savar, as a way of overcoming the costs of moving. This may mean that the waste



The roads are in an utter state of disrepair, hampering production

“Instead we have asked the factories to implement their own processes. It can be as cheap as manually beating hides to release salt dust.” However, they are not compelling the factories to do so.

This means that unless all the factories voluntarily implement salt removal, heavily saline water will be getting dumped into the Dhaleswari.

The drainage system of this estate is pretty much defunct—the roads are waterlogged with black sewage such that on rainy days one cannot walk through without stepping into sludge. The BSCIC progress report said that only 15 percent of the road construction was finished and that work on the “drains [are] continuing.” These roads will be the main thoroughfares during the days after Eid-ul-Azha.

In addition, the current CETP plan-in-

we are in the process of building a power plant that decomposes the solid waste and uses it to generate electricity,” says Ziaul Haque. The blueprint of that proposal is still under works and was submitted to BUET only a few weeks back, according to officials from the Chinese contractor JLEPL. This will be absorbed into the total budget of BDT 1078.1 crore, since only three-fourths of the amount approved in the annual development fund has been spent so far.

The Tannery Estate project has been going on in steps since 2003. 14 years have passed already—how much longer will the wait be?