



Travel Tourism



"B RAHMIMI duck! Brahmini duck! Quick, Samrda!"

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 Golpata 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 de Affairs, 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 Brahmaputra

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 afloat, but not quite for the epicure 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 river-scape 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 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 upto 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 doleful 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 Mehrs, 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 bhaktis, 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

Courtesy - The Guide Tours Ltd.

How Big is a Sundarban Tiger?

by Khasru Chowdhury

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

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

than the present tiger?

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 became 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 make 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 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 Amtali tiger of Katka meadows and another one is the Chandpali killer, which terrorized forest dwellers by killing more than sixty persons within five years.

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

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, frog, fishes, and even crab can also be taken by the tiger, but these diets may be alien to them.

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

privilege to travel to almost all areas of the Bangladeshi 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 tigers?

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