

TWO DYING RIVERS and the miseries they bring



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SIFAYET ULLAH

Abul Kalam, a fisher from Khagrachhari's Panchhari upazila, has been earning his livelihood by fishing in Changi river for the past 20 years. The 52-year-old's entire childhood was spent on the river's bank.

"Once, there were a lot of fish in Changi. But now, only a small number

of fish are available during monsoon," said Abul. "The river dries up during summer and no fish can be caught. We struggle to make ends meet during the season."

There were 23 species of fish in Changi, according to a research titled "Water quality and fish diversity of Changi river in Khagrachhari district". It was home to various aquatic animals

and a source of livelihood for fishers. According to data from District Fisheries Office in Khagrachhari, there are 2,776 registered fishers in Mahalchhari and Dighinala upazilas of the district.

Another river -- Mainee -- is suffering the same fate.

Not only fishers but also farmers, businesspeople, boat owners and people of other professions in the region, whose livelihoods depend on rivers, have suffered at different points due to the Changi and Mainee rivers in Khagrachhari turning into narrow canals, thanks to the emergence of several shoals (chars).

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"Irrigation by using pumping machines has increased our production cost, and thus, brought down our profits," said Ahmed Hossain, a farmer in Panchhari upazila.

While summer heat causes the river to dry up, with the onset of monsoon, floods cause the destruction of crops on the riverbank.

"Our real woes begin during monsoon," said Ahmed.

People who depend on the rivers live in fear during monsoon, as no

reduced to 15 feet, said an official of Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), seeking anonymity.

Nahiduzzaman Khan, executive engineer of BWDB, told The Daily Star that both rivers have been filled up. Moreover, they have been the source of immense misery for people whose lives and livelihoods depend on them, as the waterbodies have never been dredged.

The government has taken up a project at an estimated cost of Tk 586 crore to dredge both rivers, and the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecnc) approved the project in July 2022.

Under this project, 10.81 km of embankments will be constructed on the banks to protect the population living there from floods and erosion. Moreover, 59.3 lakh cubic metres of Changi and 76.34 lakh cubic metres of Mainee will be dredged.

If the project is implemented, important structures, settlements, cropland and forest resources will be protected in seven upazilas in Khagrachhari, said a project official, wishing anonymity.

"We have undertaken a project to restore both rivers to their former appearance by surveying them. There will be no more suffering for the locals, as dam construction and dredging of both riverbanks will be done under the project," claimed Nahiduzzaman.

The project is scheduled to be completed by June 2025.



Soaring prices, unhygienic production

Availability of quality vermicelli compromised ahead of Eid

According to local sources, some of the factories are using unrefined palm oil and animal fat to produce "lachchha" vermicelli. Hazardous chemicals and toxic colours are also being used.

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

Vermicelli, locally known as "shemai", is a must-have item during Eid. But due to the soaring prices of ingredients essential to making vermicelli, especially flour, the price of this beloved desert has also gone up in the market.

Ahead of Eid, vermicelli workers of the port city are passing a busy time. Meanwhile, a section of corrupt traders are busy manufacturing sub-standard vermicelli in an unhygienic environment.

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of the factories are using unrefined palm oil and animal fat to produce "lachchha" vermicelli. Hazardous chemicals and toxic colours are also being used.

Chaktai and Rajakhali of Khatunganj are well-known hubs for locally produced vermicelli. There are two types of vermicelli -- lachchha and Bangla. Bangla vermicelli is produced using flour and water, while lachchha is produced with oil or ghee, flour, sugar and water.

Traders said this year ahead of Eid, more than 5,000 baskets of vermicelli will be produced for customers in the

port city and its surrounding areas.

During a recent visit to a factory named "Two Mangos" in Rajakhali, this correspondent talked to the workers, who said that vermicelli prices are going up due to the higher prices of flour and other ingredients.

Worker Md Tarek said, "Earlier, we had to sell a bucket of vermicelli, weighing around 35 kilos, for Tk 1,200 to 1,500."

Md Nazim Uddin, a wholesale trader in Khatunganj, echoed him and said each basket of vermicelli used to be sold at Tk 1,300 to 1,500, depending on the quality.

"We started taking preparations before Ramadan, and the factory operation will go on in full swing 10 to 12 days before Eid," said Tarek.

According to Chaktai Silpo and Traders Association, there are around 10 to 15 vermicelli factories located in Chaktai-Rajakhali Khatunganj vicinity, where around 4,000 to 5,000 baskets of vermicelli are produced during every Ramadan.

Traders said most of the factories are seasonal, while a group of five to six workers work at each factory with only one vermicelli machine throughout Ramadan.

This correspondent visited several other such factories and saw vermicelli being made in a grimy, dark environment. Vermicelli was being dried in unhygienic conditions on the rooftops of the factories. Hanging on bamboo sticks, piles of vermicelli were being moved by workers, all of whom did not wear gloves or any other hygienic coverings.

Contacted, Md Towhidul Alam, assistant commissioner of Chattogram District Administration, said, "We will conduct a mobile court in the area soon against the reported unhygienic environment."