

THE FISHER'S STRUGGLE

Cox's Bazar is not only celebrated for its pristine shores and diverse marine habitats but also serves as a livelihood for the local fishing community. A fisherman's life is intertwined with the waves of the sea, many for generations, synced with the rhythms of the tides. Ziaur Rahman, a 37-year-old fisherman from Cox's Bazar, is one of thousands who rely on the Bay of Bengal for their livelihood. Their lives revolve around the sea, a demanding mistress that offers a mix of good times and tough challenges. They face the ocean's wrath, the market's

indifference, and the growing scarcity of their catch. Now, a new challenge looms - the ocean itself is changing, polluted with plastic. Yet, Ziaur and his companions persevere, their spirits as vast and enduring as the sea they call home. Ziaur's story is one of perseverance, everyday Ziaur and his fellow fisherfolks risk their lives sailing in the vastness of the sea, their fishing boats fighting against storms, low prices, fishing bans and fewer fishers. In the face of insurmountable odds, Ziaur is also fighting the new problem: plastic in the ocean.



Ziaur Rahman lives with his wife and six children—four daughters and two sons—in a modest home in Ward 9. Two of his daughters are married, while the other three study at a madrasa. Ziaur, himself could not attain education, dreams of a better future for his children, yearning for them to break free from the

chains of poverty that have bound his family for generations.

However, providing for his family as a fisherman in this poverty-stricken society is a constant battle. His income is insufficient, barely enough to cover basic expenses, and the situation worsens during government-imposed fishing

bans or when the fish supply declines. These hardships often force Ziaur to take loans of 4-5 lakh BDT for each fishing trip, which lasts 13-15 days and involves 18-20 people. Each loan is a gamble, a desperate hope that the sea will be kind and provide enough to repay the debt.

Preparing for each fishing trip is a meticulous and daunting task. Ziaur starts by recruiting fishermen with an advance payment of 3,500 BDT each. The preparations include fueling the boat, storing ice, preparing food, collecting fishing nets, checking the engine, and storing drinking water. Despite these efforts, his work is hindered by outdated technology. They navigate using an analog compass and detect fishing zones by analyzing water color, relying on assumptions rather than precision with modern equipment. Each journey is fraught with risk. The fishermen have no possession over the prices of their catch, rather it is by the boat owner.

Their financial stability is entirely dependent on factors beyond their control. Additionally, cyclones pose a significant threat, forcing them to save their lives with minimal resources like fishing nets and anchors. The danger is further compounded by pirates from Bashkhali, Kutubdia, and Moheshkhali, who attack their boats with firearms, robbing them of their fish, money, mobile phones, and oil. The pirates even sabotage the boat engines to ensure their escape.

Ziaur and his team sail the Bay of Bengal, covering 100-150 kilometers in 8-12 hours. They primarily target Hilsha due to its high demand but also catch Tuna, Giant Sea Perch, Catfish, and Indian Salmon.





Cox's Bazar Municipality and the neighboring Rohingya camps generate significant plastic waste, much of which ends up in open dumps and landfills, posing severe risks to ocean health, marine life, food safety, and human well-being. Bangladesh generates approximately 3,000 tons of plastic waste daily, with only 36% being recycled or properly disposed of. Studies indicate that plastic waste significantly affects marine ecosystems, reducing fish populations by entangling them or being ingested by them.

This waste reduces the number of fish, forcing them to venture further into the sea. To address this crisis, the BRAC Urban Development Programme initiated a 17-month project to mitigate plastic waste pollution through a comprehensive human-centric waste management system. Ziaur Rahman became involved in this World Bank-funded project and received three training sessions on plastic collection, hygiene, sanitation, safe handling of fish, and occupational safety.

Ziaur, a fisher who took part in the training, has seen firsthand the increasing problem of plastic waste. He observed more plastic entering the Bay of Bengal through the Bakkhali River. Before the training, Ziaur and many of his fellow fishers did not fully understand the negative impact of plastic pollution. However, the training sessions opened their eyes to the issue and made them more aware of the problem. Now, Ziaur and his team have changed their habits. They no longer throw single-use plastics into the sea. Instead, they bring these items back to shore to dispose of them properly. They also use special plastic collection bags and tools to pick up plastic waste from the Bay of Bengal. This change not only helps reduce pollution but also supports the training's goals of promoting better environmental practices. Ziaur and his team are also sharing what they learned with other fishers in their community who could not attend the training. By spreading this knowledge, they are helping others understand the importance of reducing plastic waste and protecting the environment. This effort to educate others is vital in creating a community-wide response to the plastic pollution problem. The way fishers like Ziaur have quickly adopted new waste management practices and shared them with their peers shows their dedication to making a positive impact, not just for themselves but for their whole community and the environment.



Despite his commitment to reducing plastic pollution, Ziaur's efforts are often thwarted by the boat owner's decisions. Nevertheless, he aspires to see a plastic-free sea, where fishing can be conducted without obstacles. Fishing is his only skill and means of supporting his family. He also wants to ensure basic support for other fishermen who work with him.

From the project, Ziaur seeks more hardware support, such as raincoats, upgraded navigation systems, and technical knowledge. He also urges the government to collaborate on reducing plastic waste in sea areas, suggesting the establishment of a cleaning mechanism in the Bakkhali River.

Author,
Uday Shikder
Deputy Manager
Knowledge Management & Learning
Brac Urban Development Programme