



(L) Star file photo of gill nets that are used to catch baby hilsa. (R) Around 55 lakh meters of gill nets were seized in a raid at a mill in Muktarpur of Munshiganj on April 17.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Gill nets banned but abundant

At least 300 factories continue to make these deadly fishing traps in Munshiganj due to lax monitoring and lenient punishment

“Although the police are determined to eliminate illegal production of gill nets, they have limitations as police are not authorised to assist fisheries officers during drives. Closing down the gill net producing factories, besides stricter punishment, is the only way to stop this menace, however, the existing law does not permit this.

ASLAM KHAN
Superintendent of police in Munshiganj

TANJIL HASAN

Although a ban enforced by the government is in place for gill nets, locally known as current nets, to save fish species including hilsa from overfishing, the production and use of the nets have been continuing unabated.

Experts said the absence of a sustained effort from different government bodies alongside lenient punishment against the producers and users are to blame.

Use of gill nets is detrimental to fish population in rivers and water bodies, and is considered a major cause behind reduced production of hilsa and other freshwater fish species.

WHAT IS GILL NET?
Gill net is a small-mesh monofilament net capable of catching even the smallest of fish fries.

When a fish swims into a gill net and passes only partially through the mesh, it struggles to free itself, causing the twine to slip behind the gill cover, preventing its escape.



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STAR FILE PHOTO

Munshiganj Sadar Fishermen's Association, said, "It is an open secret that illegal current nets are being produced behind the curtains and the fishers mainly collect those from Muktarpur."

ATM Taufiq Mahmud, Munshiganj district fisheries officer, said, "After the 22-day ban on hilsa fishing became effective on October 12, we seized more than 3.48 crore metres of illegal gill nets in just 11 days till October 24, during drives in the rivers, market palaces and factories which produce the nets."

Aslam Khan, superintendent of police in Munshiganj, said although the police are determined to eliminate illegal production of gill nets, they have limitations as police are not authorised to assist fisheries officers during drives.

Closing down the gill net producing factories, besides stricter punishment, is the only way to stop this menace, however, the existing law does not permit this, he also said.

The amended Protection and Conservation of Fish Act 2002 has a provision of a maximum five-year jail term for an illegal fishing net producing factory owner. There is no provision for closing down the factory.

"We have submitted charge sheets against some factory owners in this regard. They are, however, very influential," SP Aslam said.

"Also, during drives, we often find the factories producing nets that are legal, but when we are not around, they begin producing gill nets. It is not possible to monitor the factories all the time," he added.

Contacted, Kh Mahbubul Haque, director general of the fisheries department, said additional funds have been allocated to create awareness among people against the gill nets besides regular drives.

"If the owners of factories that produce illegal nets make an application demanding compensation after admitting their involvement, we can forward it to the government and help them with alternative employment and rehabilitation. If possible, the machines can be converted to produce other legal products," Haque said.

"We are also taking the initiative to revise the law within the next 3-4 months with provision for stricter punishment after holding a meeting with stakeholders," he added.



Illegal current nets being destroyed on the bank of Dhaleswari river in Munshiganj.

PHOTO: COLLECTED



Gill net being manufactured at a factory in Munshiganj. There are over 300 small and big factories producing such nets, locally known as current jaal, in different areas of the district. The absence of a sustained effort from different government bodies alongside lenient punishment against the producers and users continue to threaten the fish population, including hilsa, of our rivers.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

This characteristic makes gill nets so effective in catching fish that, due to its widespread use, it is feared that there would come a time when hilsa and many other fish species would no longer be found in waterbodies,

and people would have to rely only on farmed-fish for necessary protein.

The government in 2002 banned the production, marketing, import, storage, transport and use of gill nets by amending the Protection and Conservation of Fish Act 1950.

The cheap and effective current nets are employed year round for catching fish, especially during the hilsa season.

Every year, for a certain time of ban on catching, selling, hoarding, and transportation of hilsa, many government agencies conduct drives against use of the net.

However, the drives have largely remained ineffective in preventing the illegal production of gill nets and its use by fishermen.

The Fisheries Department confiscated 16.89 crore metres of gills nets during drives conducted in the 2020-21 fiscal year. The seizure was 40 lakh metres between November 2015 to June 2016.

In special combing operations and mother hilsa conservation campaigns in 17 districts-involving the coast guard, river police and district administration-4.69 crore metres of gill nets were confiscated and destroyed in 2022.

The figures only indicate that despite the ban and drives, the production and use of gill nets only continued to grow alarmingly over the years.

MUNSHSHIGANJ THE HOTSPOT
There are over 300 small and big factories producing fishing nets in different areas of Munshiganj district.

Around 3,000 machines are operating in many of those factories to produce illegal gill nets, according to locals and people working in those factories. Most of the time, law enforcers facilitate the illegal trade by turning a blind eye, they alleged.

The nets are mainly produced and traded in Muktarpur, Gosaibagh, Malirpathor, Nayagaon villages under Panchsar union of the district, and are supplied to different parts of the country including Chattogram, Cumilla, Chandpur, Patuakhali, Barishal and Bhola districts, they added.

"There were around 8-10 such factories in the 1980s, but it has now increased to around 50 in our locality," said Delawar Hossain, 50, a resident of Muktarpur.

Each of these factories operate 2-10 machines producing gill nets round the clock, he added.

Mozammel Hossain Maju, 60, who

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has been working in net-making factories for over four decades, said the factories have grown like mushrooms in this locality due to high profit.

"There are over 300 factories currently operating in Panchsar union and producing around 70,000 pounds of gill nets daily," he said.

Some owners and workers revealed that earnings from the illegal trade, both production and sale, of gill nets touch nearly Tk 15-18 crore a month.

A 34-year old former machine operator of a factory in Muktarpur said each machine produces 24 pounds of net daily, at a production cost of Tk 3,000.

Allegedly, Panchsar union parishad chairman Golam Mostafa and his cousin Mohammad Mohiuddin, a former president of the now-defunct

Fishery Materials Manufacturers Association, are running the illegal gill net production syndicate.

A huge cache of illegal gill nets was seized from GM Corporation and Sawban factories owned by Mostafa, and at least five cases lodged by the naval police and the coast guard are pending against him.

Mostafa is now out on bail in those cases. Mohiuddin is also currently on bail after serving a few days behind bars in a case related to the production of gill nets.

Contacted, Golam Mostafa, however, denied the allegation saying, "I don't know anything about this. Most factory owners have left the production of gill nets by now."

Mohammad Mohiuddin, who is also the joint convener of BNP's Munshiganj district unit, said, "Gill netting was legal at first. Later, a law was passed, declaring it illegal. We also filed a petition with the High Court in this regard. After the court rejected our petition, the association no longer exists."

He also said while some still produce illegal gill nets, he is not involved in this.

"I was falsely charged in the case filed against me for my political affiliation," he alleged.

Md Amanullah, president of



On August 27, 2022, the Naval Police seized two and a half million metres of illegal current nets from two net manufacturing factories owned by Panchsar Union Parishad Chairman Golam Mostafa of Munshiganj Sadar. In this regard, two cases are ongoing against the chairman with Munshiganj Sadar Police Station.

PHOTO: COLLECTED