



"BRAHMINI duck! Brahmini duck! Quick, Samir!"

I jump from port to starboard and snatch the field glass from Hasan's hands. So, this is the Brahmini duck, called Chakha in Bangla. Always found in pairs, and thus the famous birds of Bengali literature.

I scan the horizon, looking for them in vain. As far as the eyes go, even with the help of the powerful binoculars, it is the same pale greyish blue sky over the deeply greyish-blue water, with a thin uneven line of greyish brown in between. That line is our beloved Earth.

We are traversing Bangladesh by a powered boat from deep south to mid-north along her central waterways, the Padma. Few people, excepting the crews of inland oil tankers, have crossed Bangladesh by this route.

We started from Mongla. It is a small and picturesque port, precariously poised between the mangrove forest and the mainland. The river Pashur here is lined with seagoing vessels and clustered with their supply boats. As we leave the port behind, a curious forest reveals itself on either side. An admixture of mainland and mangrove vegetation.

All the common Bangladeshi trees, shrubs and undergrowth, mingled with Goalpata, Kewra and other plants that thrive in brackish water. As we move upstream, the mangrove flora gradually gives way to the common plant seen all over Bangladesh. Only the Goalpata persists - for nearly a hundred kilometers - as the sole remnant of the mysterious Sundarbans, the land of the Royal Bengal Tiger.

We are in a hurry - we have to make 500 kilometers in 5 days. Our target is to reach Bahadurabad by midday of the 23rd where our foreign guests, including the distinguished Mr. Albert Mehr, Charge d'Affaires, Swiss Embassy, Dhaka, his wife Renate are coming by train to board the boat for a joyride for two days. They are being led by Hasan's 18-year-

A Week on the Padma and Bhrahmaputra

by Samin Sangupta

An occasional Gharial (fish-eating crocodile) moves lazily about on the sandhead in search of a suitable hide to lay her eggs. Dolphins prance out and plunge back.

old son Rubaiyat.

The boat is cruising from Mongla to Bahadurabad to receive them. This is a pleasure trip alright, but not quite for the epicurean to whom safety and comfort top the list of priorities. The objective is not merely to see and enjoy, but also to know and understand. To move not only through the country, but also through the people and this strange ecology.

From Chandpur the riverscape changed. Gone were the thickly vegetated banks, marked frequently with villages, sometimes with townlets. We have entered the treacherous Padma - notorious for violating her banks every so often. She has inundated countless habitations since time began. This mighty river often changes her course on this soft alluvial soil.

Then - maybe after a generation or two - the river shifts once again. A two mile wide sandhead can be eaten up by the river in two monsoons. Another sandhead raises its back on the other bank, maybe ten kilometers away. The story repeats itself over and over again.

So, ordinary people are hesitant to foster habitations near the Padma. It is only the adventurous and the desperate who brave the risk. For mile after endless mile, it is a vast loneliness, inhabited only by birds and fish. An occasional Gharial (fish-eating crocodile) moves lazily about on the sandhead in search of a suitable hide to lay her eggs. Dolphins prance out and plunge back. Herons, king-

fishers and cormorants glide about, oblivious to the endless strife between man and river.

The weather was windy and chilly from the very beginning, quite unusual for late February. On the final day it became definitely unfriendly. Clouds hung low, and it began to rain. It turned tumultuous

Clad neatly in a lungi and punjabi, he stood resolutely by the side of our man in charge of the rudder and directed the quivering boat through the blind whiteness of the torrential rain. We were behind schedule, but we anchored at Bahadurabad exactly ten minutes before the train arrived.

Rubaiyat. He looks deceptively effeminate, and wears his hair as long as up to his waistband.

The boat started back, and lunch was served on board. Now it was time for the cook Nantu to come to the lime-light. So far he has served us plain domestic menu. Now this young Buddhist filled the



The tourists spread out - some on the roof, some on the deck

Rubaiyat Mansur

for an hour or so. Hasan was very anxious. We were already late. We must reach Bahadurabad before the guests.

Our pilot was put on his mettle now. He was a fine man, in his early sixties, with a white beard and chiselled profile. His entire countenance exuded poise and confidence.

Apart from the Mehra, they were seven - a curious college of origins and nationalities. They boarded the boat with their impedimenta amidst great admiration from the assembled onlookers, attracted by this event of the year. There was a lively debate among them on the sex of

plates with vegetable rolls and filled with bhetkis, cream chicken and roast mutton. He is to remain busy for the next two days from four in the morning till midnight.

The tourists eased out - some on the deck, some on the roof. The weather had improved. It was still chilly, but

the clouds were gone. The muddy sun was mild on the vast expanse of the river. It could not have been better.

Anchor was laid for the night at Kazipur, a pilot station. The nocturnal sojourns were always necessarily the pilot stations. We all got down for an evening stroll.

The name Kazipur suggested a village - but no village was within sight. There were a small ferry and some tiny shops, but no sign of any other habitation. There was an embankment road stretching towards the horizon. We took to the road.

I stopped walking after fifteen minutes and looked around. In the failing light of the late evening, I suddenly realised that I was looking at a view I never thought was possible. I was standing on solid ground. I could see clear horizon all around me, whichever way I turned my head. No trees, no houses anywhere to obstruct the vision - and no undulation of the land either. A perfect 360 degree horizon, like the one that can be seen from the midst of an ocean! The flat ground rolled out on all sides to meet the sky - unhindered, unencumbered. I stood still there, in the midst of the sheer nothingness, awestruck.

Back to the boat there were small talks all around. Jovialities, pulling each other's legs, indoor games. I found myself engulfed in a highly involved conversation with two ladies on comparative theology. Dinner was served early, and by nine it was midnight. Electricity was valuable. The only source was a few batteries.

Back to Dhaka, back to Calcutta. Back to urban reality - but with a difference. That desolation, that vast openness will linger in my mind for long years. It will seem like a dream. I may ask myself one day was it true, though? Was it not a dream - those vast rivers, that greyish blue universe? That 360 degree horizon on land?

Courtesy - The Guide Tours Ltd.

Travel Briefs

Barisal Airport Ready by June '96: Construction of Barisal airport is likely to be completed by June next year. The airport will provide air-links to people in the southern districts. An estimated amount of Tk. 268 crore will be spent to complete the work which began in July 1991.

BD Shipping Times.

Best Supervisor of March '95: Md. Motahar Ali Sarker, Public Area Supervisor of Housekeeping department of Hotel Sonargaon has been nominated "Best Supervisor" for the month of March '95. He joined the hotel on February 1992 as Houseman.

Sonargaon Tatler.

Gulf Air launches frequent flyer program: Gulf Air has confirmed its position as the leading carrier in the region by launching the Falcon frequent flyer program, the first fully-fledged passenger loyalty program from a Middle East airline. Falcon will be made available to residents of other countries worldwide throughout 1995.

Falcon rewards the loyalty of regular Gulf Air passenger with free tickets, free upgrades and many other membership privileges.

Tourism International.

Hotel Agrabad wins EM Award: The International Selection Committee has decided this year to present the European Mercury (EM) Award for excellence in corporate image and quality to Hotel Agrabad. The hotel has already been recognised in the Hotel World as having management expertise of the highest international standard.

Tourism International.

MD of Biman attends PATA conference: The managing director of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, Mr. Ahab Ahmed attended the annual conference of the Pacific Asia Travel Association in Auckland, New Zealand from April 23-27. He has been a director of the PATA Board of Directors for years.

Holiday Aviator.

Iraq Doubles Exit Fee: In an apparent attempt to curb the exodus of Iraqis trying to flee the poverty and hunger in their country, Iraq has doubled the exit fee its citizens have to pay to leave the country. Baghdad residents said recently that the fee has hiked to 200,000 dinars, or \$176, up from 100,000 dinars in February.

Monitor.

Yemenia plans to add Dhaka: Yemenia, Yemen airlines plans to add Dhaka and Bangkok to its schedule later this year. Yemenia recently introduced a direct Sharjah-Bombay flight to be operated by Boeing 727 and Boeing 737 aircraft.

Monitor.

Thai Airways to buy new aircraft: Thai International Airways is planning to buy 50 aircraft worth as much as Bt 120 bn over the next five years to reduce the number of aircraft in its fleet from 15 types to 5.

The purchases will reduce maintenance, operational and training costs which have been high because of the variety of aircraft within the fleet.

Monitor.

Aviation Sector plans further development: The government has undertaken an ambitious plan to develop the country's aviation system at a cost of over Tk. 477 crore. The plan is to modernise the country's airports and provide more amenities to both domestic and international passengers. In keeping with the plan, boarding bridges have already been installed at ZIA. Recarpeting of the ZIA runway began in April.

BD Shipping Times.

New Singapore Airlines Flights: Singapore Airlines will operate two flights a day to Osaka from January 1995 (started) and to London from April. In July, SIA intends to introduce a new Singapore-Seoul-San Francisco route on its schedule. Also, Sydney will gain 5 morning links from November 1995.

BD Shipping Times.

BA Flies to Vietnam: British Airways will launch the first ever direct air service between Vietnam and Britain later this year when it starts flying from London to Ho Chi Minh city. The flights will begin in June in a bid to meet the

growing demand for travel between the two countries as business and tourism ties boom.

BD Shipping Times.

BRTA Introduces Computer System: Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) introduced a computer system on January 30 to keep records of 3.5 Lakh vehicles and 5 Lakh driving licenses in its computer data bank. Besides registration, issuing of fitness certificates and route permits for vehicles will also be more accurate and prompt.

BD Shipping Times.

Hanoi to Raise Cargo Handling: Vietnam is fast expanding Tan Son Nhat airport in Ho Chi Minh city will be able to handle 300,000 tons of cargo per year when a US \$2.2 billion upgrade program is complete. The airport at present can handle about 300,000 tons of cargo per year. The upgrade will also allow 46 large aircraft to use the airport at any one time.

BD Shipping Times.

Guide's new tour to Darjeeling: The Guide Tours Ltd. offers a new package tour to Darjeeling for Bangladeshi travellers. The 5 nights-6 days package program starts with the journey to Rangpur and a visit to the historical monuments at Paharpur. Journey to Burmari, at the border between Bangladesh and India, starts on the second day. The journey to Darjeeling through Shilliguri takes about 5-6 hours from here.

The third and fourth days consist of guided tours through Darjeeling. The tour includes sunrise from Tiger Hill, visit to the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute and a journey by boat on the Shumendu lake.

The Guide Tours Ltd.

Travel Editor's Note What's in a Name?

MANY people are still confused - is it Dacca or Dhaka? We don't seem to have any naming standards for most places in Bangladesh, even tourist sites. For example - how to spell Ahsan Manjeel? Ahsan Manzil. Manzeel, or Manjil? Not an Ahsan (easy) task.

Worse, Jafong, a major tourist site, appears in official tourist brochures in dual identity - Zafong and Jafong (take your pick). But the poor traveller to Bangladesh isn't just confused about what destination he's going to. He may also have to wonder is it Bengali.

Bangla, or Bangal? The historical answer to that question: the British proposed Bengali. Bangla came about in reaction to the insulting Bengali. But who cares about history, what's the correct form now?

Then there is a popular vegetation in the Sundarbans - Goalpata or Golpata (see to-day's lead article). Most spellings are settled as a matter of course, through frequent use of the word. But still, if we want to make Bangladesh a major international site, we need to know how to spell the names on the map, atleast.

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How Big is a Sundarban Tiger?

by Khasru Chowdhury

IN those countries where tigers are still surviving in the wild state, they are an issue of national pride. Specially important is the size of the tiger.

A tiger's size varies with food availability, altitude, average temperature of the tiger habitat. But nature sometimes breaks its own law. An outsized tiger may come out from a habitat where the average tigers are smaller in built. Indian sub-continent tigers of sub-species Panthera Tigris are said to be of moderate size.

But the sleeker records of some states (Gouripore, Mysore, Rewa, Jaipur) show that some huge tigers are being shot by the Maharajas or their sikar (hunting) parties. These tigers are between ten feet three inches and ten feet eleven inches over the curves or between the legs (the length of a tiger determined by measuring the distance between nose tip to tail tip, i.e. over the back of between the legs. The difference between the two measurement may be of two to three inches).

But these huge cats are a freak of the nature and may be ashamed of their bigger cousins the Siberian tigers (P & Altica). In any tigerland, if a tiger attains a length of nine feet, we say it's huge. Even the Siberian tiger is seldom larger than ten feet.

I was really amazed to see some interesting records of the Sundarban tiger. Those records are given as certificate to hunter Pachadhi Gazi who killed those tigers. All of them are oversized - more than ten feet. One of them - believed to be eleven feet nine inches in length - was killed in Atharobeki in 1967.

I myself would have been proud to claim our tiger bigger. But I when I measured some dead tiger and tamed skin of the Sundarban tiger, then, to my sheer disappointment, only one of the skin measured two inches over nine feet. Most of the tigers measured between eight feet two inches and eight feet nine inches.

It is universally accepted that the tiger descended from the colder parts to the warmer parts. The size of the animal became smaller due to metabolism. Colder areas like Amur land or in Korea tiger have to store a good amount of

fat in their body to protect cold, and also have to develop long fur. Those tigers are also well fed as they get bigger

Was the Royal Bengal Tiger really as big as they said it was? The wildlife enthusiast was determined to find out.

prey. That's why these tigers are huge in size. On the contrary, our Sundarban tiger lives in warm

length from forest officials? Was the average tiger bigger in the early days than today? Were those tigers better fed

than the present tiger? For a while these queries plagued me. For the last twenty one years, I have had



The size of the beast

humid climates and its prey is very limited and small. It can only feed on axis deer (60 K.G.) and wild pigs (110 K.G.). A little amount of barking deer, other lizards, frogs, fishes, and even crab can also be taken by the tiger, but these diets may be alien to them.

It is not always easy to catch a prey in our Sundarbans. Most of the tigers have to starve to some extent. So there is no way the Sundarban tiger may attain a big size. Then how did it earn such an amazing longer

the privilege to travel to almost all areas of the Bangladesh Sundarbans. It is true that forest quality depleted little and human interference increased in large extent, but I didn't get much evidence to believe that man had extended his hand to the tigers' food to that extent. Then why do we have smaller animals?

I enquired a lot about the tiger's length, but I didn't get any answers. Then in September 1989, I met tiger

shooter Japan Mollahs, a forest guard. This gentleman earned a name by shooting tigers in the Sundarbans. He told me that at one time there used to be a friendly rivalry among the tiger shooters of the Sundarbans - that is who was the keenest of Shikaries (hunters) to bag the biggest tiger! To accomplish their purpose, after skinning a freshly killed tiger they used to light the nose tip and tail tip of the skin and engage four people to pull each end.

Due to sheer tension the fresh and raw skin elongated twelve to fourteen inches more than the actual size of its owner. Hence a nine feet tiger become ten or more. The process of measuring may be ill practice, but the shikaris were not ashamed of it.

I am sure my finding may hurt some people's pride. But I am sorry to say they capitalized on the wrong thing. The Sundarban tiger is more compact figured and deep coloured than other tigers. They are more intelligent and adaptive than other tigers and the only born-free tigers of the world. Already they have earned the name of being the only creatures in the world who made human flesh a staple diet. No other animal in the world kills and eats eighty persons annually in a single terrain - not even the Indian Sundarban Tiger.

Those who're disappointed, if you have enough patience to lend your ears for a while, I can whisper some good news. Recently I found two huge tigers in the Sundarbans who are close to nine feet, as I have assumed their length by examining their tracks. Yes!

Some crazy people like me try to determine tiger sex, age, height, length and motive of movement by studying pugmark. Pugmark study may be a dead art practiced by the old shikaris once, but you cannot get information about a shy animal like tiger by any other means. Anyway, the two tigers are, the Amtal tiger of Katka meadows and another one is the Chandpai killer, which terrorised forest dwellers by killing more than sixty persons within five years.

Saudi Arabia: Kingdom of the anicent and the modern

THE Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the Kingdom of God. The flag is green in color, and in the middle is the word of testimony: "There is no God but God, and Muhammed is the messenger of God." Beneath the words lies a sword. The Kingdom's emblem is a date/palm, again crossed by two swords. The emblem means that prosperity can be gained through justice.

To the west of Saudi Arabia is the Red Sea; to the South,

Mother of humanity, Eve is buried in a tomb bearing her name in the center of the city.

Dammam, located in the eastern province, holds the most important oil-producing areas and some national industries. It is also an important seaport of the Arabian Gulf. A causeway connecting Saudi Arabia and Bahrain lies near Daman. It is considered the longest causeway in the Middle East and the second largest in the world. Yanbu and Jubail are



Falconry - a popular sport in the country

Saudi Arabia

Yemen and Oman; to the east the Arabian Gulf, Qatar, and Bahrain; and to the north Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan. Riyadh, located at the center of the Arabian peninsula, is the capital of Saudi Arabia. The 1,600 square km area holds more than 1.5 million people. Riyadh is also the city from which King Abdulaziz Bin Al-Saud set off to unify the Kingdom.

Makkah Al-Mukarramah contains the Holy Mosque (the Ka'aba), and the holy places at Mina, Muzdalifa and Arafat. It is the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad (SM) where he received revelation at the Hira Cave.

Madinah is one of the biggest cities in the Kingdom and the second most important city to all Muslims, after Makkah. It contains a number of Islamic Holy places, Prophet Muhammad (SM) was buried in this city. The Prophet's Mosque in Madinah is one of the three mosques to which Muslims worldwide started out on a journey.

Jeddah, which is called the Bride of the Red Sea, is the Kingdom's first seaport. All pilgrim flights to Saudi Arabia land in Jeddah, thus making the city the gateway to the holy places. It is said that the

industrial cities, meeting 5 per cent of the world's requirements of petrochemical and metal products.

Besides its old historic places and modern structures, Saudi Arabia also boasts some curiously unique must-sees. Falconry is one of the old and popular sports of the Kingdom. The falcon, the main tool of the sport, is trained by falconers, to hunt. A special kind of dog called Saluki, which can run 80 km in an hour, is also used in this sport. Hunting with birds of prey is one of the earliest sports known to man. Catching and training the sought-after saker, peregrine or lanner falcon is as much a part of the thrill of falconry as the hunt itself, requiring patience, care and skill. Hunting season lasts from November to March. Then the falconer releases his bird to breed for the next season.

Horse and camel racing are also traditional sports in the peninsula. Stables have been built to breed and train horses specially for the race. A camel race is a major annual festival, attended by thousands. The Custodian of the two holy mosques inaugurates the gala attended by leading figures from the Gulf and the Arabia World. Ministry of Information, Saudi Arabia.