

When it no longer pays to pollute the environment

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Just as the city corporations were about to lay down the shovels and pat themselves on the back for a job well done cleaning up all the qurbani waste, more appeared on the streets. Traders threw away reeking piles of hides, dumping them in public garbage spots (also known as sidewalks). The rawhide merchants' association surmised that around Tk 100 crore worth of hides had to be thrown away during this Eid.

Since the main message of this festival is to teach the value of an animal's life, most practitioners take care not to waste even a single body part. All that can be consumed for sustenance, is done so, while the hooves and horns are ground into bone meal for fertilisers and poultry feed. The hides feed the second largest export industry of the country i.e. leather and leather goods.

So seeing rawhides lying on the side of the roads, waiting to be picked up by garbage collectors, was not only shocking because it was wasteful, but it was also a grotesque real-life representation of the state of the economy.

Rawhide merchants say they threw away the hides because the tanners had not paid them for supplying hides since last year, and were asking to buy on credit again. Tanners say that they are not being able to pay because business has not been doing well. Ask them both why the situation has come to this, and they will all point towards the Savar tannery estate's effluent treatment plant.

The whole tannery district of Hazaribagh was moved to Savar in 2017, where a tannery estate was developed centering a Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP). The plant was supposed to finally transport the environmentally damaging industry to the world of basic compliance.

"We invested so much money in relocating from Hazaribagh only to find that the effluent treatment plant is not functioning. On one hand, we are still not compliant and so we cannot attract new businesses, and on the other hand, we have spent a large chunk of money to relocate and expand," says Ali Hossain, the managing director of Paramount Leather.

Hossain's predicament is interesting



Rawhides lying in waste.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

because he owns both a tannery and a rawhide trading business. He has his feet in both boats—the one that cannot buy rawhide because it cannot pay its dues, and the one not being able to sell because its buyers are broke.

"I had to reinvest a lot of money during the relocation to Savar. Most of the investments went into buying new capital machinery, because the ones in the Hazaribagh factory were so old, I could not move them without them falling apart," states Hossain.

Hossain was hoping to attract new business to make up for the costs of moving, but without the CETP being functional, that is not happening. "Most of our business is with China, because the other countries want environmentally compliant businesses. Even Korea refuses to take leather from us. But ever since China's business scenario deteriorated, we have been suffering," he claims.

He is referring, of course, to the United States-China trade war. China imports tanned leather sheets from Bangladesh for their leather-goods making industry. As leather products from China are being blockaded by the US, their demand for the raw material too fell, tanners claim.

Leather Mag stated in a report that tanned

leather exports fell by 6.42 percent during the last fiscal year.

Tanners say that they are not being able to attract brands who purchase finished leather goods, because our leather is not compliant and that most of the brands are choosing Kolkata, because their tanneries are not environmentally damaging.

Two years ago, Bay Group had a new Taiwanese business partner in anticipation of all the business that relocating to Savar's tannery estate would bring. The company, Tai Chong, helped Bay set up state-of-the-art machinery in their factory. Upon entering, the first thing one would notice was the distinct lack of stink that is so characteristic of tanneries in Bangladesh. That shiny, clean factory was abuzz with foreign-educated, English-speaking millennials, who moved their lives to that dystopian industrial zone of Savar to make a quick buck. But when the CETP failed to be fully compliant a year after relocation, Tai Chong packed up and left.

"They left around September of last year," says Ziaur Rahman, managing director of Bay Group. "This was a big hit for the image of the country."

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