

A DAY ON THE SHITALAKHYA

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Though it's a sunny Friday morning, the concrete Gulistan flyover renders the landscape gunmetal, where I'm to meet Shohag Mohajon, the manager of Clean River Bangladesh. Almost 20 minutes of miscommunication later, I manage to find him in a sea of speedy civilians. We exchange greetings and get on the waiting bus. "We held the bus for five minutes just because of you," the helper says, mockingly. Inside, I find Mili Rahman, the chief monitor, Monoranjan Mondol, the vice president, and around 20 kids in neon t-shirts and blue trousers who would be voluntarily cleaning the Shitalakhya river. For six months now, since the inception of the organisation, the volunteers have collected the necessary funds and cleaned nearly 20 rivers around Dhaka weekly.

Around three to four sentinel factories with their sentinel chimneys are visible from this side of the bank, also known as "Silo" ghat. Trawlers, rusty vessels,

blaring words full of passion.

Everything is here—the protectors, the cause, and the perpetrators. The kids repeat after him, "Shitalakhya is my river". The words hover in the air, their voices one and full of meaning with the backdrop of these unwanted things.

They are cleaning the bank, sweeping, disposing rotten leaves and branches into buckets with unrelenting discipline. Until now, I was ignorant of the fact that rotten leaves or dead tree branches are actually harmful to a river. The aquatic lives in it cannot spawn properly and find it uninhabitable because of the decomposition of the biodegradable materials in the water. It's a battle for oxygen when the decomposition rate is higher than normal.

Ironically, the pollution has made it easier for locals to catch fish. As the river becomes increasingly uninhabitable, the fish, at one point, swim towards the banks. And when caught by the fisher-



Rotten leaves or dead tree branches are actually harmful to a river. It's a battle for oxygen as this biodegradable matter decomposes.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

launches, and water hyacinths ply the murky grey waters. The scene looks less dystopian because there's enough sunlight—when the light goes away momentarily, it looks fully so. Further from the patch of green land where we're standing, is a metal bridge that connects the actual bank to a fallen vessel's body parts. Huge boats line the sides of the many similar metal banks. The metal banks are used by the factories for expansion, from the land into the river. Had these not existed, the river would have been as it should be.

The team is proceeding to clean the metal bank, a sizzling pan in the sun. The neon and blue soldiers maintain a line. Shohag clicks a series of photos as they march. He pulls out a microphone from his bag and takes an oath. The quietness of the area is pierced by the passing ship horns and the microphone

men, they don't struggle to escape back into the river. But the prospect of catching fish easily doesn't excuse the fact that the river is now smelly, and contains factory chemicals that have bled into the ecosystem. The locals here are as helpless as the fish that give up so easily to the fishermen's nets. They used to depend on the river for catching fish, and still do, but now at the cost of health hazards to themselves.

Now, it's time to write reports where the kids would pour in their personal observations. They're interviewing the locals with confidence and concern in their eyes. Asking them about their grades, I find that the youngest one is in the 7th grade and the oldest one, in the 9th. They all express their concerns for the gradual destruction of the rivers. They are very young, their concerns important.



A metal bridge connects the actual bank to a fallen vessel's body parts. Huge boats line the sides of the many similar metal banks, used by the factories for expansion from the land into the river. Had these not existed, the river would have been as it should be.

PHOTO: COURTESY

When I ask them about the best part of this activity, their replies are unwavering.

"We find mental peace in this activity because we are doing well by the environment. We can also encourage the locals and create awareness."

The most challenging part for the volunteers is to warn the locals of the consequences. It is a cycle that repeats itself. One moment, the locals nod in agreement as though fully understanding the harm that is being done to the river. The next moment, they're back to not giving it a thought.

Many factories have sprung up on the river banks. These are the signs of our "development". They are also the signs of our destruction—a slow but imminent one. These have expanded their areas and occupied portions of the river by putting metal banks. What used to be a wide river pathway is narrowing. If they used effluent treatment plants (ETP) and dumped refined waste, these factories' existence wouldn't pose as much a threat. Despite tough emphasis on using ETP, most factories here don't, since, their profits would be less if they actually used that money to institute ETPs as per the law. Shumon, a local, points this out to me. I ask him if there have been any protests regarding the mistreatment of the river. Shumon laughs a little and says, "It's just a bunch of people against millionaires. Who do you think would win?" Hence, they don't take the effort. It's known to them before they have even waged the battle that they're going to lose no matter what.

"Once the paper mill's expansion is completed, it will hit our lives," he adds.

Solid waste, air emissions, wastewater, dissolved materials, and residual chemicals from the paper mill will continue to affect the river and its ecosystem. It will also extract a huge

portion of the river water for its use, which will cause a water crisis in the area.

The locals emerging out of the smelly water are unaware of the consequences of swimming here. I ask an aged man if they are affected by serious illnesses for bathing here. He says the rainy season is keeping it comparatively okay for them to bath. They just face irritations on the skin, but they're habituated to this. The water is unusable during the winter season, smellier and worse than it is now.

It's lunchtime. We are all unwinding. The vice president gives a speech to conclude the programme.

He expresses his regret for not being able to buy the fish that the locals were catching.

"They are toxic and smelly. It's our fault."

He sarcastically says, "We could wash our hands in this river if we had lunch here 10 years ago."

The azaan is peacefully tearing through the ironically undisturbed atmosphere. We are leaving. The neon and blue soldiers are marching again in line, their innocent faces satisfied with their work. I take a look back at the riverside and think, if one were a life form in the river, one could only witness its slow destruction since the river is unarmed for this battle. Though ruthless in cases, such as when it swallows people and homes whole, its hands are tied when it comes to pollution.

It's the rivers against capitalism. Development against development. The grim conditions of our rivers herald the emergence of an unwanted future. We need many responsible gatekeepers to avoid this dystopia.

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