from the 1971 war of independence, which left many ships unusable or in a state of disrepair. The struggle continues for the residents of Sitakunda. They still strive to do as much as they can with what little they have, in a dangerous and unforgiving environment.

The day before, we had visited an antique shop, five minutes away from the ship-breaking yard. Outside the shop, bright orange life jackets dangled lifelessly from a ceiling hook. The shopkeeper, a short, chubby man with a mischievous smile, eagerly welcomed us in. The interior of the shop smelled of brass polish. Paint peeling off the walls had formed giant scabs, exposing the coarse, dark gray cement that lay beneath. The rooms were filled with large, cluttered shelves of brightly polished gongs, clocks and telescopes, the relics of long-ago journeys, now forgotten.

The shopkeeper showed us to a steep, metal ladder that led to the second floor of the shop. I carefully climbed the aged ladder, as it bellowed out ominous creaks under the weight of my body, barely conquering my uneasiness and anxiety. The second floor was a maze of cluttered, dust-covered shelves. Small treasures suddenly caught my eye. Sharp silver dueling swords and bejeweled daggers protruded through the top of a brown paper carton. Large, jet-black touchstone Buddha statues sat on a nearby shelf, in deep contemplation, as small Chinese jade figurines stood steadfastly beside them. Intricately carved antique wooden boxes from distant lands revealed scenes of exotic cultures in painstaking detail. A blanket of ancient dust covered everything I saw. However, it had failed to diminish the beauty of these objects.

Today, down at the breaking yards, the shimmer of perfectly polished brass and silver was replaced by the reddish brown tinge of rusting iron.

As I walked on the beach, I quickly made my way towards the ships, away from my father's disapproving glance. I sensed the hostility in the air. He had made his feelings clear from the beginning of our journey. However, I empathized with his annoyance. How can one truly justify the lure of such a place, a place meant to repel rather than attract? My journey here was one of curiosity rather than necessity, a short stop on my way to a nearby factory to complete a university project. Yet, I was inexplicably drawn to it.

On, the beach, massive ships dominated the landscape. The shipyard workers seemed ant-like in comparison, very minute and insignificant.

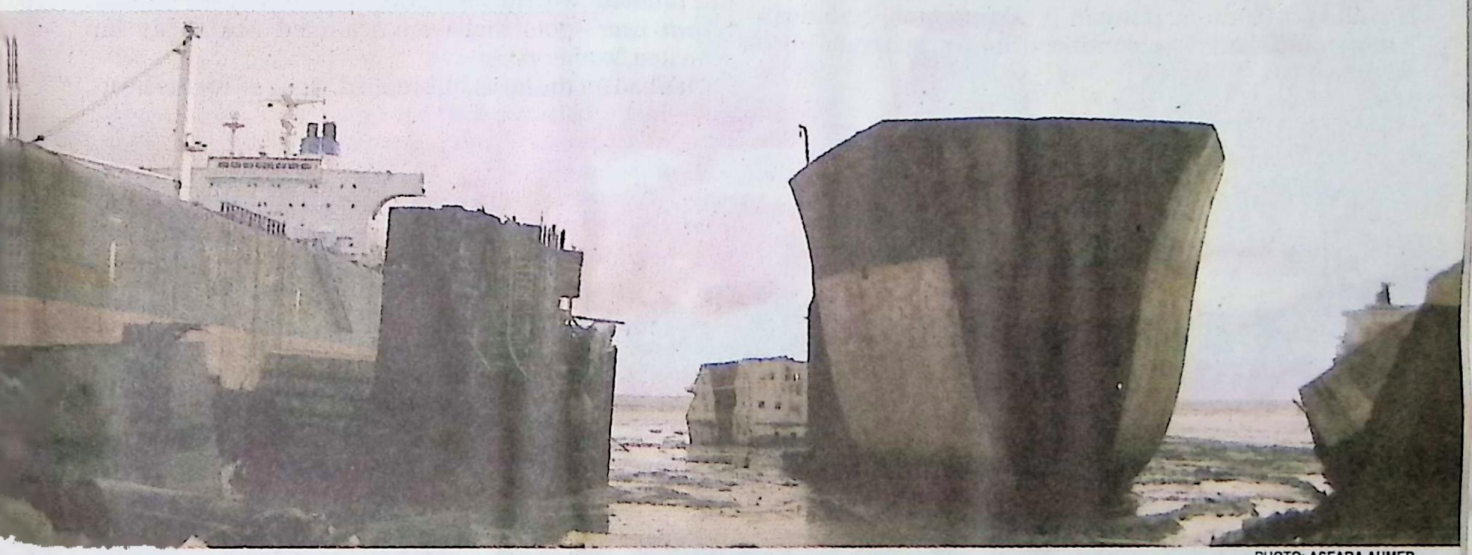


PHOTO: ASFARA AHMED

I tried to make my way through piles of rusted scrap metal to get a view of the ocean. As I carefully balanced myself on a large metal beam, I finally saw the silvery outline of the Bay of Bengal on the distant horizon.

A mammoth cargo ship named "Orestic" blocked my path to the ocean. I followed the curvature of its hull with my gaze. There was a beauty to its structure. One immediately realises the grace and efficiency with which the mighty vessel must have sliced its way through the ocean. I carefully positioned my camera to take a picture and adjusted the zoom. I stared at the display, completely unsatisfied with the lighting and colour.

Sitakunda was notoriously dangerous for those who relied upon it for their livelihood. Once in a while, stories of explosions and accidents would pierce through our insulated existence and reach us through the local media. In 2005, a mysterious toxic gas was released from one such ship, instantly killing three people and causing skin and respiratory problems in others who were exposed. That same year, an explosion aboard an old oil tanker killed three and injured 20 others.

According to estimates by local nongovernmental organisations, as many as 400 workers have been killed,