Breaking Ships Broken Hearts

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AS our dilapidated Land Rover approached the massive gates of the ship-breaking yard, the air was heavy, humid and assaulting to the lungs. It was a typical July day. Perspiration streamed down my father's neck. The clouds hung low in the sky. They seemed to follow us wherever we went.

Inside the yard, our car trembled its way through the winding path of mud and scrap metal. We stopped and our guide, a bald, chubby man of short stature and even shorter temper, stepped out.



The shipyards employ thousands of men who risk their lives working in the most dangerous circumstances. PHOTO: ASFARA AHMED

He spoke very briefly to a man standing in front of our car. After a moment, with a swift gesture of his hand, he signaled us to get out.

"The path stops here," he said. "We have to walk the rest of the way."

With every step, I could hear the high pitched shriek of bending metal. Something stung my eyes. I could taste salt and metal in the air. Years of contact with rusting iron had coloured patches of the soil blood red.

Further off into the distant haze of dust and fog, half a dozen ships towered towards the angry sky. I was taken aback by the apparent randomness of their placement. For, objects that massive should be handled with greater care.

Sitakunda is the second largest ship breaking facility in the world, located about 10 km north of the port city of Chittagong in southeast Bangladesh. The ship breaking yards of Bangladesh supply 80-90% of the nation's steel. Ship breaking is a vital link in an eternal cycle of destruction and creation, the inevitable destiny of wood and metal after a lifetime of service. Here, these mighty ships are dissected and stripped of all valuable parts. The harvested scrap metal is then melted down and remolded into its various reincarnations. In its greatest resurrection, it is used to produce the strong corrugated iron rods that support the massive steel and concrete towers that have come to symbolize Bangladesh's steady economic expansion, an emergence of a new age.

Thirty-two separate ship- breaking yards are spread across 7 km of Sitakunda's coastline. In 2005, 135 ships, equaling a total weight of more than 1 million tons, were dismantled in Sitakunda. The shipyards employ, directly and indirectly, more than 300,000 people. They work in the most dangerous of circumstances. Most of the work is done manually or with the most primitive of tools. Safety precautions are never a consideration.

The ship breaking industry was born out of hardship and disaster following a cyclone in 1960 that destroyed property and killed thousands of people. The force of the storm beached the MD Alpine, a 20,000-ton Greek nautical giant on Sitakunda's virgin shores. As a testament to human endurance, residents used the sharp, twisted wreckage to ensure their economic survival. The growth of the industry was fueled by the destruction resulting