



Workers are applying salt to rawhide to preserve it until sold, at Chawkbazar area.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

After page 3

Rahman claims that they wanted to set up their own effluent treatment plant within the factory, but that government—Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) to be exact—is not giving clearance. “We have the capacity to build our own internal plant. This would also be beneficial for the central plant, because we would not be pressurising it with our waste load, but there has been no progress regarding that. We even set up a laboratory to test the components of the effluent we release,” says Rahman.

Because of compliance issues, big companies like Bay and Apex are choosing to import leather sheets from compliant sources. That way the factories are at least able to get contracts for finished goods. “I need to be able to pay my staff during these times,” says Rahman.

Foreign contracts are needed because the domestic demand is not enough—a 2015 conference presentation by Leathergoods and Footwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association of Bangladesh

for Policy Dialogue, in a recent roundtable discussion organised at *The Daily Star*.

#### Why is environmental damage still happening?

“At present, the construction and functionality of the CETP has edged towards completion, but the Chrome Recovery Unit and Sludge Treatment Plant will require further work before they are fully functional,” states a policy brief by Research and Policy Integration for Development. The think-tank undertook a situational study sponsored by The Asia Foundation.

Currently 123 factories are operating inside the tannery estate, with 18 more being built.

“The CETP is not running at its fullest efficiency as some of the facilities are yet to be installed. Dewatering tanks, sludge thickening, and sludge recycling processes are not installed yet. As a result, sludges are [sic] now dumped into the dumping yard, which is likely to be filled up before the end of 2019. It thus reinforces the need for a sludge recycling system,” states the think-tank report.

That is basically the crux of it. Dr Delwar Hossain, professor at the department of civil engineering at Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology explains the details.

First up, he talks about the solid waste dilemma. “We have yet to decide how to make use of the sludge produced by the factories, so they are being stored in a plot in the estate,” explains Dr Hossain. Sludge, the solid waste produced by the tanneries, are usually of three types—solid waste produced while trimming the raw hides (e.g. ears and fur), chromium treated tanned leather trimmings, and the remainders of the CETP-treated effluent water. For two months following Eid-ul-Adha, the daily solid waste production is 150-200 tonnes. Usually it is 80-100 tonnes.

“We accepted a proposal for three separate dumping zones just this week,” says Dr Hossain.

Initially the waste was supposed to be used to generate power. “We were supposed to have a sludge power generation system, but BUET experts refused to pass the proposals, because their designs were not proper. Such a system is very much feasible, but when we refused to accept the designs, the authorities backed away,” adds

Dr Hossain.

They are looking into other avenues. Two companies have also been given permission to collect the bio-waste and produce gelatin, and they were supposed to go into production on July 1, but have not done so yet, informs Dr Hossain.

There is also a skirmish going on regarding allocation of tannery estate land for factories producing by-products. “The tannery owners are refusing to have any companies in their estate except tanneries even though such a company is necessary for their survival. The company is now on its way to get space outside the estate.”

The dewatering house not being completed yet is also an issue, says Dr Hossain. “The sludge going to the dumping yard 95 percent water, and the run-off from this waste is mixing with the river.”

There is more. “All tanneries are supposed to have two lines—one is supposed to let out normal effluent, and the other is supposed to let out chromium effluent. But not all the tanneries maintain this distinction. Out of 121 factories, 62 are compliant regarding this. The others aren’t.”

There was also a period of a few months around two months back, when the Chinese contractor in charge of the CETP did not separate chromium from the effluent and were dumping directly, claims Dr Hossain.

For the first year, after the relocation of the factories, only two units out of four of the CETP were functional, leading to a High Court battle with environmentalists. The CETP was finally made fully operational in the middle of last year.

There is currently also no way to deal with the salinity of the water being piped into the Dhaleswari river. Dr Hossain found that there are 2,500-3,000 milligrams of dissolved solids (like salt) in the effluent being released. “This is more than the limit allowed by the Environment Conservation Rules 1997.” Once this effluent goes into the water, they

“We need further investment of Tk 500 crores to build the infrastructure for tackling this. We need to build a unit that can perform reverse osmosis,” he states.

For years, all parties have been after the leather industry for completely ruining the environment in Hazaribagh. Now that they have realised that they need to clean up their act, why can’t the government?



Rawhides lying on the side of the road, waiting to be picked up. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

stated that only 15-18 percent of the total leather supply can fulfill the domestic demand.

“It is very unfortunate that Bangladesh imports USD 1 billion worth of leather every year while the country has unused rawhide,” said Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at the Centre