



Empty launches wait at the Sadarghat terminal. Launch owners say they have lost around 70 percent of passengers since the opening of Padma Bridge. The photo was taken on Thursday afternoon.

PHOTO: NAIMUR RAHMAN

Launch owners struggling to stay afloat

MD ABBAS

"If you seek comfort, no journey is better than a journey by launch. You book a room and you arrive at your destination well-rested. The sightseeing is a bonus," says Mehedi Hasan, a resident of Borguna's Bamna.

But, for him, the main concern is time. He says it used to take around 14-16 hours to travel between his home in Barguna and Dhaka. And with options at hand, he now can't afford to waste a whole day.

"I can now travel to Dhaka from my village in less than 6 hours. The Padma Bridge has cut the travel time as well as added new comfortable busses to my route," he says.

Like Mehedi, a significant portion of people who used to use the waterways switched to less time-consuming road transportation, bringing the inland waterways business to its knees. Launch owners, who invested millions in building luxurious multi-storey ships, are now struggling to keep their operations afloat. The business insiders have also attributed the crisis to mismanagement by authorities and shrinking of routes and waterways due to poor navigability.

According to a report published in August last year, launch passengers have decreased by 35-45 percent on different routes. It counted data from July, 2022 to June, 2023.

It said around 50,000 people used to travel to various coastal districts by launch from Dhaka every day before the opening of Padma Bridge. Within a year of the opening of the bridge, this number decreased by 17,000 to 33,000 with a 34 percent drop.



This file photo shows a bustling Sadarghat terminal before the opening of the Padma Bridge.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

SADARGHAT LAUNCH TERMINAL A bustling riverport GONE QUIETER

The port has become dramatically quieter. You can still see a few big boats with fancy names arrive at Sadarghat from different places across the country. Hawkers and vendors still sell an array of products. ... And the Buriganga is still flowing and just as polluted. However, regulars who frequented this place in the past can feel it — the essence of this place is gone.

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It is hard to describe a place when its glory days are over.

The structures, roads and some of the businesses remain there, but something goes missing — a thing that can make a chaotic, hectic place charming, and endearing even.

Just a couple of decades ago, before the surge in road infrastructure development across the country, Sadarghat, occupying a central point on the Buckland Bund, served as the central hub connecting millions of people from the riverine south with the capital city. Situated on the banks of the Buriganga, it has been a river port since the 19th century.

In 1967, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) constructed a modern naval terminal at Sadarghat. After several rounds of renovation and expansion, it took the shape of today's terminal.

For decades, Sadarghat has been a maddening place, a place where so much would be going on, all at once, it would make your head spin. The impossibly long lines to get a ticket, the desperate

boats with fancy names arrive at Sadarghat from different places across the country. Hawkers and vendors still sell an array of products. The wholesale markets are still as busy as always. And the Buriganga is still flowing and just as polluted.

However, regulars who frequented this place in the past can feel it — the essence of this place is gone.

With better road communications, the terminal was already slowly losing its status as the main communication hub with the south. But the inauguration of the Padma Bridge, which connects the capital with south-western districts by road, came as a heavy blow.

And the effect can be felt by all the businesses around.

During a recent visit in the afternoon, Sadarghat's peak hour, only a few passengers were at the terminal.

The once-vibrant location, teeming with businesses and thousands of people, has become slow and quite uneventful.

With the a drastic

Tk 1,500-2,000. Previously, I used to cut a profit of at least Tk 1,000-1,200 per day, but now it has dwindled to only about Tk 500 on a good day," he adds.

"With the current surge in prices of essentials, it's now extremely difficult to support my family of four with the income. I'm thinking of leaving this place too," comments Shohag.

Mohammad Masud, a fruit seller at the terminal for over 12 years, echoed the same. "I hardly make any profit now," he says.

The situation is more or less the same for all the vendors of Sadarghat.

It is also hurting the markets — Sadarghat Municipal Hawkers Market, East Bengal Institution Super Market, and Sharif Market — and small dining shops in the area.

"Once, this market attracted a huge number of customers. Now we don't get many, even in peak seasons," says Mohammad Sohel, an employee of Raising Fashion at the Hawkers Market, who has been working here for years.

"The prices of everything have gone up, but not our salaries. We get what we used to get

five years ago. Knowing the sales, it's hard to push the owners to increase salaries. It's a struggle to meet ends now," he continues.

Parvez Hossain, a worker at a shoe shop at Sharif Market, said sales have come down to half after the inauguration of the Padma Bridge.

"This is the Eid season. A few years back, at this time, we had to struggle to deal with the huge number of customers. But now only a few come this way," he says. Most of the shopkeepers in the area echoed the same sentiment.

Besides, some porters who used to earn their livelihood have also changed their profession due to lack of work.

Some have started pulling rickshaws or vans, while some have become day labourers.

Rahamat Miah is one of them. "I used to be a porter here for at least 15 years. I earn better now. When launches arrived, the whole area used to come alive with activities," he remembers.

"I still miss those days," he says.



Launch staff and vendors sit idle at the Sadarghat terminal on Thursday evening.



PHOTO: NAIMUR RAHMAN

rush to get a seat on the launch — on special holidays like Eid it would be a spot to stand on the shouts and cries of passengers, launch operators, vendors and kulis, all would merge to form a cacophonous din. Yet even in that chaos and madness, one could not ignore the excitement and raw energy of this ghat.

The port has become dramatically quieter. You can still see a few big

drop in the number of passengers, Sadarghat's numerous businesses and makeshift small vendors are now struggling to remain afloat.

"Many vendors have already left," says Mohammad Shohag, a vendor who sells bananas and bread at the terminal.

"Earlier, I used to generate sales of Tk 3,000-4,000 daily. Since the bridge's opening, my sales have come down to

It also said at least 80 launches used to leave Dhaka daily for various destinations. This number has been reduced by 20 to 60 during the study period.

However, business insiders say the drop in passengers is more than 70 percent. And since August last year, the situation has worsened significantly putting the launch owners in a financial crisis to the extent that they are now struggling to pay salaries to employees regularly, which, in turn, compelled many workers to either quit jobs or switch to other professions.

The owners now claim that only 5000-6000 passengers leave Dhaka in 30-35 launches every day.

Now, under a rotation system, the owners say, only two launches operate on the popular Dhaka-Barishal route daily. Before the crisis, at least a dozen luxurious launches like Sundarban-10, Manami, Parabat used to operate on the route daily. Similarly, only two launches now operate on the Dhaka-Charfassion route daily. A similar rotation system has been launched on the Dhaka-Patuakhali and Dhaka-Hatia routes, with one launch operating daily on each route.

However, according to the owners, these adjustments have not been enough to offset their losses.

Nazrul Khan, supervisor of the MV Parabat-12, says things have to improve fast to keep the business afloat, a sentiment shared by officials of other launch companies.

BM Ataur Rahman Atahar, senior vice-president of the launch owners' association and managing director of M/S Bapari Navigation Company, says, "The owners are now in such a position that they may have to quit their businesses."

Some owners are looking for alternative businesses to overcome the losses, he adds.

According to Mohammad Mostafizur Rahman, BIWTA deputy director at Dhaka Sadarghat, there are currently 10 launches operating on the Dhaka-Barishal route as the number of passengers dropped by about 70 percent.

"Most of the launches remain idle at the ghat [jetty]. The owners have resorted to cutting the number of staff to minimise the losses. Even after operating two launches daily on the Dhaka-Barishal and Dhaka-Patuakhali routes, they do not get desired number of passengers," he says.

It is unlikely that additional launches will operate during Eid amid this scenario, he adds.