



Sand extraction, waste dumping and lack of initiatives by authorities are slowly killing our rivers. FILE PHOTO: STAR

WORLD RIVERS DAY

A riverine country with dying rivers



Nazifa Raidah is a journalist at The Daily Star.

NAZIFA RAIDAH

In my two years working at *The Daily Star*, I've found myself completely baffled at how we, the people of a riverine country, have pushed our rivers to their certain death.

The story goes like this: for years, locals near the rivers, in absence of proper waste management facilities, dump household garbage (which include large amounts of plastic) right into the river, thinking that the water will carry it away. It obviously doesn't, and when local authorities are informed of the situation, they usually claim ignorance or say the matter will be looked into – but they hardly ever follow through to solve the problem.

Then there's the other common story. Authorities like Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) invite tenders to dredge

The story goes like this: for years, locals near the rivers, in absence of proper waste management facilities, dump household garbage (which include large amounts of plastic) right into the river, thinking that the water will carry it away. It obviously doesn't, and when local authorities are informed of the situation, they usually claim ignorance or say the matter will be looked into – but they hardly ever follow through to solve the problem.

rivers for better navigability. The offers usually get approved via internal political vetting, and the tender winners overstay their welcome way beyond the contractual period. While their presence goes unnoticed during this extra time, the contractors dredge sand beyond the river's limit, creating sinkholes and eroding embankments (the usual reason behind river erosion), ultimately affecting livelihoods. The sand is then dumped on farmlands or used to fill different parts of the river during the dry season.

Now you might ask who takes ownership of the newly filled lands. If you're thinking that these lands are used to repopulate displaced communities who have lost their homes to river erosion, you couldn't be further away from the truth. The lands' ownership remains inconclusive – but more often than not, "local influential groups" occupy the areas using political muscle. Some of these spaces are turned into khas land (land under government ownership), and in the far outskirts, government personnels too take advantage of the lack of oversight and sell off these lands informally. Locals are often too afraid to speak up.

Something different can be seen in places like Sylhet where, due to

lack of timely dredging and robust embankments, massive floods affect the region's most vulnerable populations for days on end. In June last year, the worst floods in 122 years hit Sylhet and Sunamganj, displacing millions from the vast swathes of inundated land.

And how are the rivers in metropolitan areas like Dhaka faring? We cannot even think of the historically and economically significant Buriganga without imagining its deep black waters. Locals encroach the banks faster than the BIWTA can make a dent with its numerous intervention drives. The dumped waste (an issue city corporations are supposed to monitor) is not picked back up often enough. And let's not forget the numerous factories,

broadly a strong law, there are some aspects (such as water pollution and drinking water provision) that are not adequately covered, and some contradictions exist with previous and connected policies. In general, documents are sometimes unclear about the mandate and powers of individual water institutions, and there are contradictions over which agency is responsible for implementing particular activities. The water governance bodies and connected institutions include the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives; Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Water Resources; Executive Committee of National Water Resources Council; Planning Commission, Ministry of Industries; Department of Environment; Flood Forecasting Warning Centre; National River Protection Commission; and the Ministry of Textiles and Jute. These bodies hardly ever sit together and convene issues faced by each ministry to solve them.

Too many regulatory bodies taking care of rivers only means one thing – the broth has turned spoiled, and the broth here is the policies concerned with river management. So what can be done to make a dent in the huge pile of problems? Have we led ourselves to inevitable doom?

Well in reply, all I can say is a ripple can cause a wave. Each problem needs to be addressed individually. If uncontrolled and mostly illegal sand extraction from riverbeds are killing rivers and farmlands, we need to start depending on sustainable alternatives for sand to beat these "sand mafias." When buildings are demolished, the waste can be crushed and mixed into cement, and the rubble can be used for building foundations and roads. Germany for instance recycles more than two-thirds of its construction waste. But in countries like India and Bangladesh (with dense cities and growing population) the amount is still paltry. Moreover, to curb incessant dredging, finding and certifying sustainable sources of sand would make it easier to track illegal extractions, apart from significantly raising the bar for punishment and fines for illegal dredgers.

Secondly, behavioural change campaigns are a must for the waste dumping issue, and city corporations can take steps by identifying the intervention points and monitoring change for at least five years. A countrywide ethical waste dumping campaign needs to be set up with appropriate provisions for bins in every locality. While authorities may point to how mammoth of a task a mass river clean-up programme is, it must be noted that Cambodia has already shown it is possible. Once every year in Cambodia, the organisation River Ocean Cleanup partners with the Royal Government of Cambodia and others to clean the country's most polluted rivers and tributaries, not within years but at times within days. Why can't we do the same in Bangladesh? Until the authorities answer this question, our identity as a riverine country hangs in the balance.

A youth forced to censor its thoughts



Monorom Polok is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

MONOROM POLOK

The last time Awami League was not in power, I was still in primary school. I came into adulthood under the current prolonged reign of this party, and for a long time, I held a positive view of it. Given the opportunity to vote, I probably would have supported AL. During my mid- to late-teens, my perception of the BNP was tainted by memories of arson attacks on buses with passengers still aboard. Mostly it was things I had learned of from the media. The load-shedding problem loomed large, and the efficiency of book distribution in schools had room for improvement. The economy at large also wasn't at its best. Jobs were paying less. In particular, government job holders were so underpaid that the ideal way to go was to seek employment in the private sector.

Once the Awami League came to power, our educational curriculum increasingly emphasised lessons, stories, and history related to the Liberation War, with a particular

term in power, unleash such brutality on a group of educated youths who were peacefully advocating for their rights? The aftermath further baffled me, as some political leaders blamed the opposition party, and the organisers of the protests were suddenly being accused of having extremist ties. Throughout this ordeal, my friends and I remained perplexed because, to us, the demands appeared logical and justifiable.

That same year, the students' road safety movement unfolded – an inspiring display of the youth's power. Students were conducting the protests with remarkable discipline, stopping vehicles which didn't have the proper documents and allowing emergency vehicles to pass. However, this time, the ruling party's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, attacked students while the police stood by as mere spectators. The protest was further undermined by the spread of fake news. Once again,



ILLUSTRATION: RAKEEB RAZZAQ

focus on Awami League's contributions and tales about Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This cultivated a sense of national pride in myself and my peers. We cherished the "free country" we enjoyed, thanks to the sacrifices of the martyrs and all those who had played a role for us in the war. Through all this, we subconsciously inherited the notion of nationalism.

However, as I grew older, the sense of freedom in our country began to wane. I distinctly remember the moment my perspective on the government underwent a drastic transformation – during the quota reform movement. I joined the protests one day upon hearing about their reasonable demands. Though the issue did not directly affect me, I was drawn to the passionate gathering of young people advocating for their rights in a peaceful manner.

On the day of the sit-ins, I participated eagerly. There were hours of chanting slogans and making demands. However, as the sun set, the police unexpectedly released tear gas on the protesters and charged at us. The once peaceful assembly of demonstrators scattered, and the entire Dhaka University campus area was engulfed in tear gas. It was a chaotic and distressing situation, to say the least. The protest took a violent turn, with students being beaten and many arrested. Our eyes, affected by the gas, didn't stop tearing up until the next day. In the media, the narrative shifted to blame the opposition party for inciting unrest – a narrative we knew to be false. There was no political party involved there. It was the general youth heading the movement.

This was a pivotal moment for me. How could a political party, in the midst of its second consecutive

ruling party leaders shamelessly urged the public not to believe in what they termed propaganda, even though it was evident that these young students had no connection to the false information. Still, the propaganda did affect us. On the streets and at home, the rumours were painted so violently that the movement's mood turned gloomy and dark.

Once more, we questioned the authorities' actions. How could they resort to violence and aggression against peaceful student protesters? By this point, my dissatisfaction with the government's harsh response to reasonable and justified protests and demands had grown.

It is a well-known fact that politicians seek to retain power once they attain it. However, the government belongs to the people, and regardless of the party in power, those occupying government positions have the most significant influence on the functioning of our lives in the country. If we, as the general public, feel neglected or even despised by the government, then this is a profound concern. We may not have allegiances to any political parties, but we do have the right to demand changes from our government. After all, the government is entrusted with the welfare of the nation, and the nation is its people.

The quota reform movement concluded on a sombre note. Yet, a few months later, after the protests subsided, the government eventually removed the quota system even though that was not the primary demand of the movement. Still, at the very least, the government acknowledged the existence of a problem and took what it considered were appropriate steps.

A similar pattern emerged in the 2018 road safety movement. The

discuss within a community any faults you find with political parties, government organisations, or even people of influence who are connected to said state establishments.

A Jagannath University student, Khadijatul Kubra, is still in jail today after being arrested under the DSA for trying to "cloud the existing political situation," "involve the general public in anti-government activities," and "impact the reputation of Bangladesh in the international world." Even though she was granted bail by the high court in February, the chamber judge stayed the order due to a petition by the state. In sum, a regular university student is being persecuted by the state. This made me recall the time when my father, journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol, was in jail for seven-and-a-half months, after his two-month disappearance. The court dates come and go. Bail petitions are denied. And the suffering never ends.

The command the government exercises over digital and social media has made our generation so afraid that I have seen my peers putting their phones away, switching them off, or not talking about certain topics even in private with the people close to them. The thought of being flagged by the state as being anti-government and being persecuted over months on end has created a practice of self-censorship in Bangladesh's youth. They now choose to not be conscious citizens.

I believe that we, the youth, would feel more appreciated and valued if the government engaged in open dialogues and took positive actions in response to protests. It would demonstrate that we live in a state that is governed with reason and respect towards its citizens.