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**PRIMARY SOURCES: THEORY AND ANALYSIS IN PRACTICE**

**Meet the Source:**

I chose for my source the 2016 publication entitled “The Most Dangerous Job on the Planet – Ship-breaking in Bangladesh” authored by Professor M. Jamaluddin Ahmed.[[1]](#footnote-1) This 203 page work was intended to be a study with up to sixteen “specific objectives” that focus on environmental-related issues and communication with NGOs, governmental agencies, and the public. A major aim of the study was “to form a model for the environmental sensibilization in ship-breaking area of Chittagong.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Professor Ahmed uses a balanced view in the publication, recognizing the value of ship breaking to increase profitability in developing countries such as Bangladesh while also identifying and discussing the serious environmental issues and health hazards that are inherent in the activities. He calls it “one of the manmade hazards in the coastal area of Bangladesh” including calling out PCBs, hazardous wastes, heavy metals, and asbestos.[[3]](#footnote-3) An interesting aspect of the discussion is the treatment of asbestos as being a pollutant similar to other persistent organic pollutants which go directly in the soil and water, rather than the typical asbestos discussion referencing inhalation into the lungs.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is somewhat unusual as even the World Health Organization does not believe that the current body of scientific literature supports a danger from ingesting asbestos fibers in drinking water.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Although the publication itself is only six years old, it contains extensive discussions on historical pollution, soil sampling, and measuring historical pollution, in addition to literature reviews, all of which set the baseline for further discussions on environmental issues arising from ship breaking. The material also includes sampling, methodologies, and results prior to discussing conclusions in Chapter 6. These conclusions involving pollution are placed in context of Bangladesh being one of the largest deltas in the world with a coastal area including extensive natural resources and approximately 30 million coastal inhabitants.[[6]](#footnote-6) Of course, with such extensive information, the data may be manipulated or misused by those with an agenda to reach certain conclusions. Professor Ahmed clearly was aiming to undertake a deep dig in order to find workable solutions, but others may analyze the information somewhat differently. Ahmed states in the conclusions, “[c]oastal environment is delicate. Harnessing and exploiting its opportunities in systematic and coordinated way is essential to make it a sustainable resource.”[[7]](#footnote-7) That being said, the article is clear about the significance of the problems caused by ship breaking, with Ahmed acknowledging that “[u]nfortunately some part of this coast is used for Ship-breaking, causing huge environmental loss. Now Bangladesh has to decide whether it would allow continuing its coast to be used as a dustbin of developed world or not.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Professor Ahmed concludes the publication with his seventeen recommendations for Bangladesh to develop sustainable shipbreaking practices.[[9]](#footnote-9) Recommendation 13 is, in my opinion, critical as it sets the baseline for communication and responsibility. This recommendation is as follows:

“Both owner and contractors have to take the responsibility in providing compensation, treatment and security for the labors. Adequate compensation for victims of accident and their families, social security … etc. should be ensured.”

The actions contained within this recommendation would go a long way towards developing sustainability in the ship breaking industry.

**Analyze the Source:**

The two different approaches which this paper will discuss are (1) environment and health and (2) economics and community prosperity. These issues are front and center in the publication and drive the author’s recommendations.

The author’s analysis concerning environmental and health hazards arising from the historic and current ship breaking practices is outstanding with one exception: asbestos-related exposures. Asbestos is only mentioned a few times in the 203 pages, and then as an afterthought thrown into environmental issues involved in polluting the land and water.[[10]](#footnote-10) These other pollution risks, such as involving the release of lead and phosphates into the environment, are discussed in much more depth than is asbestos, including detailed mathematical and scientific analysis of those exposures.[[11]](#footnote-11) Professor Ahmed also provides an excellent discussion on potential improvements in handling the environmental and health issues, such as setting up fire stations and hospitals near the yards and requiring advance ship breaking layout plans for hygiene.[[12]](#footnote-12) Ahmed, in addition to discussing the science, recommends various potential laws and government activities to support the environment and health.[[13]](#footnote-13) As such, the publication is very useful for setting the stage concerning general environmental and health-related ship breaking practices, but less so for specific asbestos-related discussions.

Professor Ahmed’s analysis in addition to discussing the terrible environmental and health consequences arising from ship breaking, recognizes the importance of the industry to Bangladesh. Ship breaking companies pay significant taxes and supply about 90% of the eight million tons of required iron building materials used annually in the country.[[14]](#footnote-14) As noted, “[t]he scrapping of ships provides the country’s main source of steel and in doing so saves substantial amount of money in foreign exchange by reducing the need to import steel materials.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Approximately 25,000 people are directly employed in the industry with 200,000 indirectly employed in industries related to the ship breaking, although Ahmed does not discuss the source of this employment or the types of jobs in depth. As stated in the article, “Ship-breaking yards along the coast of Chittagong…has become a paramount importance in the macro-and micro-economic context of poverty-stricken Bangladesh.”[[16]](#footnote-16) In summary, Ahmed attempts to explain the need to continue the industry while increasing the protections for the workers and the environment.

The two approaches to the article, environmental/health and economics/prosperity, arguably lead to inconsistent conclusions given the costs to develop and implement the protections while trying to maximize profits, production, and tax revenues. Asking for absolutes for either position would eliminate the industry as an economically viable force and, hence, the author recommends the need to compromise on the most important issues as recommended in his conclusions.[[17]](#footnote-17) These are the seventeen recommendations which, in Professor Ahmed’s opinion, provide an acceptable balance for all of the constituencies on economics, the environment, and employee safety.

**Argue with the Source:**

Ship breaking in Bangladesh requires a transition to more sustainable practices if it is to succeed long term without breaking the backs of laborers.[[18]](#footnote-18) The industry provides essential employment, money, and building materials in an impoverished area with no readily available substitute; as such, long term viability with sustainable practices is in the interests of all constituencies to “minimize the negative consequences of Ship-breaking activities in our coastal zone.”[[19]](#footnote-19) However, transferring to such a neutral ground will require the ship breaking companies to view laborers and the investment in environmental protections as partners for long term profits, including agreeing to laws recognizing such relationships, rather than viewing them as fungible business expenses. Such a transition in a developing country that possesses an overabundance of available labor and weak environmental protections is difficult to plan, manage, and implement. Navigating the politics will be critical. As such, the issues need to be outlined and the action plans discussed and agreed to in advance, similar to Professor Ahmed’s attempt in providing his seventeen recommendations.

**Imagine More from the Source:**

This primary source deals broadly and in depth with ship breaking in Bangladesh; as such, it is a good seminal publication for me initiate a broad discussion concerning both the environmental/health and economic/prosperity issues. Many ship breaking articles typically focus on only one or the other. A significant failure of the publication, however, is the treatment of asbestos related issues. As such, I will need to supplement this material with other primary and secondary sources that discuss asbestos inhalation and pollution in the context of the ship breaking laborers. That being said, I particularly like the author’s approach to suggesting seventeen potential action plans to foster industry sustainability. I believe that these recommendations can form the foundation of potential recommendations that focus on protecting the long terms health of the industry and the laborers, including protecting those at risk against asbestosis and asbestos related cancers. I will need to modify the recommendations to meet the general needs of asbestos inhalation related health issues while, at the same time, keeping in context that Bangladesh ship breaking must be a sustainable industry to benefit all of the constituencies. Of course, the article does not discuss the World Systems analysis nor the Normalization of Deviation concept which I plan to use as the foundation of my analysis.

1. M. Jamaluddin Ahmed and Md. Nazrul Islam, “The Most Dangerous Job on the Planet – Ship-breaking in Bangladesh,” USA: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, July 2016, accessed September 12, 2022, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305496566_The_Most_Dangerous_Job_on_the_Planet_-_Ship-breaking_in_Bangladesh>. Some of the quotes used in this paper reflect that English is not the author’s primary langage. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a full discussion on the scientific literature discussing ingesting asbestos fibers in drinking water, see my blog on this topic which is located at <https://theasbestosblog.com/?p=10202>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 200 – 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 53, 188, and 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 14-16, 19-21, 26-40, 53-55, 108-113, and 197-199. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 200-203 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)