

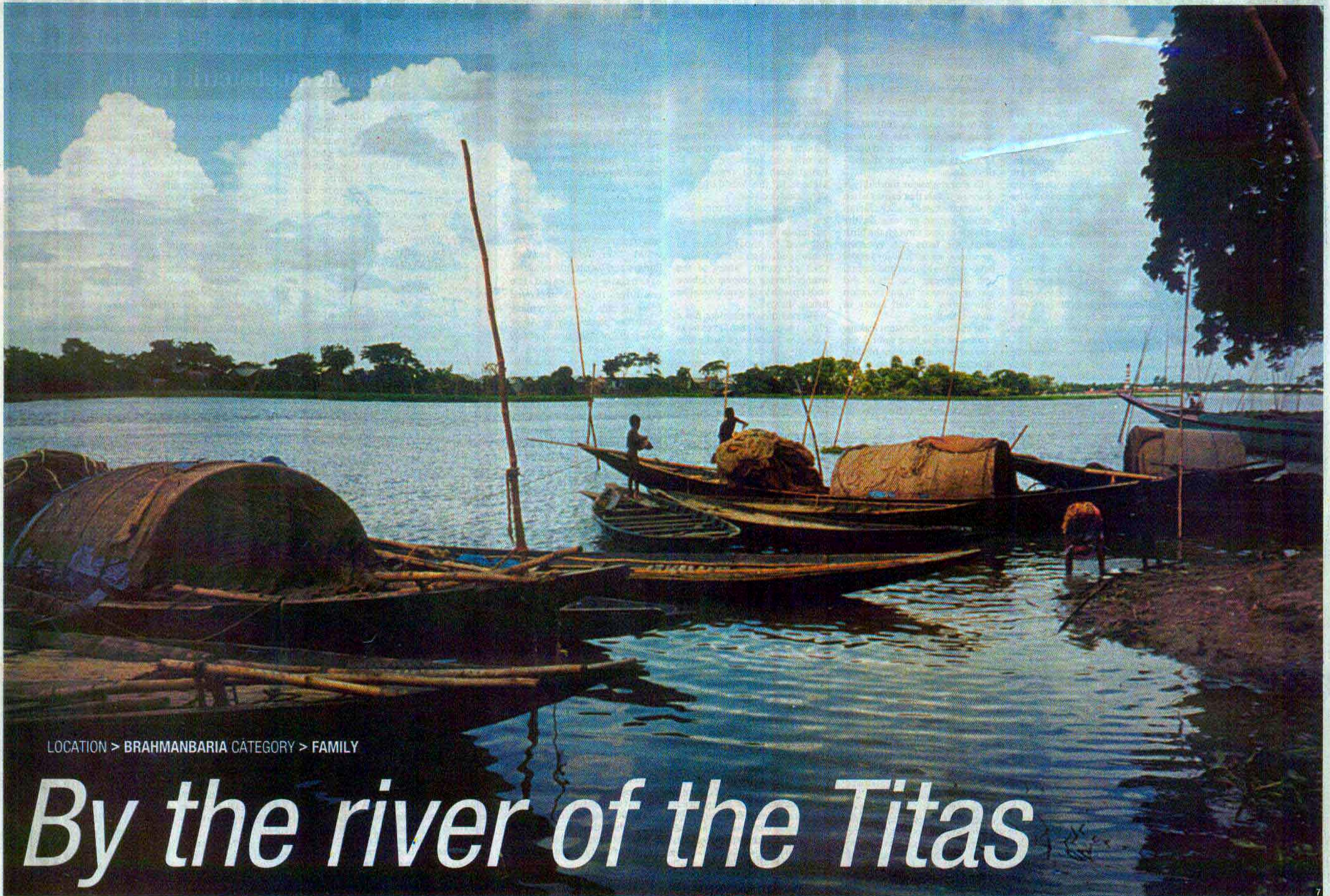
Star **HOLIDAY**

DHAKA SUNDAY OCTOBER 5, 2003

next in line



The Zoo of Sitesh Babu



LOCATION > BRAHMANBARIA CATEGORY > FAMILY

By the river of the Titas



THIS is Gokornoghat, the place you are looking for," said Joidul Hossain, a prominent cultural activist and lover of writings of our great novelist Addaitya Mollobarman.

Our rickshaw could not go any far as hundreds of rickshaws blocked the approach of the ghat. The rickshawpullers shouting to attract passengers, as a passenger launch just touched the tiny ghat at the end of a metal road leading towards Brahmanbaria town.

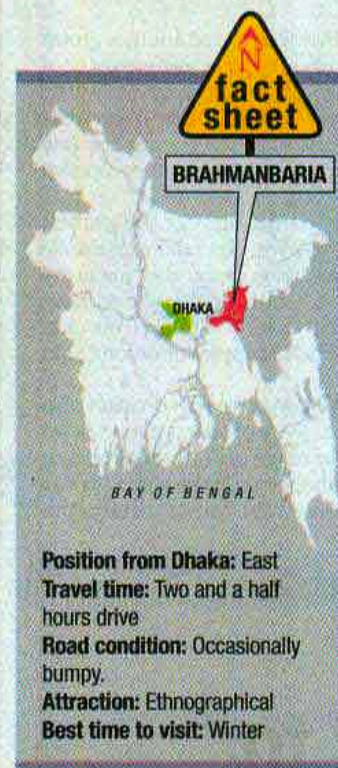
We decided to leave the rickshaw and failed to wade through the mob. So, we descended on the bank of Titas. It was almost midday and the autumn sun was glazing hot. I was rather sceptic about our mission to explore the Malo community who figured in the most successful Bengali epic "Titas Ekti Nadir Nam" written by Addaitya.

An overcrowded place with rice and sawmills humming around, shops sprouting everywhere and unplanned buildings shattered my imagination created by the novel written about 70 years back.

But little further up, the monsoon-swelled Titas is flowing quietly, reflecting the clear blue sky and hovering clouds.

At the launch terminal we cross the road and walk down twenty metres. Suddenly, my eyes caught them -- a Banyan with its outreached branches and dangling climbers stood firmly on the water line. A number of boats mooring leisurely under the shed of the tree.

The unmistakable fishing



boats of the Malos reconstructed from the great Titas chronicle dancing in water. Some brown fishing nets are left on the shoreline for drying up.

As Jaidul bhai led us to the nearby Malo village, a group of half-naked, suntanned children appeared, looking us up with curiosity. Among them I tried to find the characters of the novel -- Anonto, Basonti, Subol and others.

Their village, hardly can we call it a village, a tightly-knitted cluster of houses, resembles more of a Dhaka city slums. Each household is separated by knitted bamboo mats, only some passages serving as walkways.

Musky odour of dry fish, fishing nets, anchors, paddles and chickens remind us that we are in the Malo para. Naked children, women with vermilion, some old fishing hands bidding time dot the area.

One of the women with an infant on her lap leads us to late Addaitya's resident -- a piece of three-desimal land, later taken over by one of his descendant. On his last birthday (January 1), Somnilito Sangskritik Jote with the help of the Malo community built a statue of Addaitya and put garlands at the base of the alter.

A three-day fair was also organised there last year, which was attended by the cultural minister of Tripura.

The Malos are totally dependent on the rivers for their livelihood as they do not practice agriculture. But as the rivers are running out of fish stock, their hardship has heightened. They still practice their traditional rituals.

The Malos claim themselves as *Khatrios* or the warrior community of the Hindu cast system. But they are often looked down upon by the higher cast Hindus. They are also neglected by the Muslim neighbours, although most of the 'Nikaris' or fish traders are Muslims. The Malos perform Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Saraswati and Laksmi Puja alongside their own Ganga and Manasha worship.

Their rich myths, legends and cult are well depicted in their traditional folklore, which are subject to anthropological study.

Story & Photo KHASRU CHOWDHURY



Budget

AC Micro bus (for 7 persons) fare - Tk 1,300
Fuel and driver-Tk 1,100
Food & drinking water-Tk 1,000
Total : Tk 3400 for 7 persons

Travel tips

Sunscreen lotion is a must since you have to spend most of the time in open air

Don't forget your umbrellas.

A sun hat or a cap is a must to escape the scorching sun.

Wear light-soled shoes.

Sunglasses.

Take lunch packs and water with you.

Caption: 1. An overflowing Titas. 2. Fishes are still there, though not in plenty. 3. An elderly fisherman weaving a fishing net before some admirers. 4. Children's only occupation is to help daily chores. 5. The future may be bleak for the children of the Malos, but they keep on smiling. 6. A Malo fisherman's wife. 7. Fishing boats at rest at Gokornoghat. 8. Is another Anonto in the making?