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PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Chattogram's death traps

Open drains continue to pose fatal threat

Take the case of the drains on both sides of the road from Muradpur to Bahaddarhat for example, one of the main thoroughfares of the port city. The huge drains by the side of footpaths have been left open and unprotected.

ARUN BIKASH DEY

"I thank God for letting me see my son's body for the last time," Ali Kawsar, the father of a 12-year old boy, told reporters with tear-stained eyes, soon after the body of his son Kamal was recovered from Mirza Khal in Chattogram's Muradpur area in December 2021, around 68 hours after he fell into a drain on December 7.

And he had reasons to thank the Almighty, as he could at least find the body of his baby boy, or whatever that remained of him.

The family of vegetable vendor Saleh Ahmed was not so lucky, as he is still "missing" even after almost two years of falling into the same drain, located near Sholashahar Railway Station of the port city on August 25 of the same year.

Similarly, a university student named Sehrin Mahbub Sadia was also swept away by an open drain in September of the same year.

A three-year-old baby, Ojaila was killed after falling down into an unprotected drain in



With the ongoing monsoon threatening to exacerbate waterlogging, the residents harbour a collective fear that such tragedies may proliferate once more.

Sadarghat Nalapara area on April 9 this year.

Over the past seven years, at least eight lives have been claimed, while countless others suffered injuries, after falling into these unprotected drains and canals that haunt the city's streets.

The open drains have set up a perfect death trap for the people living in the port city. As the commercial capital of the country sinks even after minimal rain, it gets nearly impossible for its residents to identify these roadside sewers.

With the ongoing monsoon threatening to exacerbate waterlogging, the inhabitants of Chattogram harbour a collective fear that such tragedies may proliferate once more, as the disconcerting state of the open drains persists largely unchanged.

Take the case of the drains on both sides of the road from Muradpur to Bahaddarhat for example, one of the main thoroughfares of the port city. The huge drains by the side of footpaths have been left open and unprotected.

During a recent visit, it was noticed that pedestrians were walking on the footpaths with a high risk of falling into the drains. The risk of accidents increases manifold at nighttime and during waterlogging.

"Waterlogging is a common phenomenon

in this area during monsoon; as the road goes under water, pedestrians fail to differentiate the road from these drains, which causes accidents," said MA Gani, a resident of Bahaddarhat area.

The same situation prevailed in the drains beside the road from Muradpur to Sholashahar. There is a wide drain on one side of the road and a canal (Chashma Khal) on the other side. Although a number of accidents and casualties occurred in this canal including the tragedies mentioned above, the canal still lies unprotected.

"We are in a constant state of panic while crossing the road during waterlogging," said local resident Samir Jaladas.

According to city corporation officials, there are a total of 57 (161km) canals and 765km drains in the city. Chattogram City Corporation conducted a survey of risky spots in drains, canals and footpaths in 2021. After the survey, a total of 5,527 risky spots were identified, the total length of which was 19km. But the works on safeguarding the risky spots have allegedly been going on at a snail's pace, said sources in CCC.

Contacted, CCC Chief Engineer Rafiqul Islam said they have already installed slabs on 30,000 square feet of drains, while retaining walls have been built beside 18,000 square feet of risky canals.

About unprotected drains and canal in Muradpur to Sholashahar Gate-2, he said the Chattogram Development Authority has been working in these areas under a mega project for addressing waterlogging, so it is the responsibility of CDA to protect the canal and drains of these places.

Contacted, Lt Col Shah Ali, project director of CDA, said CDA was just working to install walls by the Chashma canal, but the drains on the other side of the road don't fall under their jurisdiction.

"We have built a protection wall in some portions of the canal and the remaining works will be resumed in the next dry season," he said.



Gone are the cinemas

ARUN BIKASH DEY

There was a time when movie theatres used to multiply Eid joys for most "Chatgaiya" families.

The port city residents would often set off to dive into a cinematic experience with friends or loved ones to relish a moment for themselves after a tiring day of festivities and responsibilities.

"On the first or second eve of Eid, we would set off in crowds to cheer Ajim-Sujata, Rahman-Shabnam and Razzak-Kabori as they appeared on the silver screen," recalled Abdul Hamid, a 60-year-old resident of Panchlaish area.

Over 30 movie theatres were running in full swing in the city during the late 1900s.

"The halls used to compete over good movies while we had to fight our way up the queue to get tickets. To further draw movie-buffs, the theatres would be beautifully decorated with coloured lights and posters during Eid, especially the Gulzar Cinema Hall. Sometimes, tickets even had to be bought in black," said Asad Haider of Bibirhat area.



A shopping mall replaced Gulzar Cinema Hall in 2005, said Abdul Aziz of Katalganj.

Most of the halls have been demolished to build multi-story buildings and malls. The city currently has just two operational movie theatres -- Cinema Palace and Sugandha (earlier known as Jhumur Cinema Hall), said Abul Hossain, president of Chattogram Cinema Hall Owners' Association and the owner of the halls.

"The demolition started in the late 1990s when vulgarity engulfed the film industry. With time, the audience turned away from the cinema halls, and our business started to collapse. The introduction of private television channels and internet facilities further added to their demise," he added.

A hall used to employ around 30 staff, all of whom received respect, enough salaries, and bonuses. However, with decreasing audience turn-outs, the owners are now struggling to even pay salaries regularly.

Following the first fall, other theatres -- Banani Complex, Jalsa, Nupur, Melody, Uzala, Lion, Khurshid Mahal, Rangam, Almas, Diner, Sanai, Uphar, Rhythm, Sagarika, Alankar, Akash, Chandni, Karnaphuli, Rupali, Purabi, and Garrison -- were demolished gradually to build shopping malls.

According to movie experts and hall owners, the audience now prefers multiplexes over single screens as they offer better sound and screen quality and more comfortable sitting arrangements.

Around 1,200 cinema halls have been shut down in the last 20 years in the country, while 200 are still struggling to cope with modern trends, mentioned Aolad Hossain Uzzwal, general secretary of Bangladesh Motion Picture Exhibitors' Association.

Where tigers roamed free

ARUN BIKASH DEY

"I grew up listening to my grandfather's stories of how tigers ascended down these hills. He even saw one himself while one of his friends even tried to hunt one once using a trap, but failed. It was their reality, but for us and our following generations, it's only a myth," said 80-year-old Saleh Ahmed sipping tea at a small stall in the port city's Tiger Pass area.

Chattogram city used to be a small settlement, stretching only 16 square km during the 1950s, with tigers roaming around the hills and hunting. Humans had to put up a tough fight to survive as they often preyed on their cattle, said Prof Abdul Mannan, former chairman of University Grants Commission and ex-vice chancellor of Chittagong University.

"I started schooling in this town in 1953 and have grown up listening to stories that sing of the 'glorious' tiger hunters," he added.

Once a wildlife sanctuary guarded by hills and hillocks, Tiger Pass, located in the central town, is now a busy intersection, connecting four roads. These roads were established at the cost of these wild animals to develop the city's connectivity.

Many other such city areas, like Leopard Pass and Baagh Ghona (Tigers' Haven), were named after the tigers that ruled over these areas.

Abdul Haque Chowdhury, in his book "Bandar Shahar Chattogram", mentioned of the tigers and how they were hunted down by humans using traps and guns, said Prof Anupam Sen, vice chancellor of Premier University Chittagong.



This is how the Tiger Pass intersection look now, devoid of hills and greenery.

"This place was named after the tigers as they would make frequent visits while crossing between the two big hills in the area that glided towards the sea, even during the 1900s," said Prof Sen who has spent his childhood in the city.

The roars could even be heard during the day time, said the social scientist, referring to Arthur Lloyd Clay's book "Leaves from a Diary in Lower Bengal".

"The government used to reward tiger hunters back then. In fact, two tigers were brought in for rewards within a week of Clay's posting in the district in 1862. These books carry evidence of the silent war between humans and the tigers, and how the four-legged legends had to bow before the guns before leaving this place for good," he added.



The area was named after tigers as they would make frequent visits while crossing between the two big hills in the area even during the 1900s. Now all that remains is a statue of a tiger.