

“To be honest, the swimmers from Amla started performing from good to better in the national junior swimming championships once I got professional training on swimming.”

AMIRUL ISLAM



Amla: A swimmers’ village without a swimming pool

“Under the banner of Kushtia DSA (District Sports Association), the swimmers from Amla first participated in the national junior swimming championships in 1987 and Shahjalal won a bronze and that was the lone success. Afterwards, many swimmers from here achieved laurels. The journey is still ongoing but the most pathetic fact is the swimmers here keep practicing in available water bodies,” said Amirul.

AMANUR AMAN

Amla is a small and tranquil village, akin to many other villages in the country, situated twenty-two kilometres away from the south-western Kushtia district.

The place is, however, not unfamiliar to those who happen to follow Bangladesh swimming as the village is known as a ‘Sataru village’ (the village of swimmers).

It’s quite incredible how this village kept producing numerous swimmers for the last 35 years – who have earned fame in both national and international levels, and especially taking into account the successes which materialised without any modern facilities, or any proper ones for that matter.

From Rubel Rana, the gold medallist in the 2004 SAFF Games, to Bangladesh swimming’s new crown Jewel Ahmed to country’s famous swimmer Sabura Khatun, their swimming venture originated from this remote village.

Thus invariably, when it comes to any national competition, the swimmers from Amla always make the headlines.

But what makes it possible for the swimmers in this famous village to shine amid the non-existent infra-structure?

In 2017, a swimming pool was established in Kushtia town and unfortunately it lies almost unused.

Amirul Islam, who initiated the swimming training at Amla around 1985 with 10-12 learners, projected the bleak scenario surrounding Amla.

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“The first pond I used to train the swimmers is no longer in existence. The pond at the Amla Govt College we used was also filled up. I’m training the budding swimmers at a BADC pond, which is two kilometres away from Amla, while one of my former students named Kamal is also preparing another group of swimmers at GK project canal, which also happens to be one and half kilometre away from our village.

“One information is enough to help you understand what kind of boys and girls train here, that they have no financial ability to visit Kushtia to avail the training facilities there by spending Tk 100,” Amirul continued.

“Some six to seven thousand boys and girls trained here so far and went on to participate in domestic competitions. Meanwhile, at least twenty-five swimmers took part in different international competitions and grabbed the medals from gold to bronze but here we are, still crying and pleading for optimum facilities for so long,” said the dejected former swimmer, who failed to make his career successful as a swimmer but his dream somehow came true through his students.

Despite all hurdles, the swimming took a great stride in this village because of the interest of local people, who have continued to encourage their boys and girls to become swimmers to this very day.

“They [locals] are my great inspiration and without their enthusiasm we cannot run it here,” said Amirul.

Amirul further informed about six to seven

more clubs that are toiling hard to produce good swimmers and apart from Amirul, coaches like Kamal Hossain, Morjina Khatun, Emdadul Haque and Anwar Hossain are tirelessly involved in coaching in canals or abandoned ponds in Amla.

But why do people of this locality encourage their children to take swimming as a profession? Is it all about passion or do other factors exist?

Many consider the sustained success of swimmers here at national and international level has inspired others to take swimming as a profession.

“There is the issue of making a career through swimming. Here people are not well off and they know success in swimming can bring a job for their boy or girl in service teams,” said Amirul, who is currently a coach of Bangladesh Ansar-VDP swimming team.

“Many teenagers from this area are doing well at the national and international level as well as being engaged in good jobs in the swimming teams of Army, Navy, Ansar-VDP and Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC). For this reason, many parents remain



enthusiastic regarding swimming,” he added. “There is a job issue behind our desire to become a swimmer. And it’s one of the reasons I want to take up swimming as a career,” said an aspirant swimmer Amal Hussain, a secondary school student.

“If you know how to swim well, there is a possibility of getting a good job at a very young age. That’s why I wanted to encourage my 14-year-old girl in swimming,” said Harunur Rashid Askari, a parent of a swimmer.

The participation of the girls is another key facet of this village’s remarkable journey in swimming.

Morjina Khatun, who has already gained fame in swimming and a coach at present, said: “Many female swimmers are contributing at the national and international level by taking swimming training in adverse conditions here. Therefore, it will be good to have a swimming pool in Amla.”

Another renowned swimmer Sabura Khatun, who has won more than a hundred medals in swimming, said: “If there was patronage, extraordinary success stories would have been created from here.”

Sabura is currently working in Bangladesh Army as a coach. On the other hand, Babita Khatun and Chameli Akhtar are serving in Ansar-VDP after showing achievements in swimming while Najma Khatun, Seema

Khatun, Subarna Khatun and Lucky Akter are serving in the Navy. And upon seeing their accomplishments, dreamy-eyed girls and young women are also venturing into the sport.

Devoid of facilities, Amla had always stood on a slippery slope and conditions there have inevitably declined.

“The time has changed and you have to provide minimum facilities if you want to produce quality swimmers. Once known as a good hub of swimmers, the number of participants in recent years is far from encouraging,” said Amirul, who once served as the joint general secretary of the Bangladesh Swimming Federation.

“True we have young talent like Amy Akhter and Mukta Akhter who hogged the spotlight in the junior levels but still the overall picture is gloomy considering the glorious past.”

From young swimmers to the coaches, everybody was crying for public or private initiatives to build on their successes.

The only good news for swimmers in Amla

so far is that they are going to get a 50-meter pool with some facilities in their locality.

“One day our Mirpur upazila chairman Kamarul Arefin told me that he once heard the name of Amla of Kushtia regularly but now-a-days we hear the name of Kishoreganj in swimming,” informed Amirul.

“In reply, I told him the locals of Kishoreganj are helping their budding swimmers to groom up but here you are the only person who is going to help us by building up a 50-meter pool at the Amla High School premises. I promised him that we would regain our glory in junior swimming competitions within the next two years. To be honest, no one except the chairman of Mirpur upazila is taking care of Amla swimmers.”

From Sabura Khatun to the young swimmers, everybody holds the opinion that without modern facilities, one cannot excel in national competition or international events these days. Hence the patronage from private and government authorities is a must.

Despite the gloom, Amirul remains an extremely optimistic man and sees the silver lining. “You know, swimming has entered into the psyche of the local people. From here it is possible to build a better generation of swimmers if a swimming pool with better facilities can be built.”

‘Local swimmers train anywhere they find water bodies’

Amla, a small village in Kushtia, is renowned for giving the country some of its talented swimmers. Jewel Ahmed, a 35-time gold medalist swimmer at the national level, is one such athlete who also hails from this village. In an interview with The Daily



Star’s Ashfaq Ul Mushfiq, Jewel shared his experiences in Amla and talked about the things that need to be done to improve the scenario of his village.

The Daily Star (DS): Tell us about the early stages of your career.

Jewel Ahmed (JA): I started swimming back in 2003. Initially, I didn’t

know much about the rules of swimming. So, when I took part in my first competition, I just had this excitement of going to Dhaka. I went there with my coach, participated in the competition and came back home. But later when I realised there is an uproar around those who win medals, I said to myself that I have to win as well. So that’s how my journey in swimming started and I won my first age-level (8 to 10 years) gold in 2008.

DS: What is the process of becoming a professional swimmer from places like Amla?

JA: Back in our days, there was a good tradition of swimming in Amla. We had two swimming clubs. Later on, Bangladesh Ansar also came to Amla and swimmers from different parts of the country gathered there and chose their preferred clubs for training. To get into the service teams, swimmers need to beat a standard time and only the ones who can do that get selected.

DS: How do the swimmers get into academies in Amla?

JA: Everyone comes here of their own will. My story was that when I got interested in swimming, I went to Amla and talked to the coaches and expressed my interest to be a swimmer. And when they saw my eagerness to learn and swim, they told me to come regularly.

DS: Were there any admission or monthly fees involved?

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JA: No, to this day, no swimmers have had to pay a single penny to train in Amla. All the coaches there train swimmers voluntarily.

DS: How was the training routine for swimmers in Amla?

JA: We always trained according to the routine. Usually, in the morning, we trained from 6 to 8 or 9 and from 4 to 6 in the evening.

DS: Amla used to produce a lot of talented swimmers who would go on to win medals in international events. But it is said that things are not like how it used to be. What’s your thought about this?

JA: The main asset for a swimmer is a swimming pool which is yet to be established in Amla. I used to train in the ponds of Amla Government Degree College. With the help of our coaches, we used bamboo sticks to somehow make walls for swimmers in the pond and continued training like that. We demanded for a swimming pool in Amla for a long time. But the problem was that only orders were given but no sign of implementation. If you have talented swimmers but don’t have a swimming pool, things don’t work like that.

DS: What do you think needs to be done to improve such a scenario?

JA: As I’ve said, a swimming pool is a must. And a proper club is needed which will not only maintain the swimming pool but conduct swimming activities. They should hire a coach who will select prospects and train them on a regular basis. In Amla, currently, there are two swimming teams but they don’t have a single place to train as the swimmers have been forbidden to train in the ponds of Amla Degree College since 2016. So the local swimmers are now training anywhere they find water bodies. There is no measurement, nobody to check the time, and no proper facilities for swimming.



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