

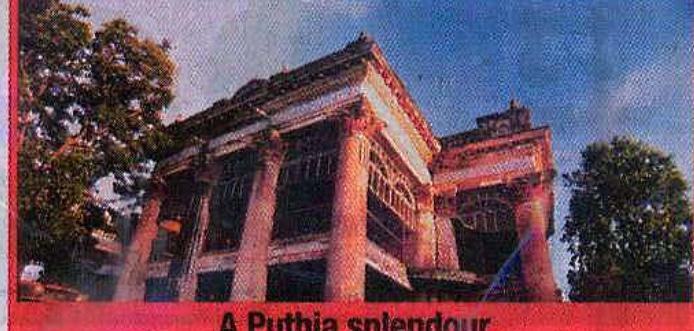
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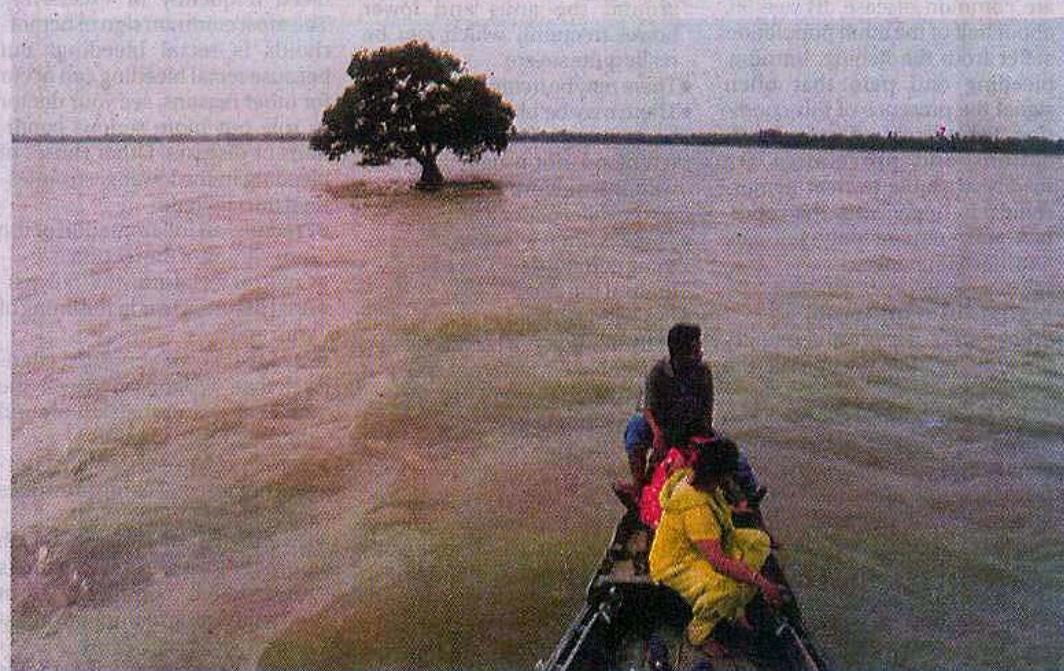
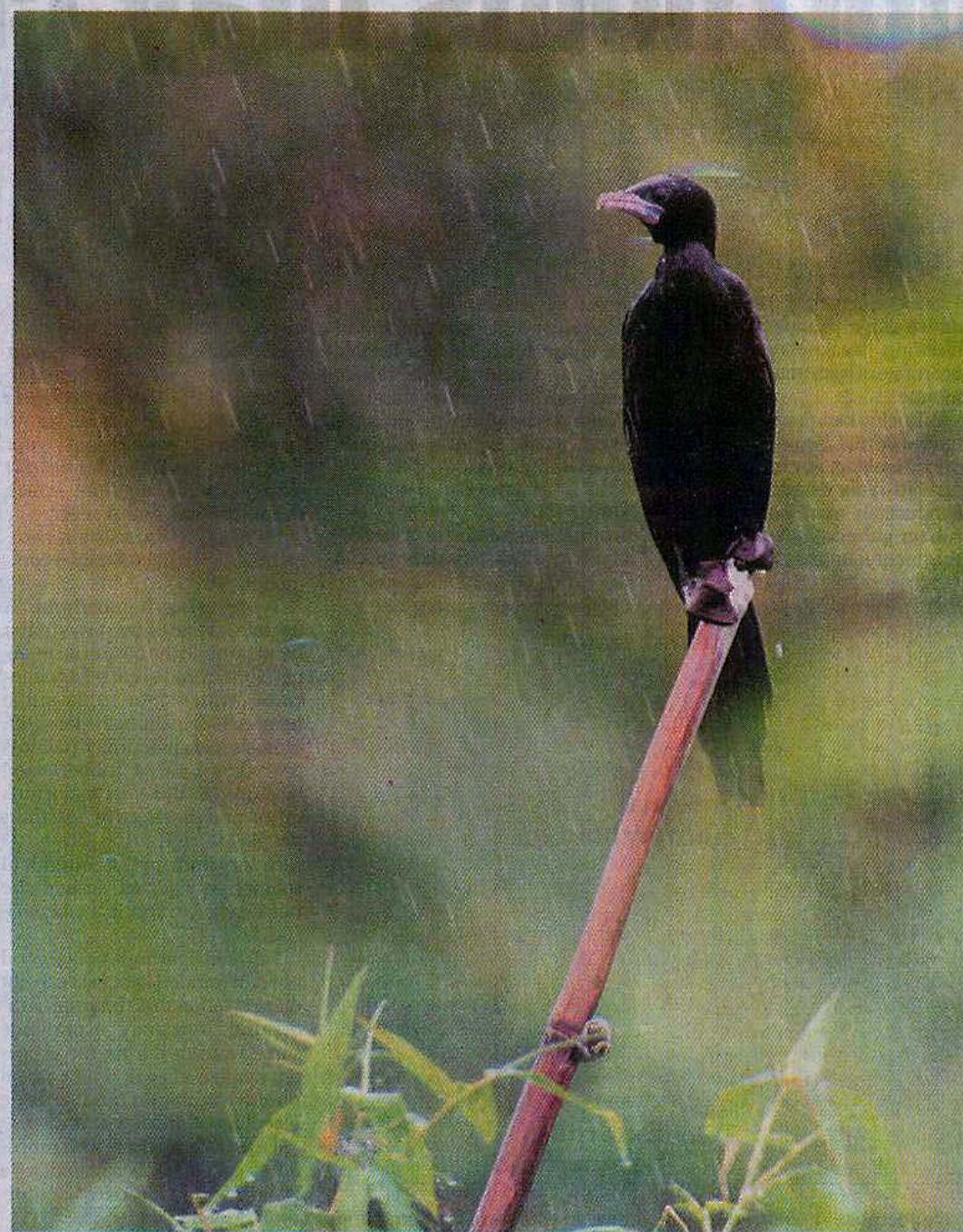
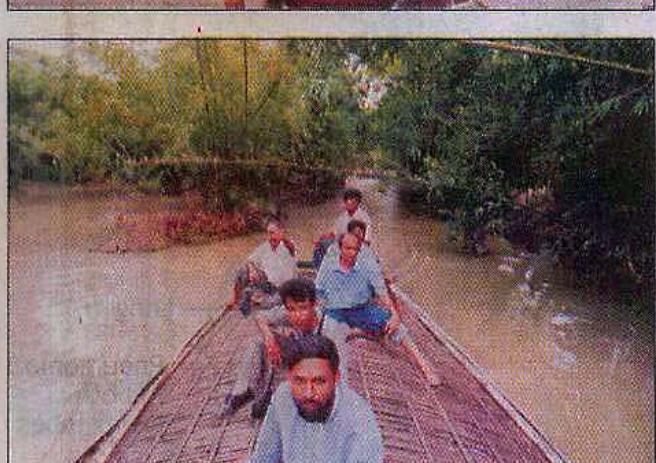
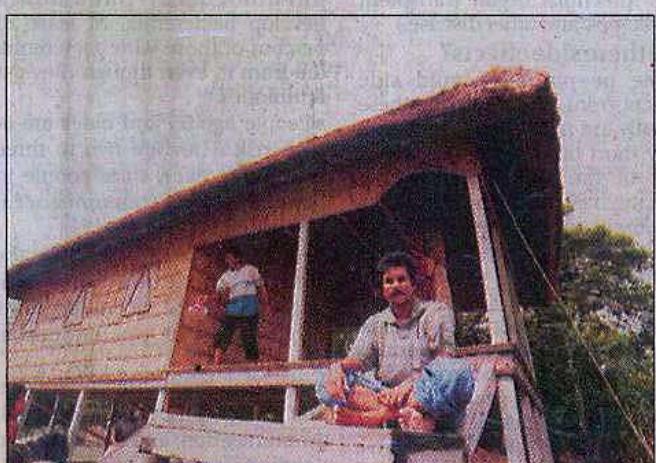
HOLIDAY

DHAKA SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 7, 2003

next in line



A Puthia splendour



LOCATION > MANIKGANJ CATEGORY > FAMILY

A bird's eye view

W INDY yawns of the Padma greeted us at Baro Bahadurpur, its sleepy trees waved green at us and the perched wooden house used as a dolphin watch centre looked welcoming.

Small ramshackle huts peeped through bamboo thickets. We stepped on the wet bank, our soles sinking in the soft mud.

And then we saw the birds flying overhead in flocks, some coming in and some flapping out. Cormorants, heron, egrets and many more. Their cackles filled the air.

We were thrilled. Egrets and herons, yes, but never before have we seen so many cormorants together. High wind tips them on their flight.

Small children ran freely on the stretch by the bank. Mango trees swayed in wind. They paid us no attention as visitors frequent this small island village surrounded by *beels* and canals for its birds.

We walked into the village, the huts bear the marks of receded floodwaters. Every year, the Padma enters this village, bringing boons and miseries. Living with floods is a way of life for the Baro Bahadurpur people.

Hakim Mia, an old hand of the village, appeared in the doorway of a hut.

"Go there. That way is the bird watch tower," he said.

A little farther, we saw the crude bamboo ladder, tied to a mahogany amid a stand of trees and bamboo bushes going up into the sky. A strong stench of bird droppings assailed our nostrils. Fishes of different sizes and a half-eaten snake lie beneath.

Zakir and I ventured, as the rest thought it too risky. The bamboo rungs were slippery from overnight rain. Slowly we duelled up. Each step seemed uncertain. Our arms ached. Our legs strained. The cameras on our back seemed like tons of bricks. Still, the birds cackling above dragged us up. Through the thick foliage, we could glimpse wings

flapping. Bird droppings fell past us.

Finally we were there. A small bamboo platform with a bamboo arch overhead. We sat gasping on it and looked around. And wow! Hundreds of birds all around. Some nesting, some just sitting with fishes in beaks, some just nursing their feathers. They

bamboo bushes turned to be the vital element in saving the colony and how this village has become a model for nature conservation.

While we talked, we had a small 'accident' though we later turned it into a joke. Khosru, spurred by his naturalist instinct, forgot his age and tried to climb up to take snaps of the bird colony. A few yards from the ground, he slipped and fell on the soft mud with his mammoth 600mm Russian lens. He limped back, face flushed.

Then we sailed for the Gopinathpur Beel. We crossed a narrow canal and fell into a watery vastness. The other side of the *beel* was so far away that the shores looked hazy. It is hard to imagine that this vastness turns into cropland in winter. A lone banyan stands right in the middle of the *beel*, giving the whole scene a dreamy edge.

After about half an hour, the boat moored to a patch of perched land full of chilli plants. Anis asked us to hush up. Very slowly, we got down and tiptoed ahead. Anis peeked over the bushes and waved at us. There a bunch of monitor lizards were basking in the midday sun that bounced off their spotted dark bodies. With our slightest hint, they dived into the water. This place, as Anis said, is a great place for monitor watching.

Suddenly, a shrill cry startled us. We looked up at the sound and saw this majestic bird circling round -- spreading its huge wings. It is the biggest bird we have ever seen. Osprey eagle, Anis told us. These birds are often seen here and are protected by NACOM. We watched the bird in disbelief.

We proceeded to another NACOM camp for lunch. Soon, we found ourselves inside the most amazing villages. To anyone who had never been to Bangladesh, the villages could well be passed on as somewhere in the Amazon. Wide and narrow canals have snaked through villages after villages. The trees and bushes on

both sides are so thick and wild that we often had to stop our boat and clear the way. We had to lie down on the *choi* of the boat to avoid a collision. The water looked black shadow. The sun hardly could get through. The whole village we were in looked like a ghost neighbourhood. The huts we could see at intervals, but hardly any souls. Maybe, people are having siestas.

After lunch, it was time to get back. We took a different route this time, much shorter. The sun was already in the west. With tummy full, we spread ourselves horizontally on the *choi* and watched lazily the afternoon villagers. It has now a different look.

People are sitting by the bank and gossiping, some are going to the *hat*. Soon we came upon a *hat*, bustling with activities. We looked for *hilsa* from the Padma and found some. In the middle of the *hat*, a quack dentist has set

up his practice, spreading out his various tools and paraphernalia. A child keeps weeping in the lap of her grandpa, her cheek showing the unmistakable bulge of a bad tooth. The quack tries his best to cajole the child into allowing him to pull out the wormed teeth. But he did not have luck with this one.

A snake charmer appeared with a huge snake hanging from his neck. He passed the *hat* for the crowd to throw in doles as *simni* for *Devi Monosa*. The villagers lazily gossip in groups to pass time, some chew on sugarcane sticks and eye the range of things that are being vendied in the open. The whole place wears a laid-back mood even in the middle of the entire bustle.

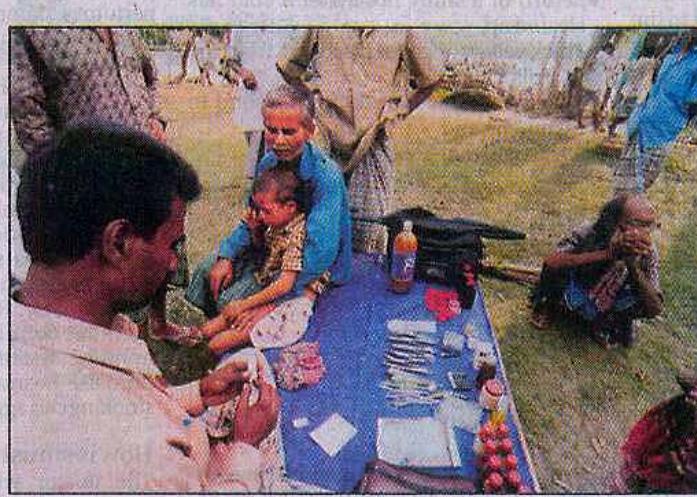
It was getting even late and so we sailed again. The sun has finally appeared after short drizzles and casts an elongated ray on the riverscape. We lay on our back and feel the rhythm of the



Position from Dhaka: north
Distance: Around 95-km
Journey time: 2hrs (approx)
Road condition: good
Places of interest: Maluchi, Baro Bahadurpur
Best time to visit: Monsoon

looked back at us in wonderment. Small, fleshy, almost featherless babies taking naps. They were all so close that we felt like reaching out and touching them.

We climbed down. We could still not believe what we saw. Naturalist Anisuzzaman Khan told us how they established this bird sanctuary with funds from the IUCN. How they virtually saved a colony of birds from extinction. How they involved the villagers into conservation instead of hunting, how they thought up a credit system for the villagers in exchange for saving the birds, how dissuading the villagers from cutting down



Budget

Cost for 10 persons
Microbus fare - Tk 1,700
Fuel and driver- Tk 1,500
Food - Tk 1,000
Motorised boat Tk 1,200
Local guide Tk 600 (three rooms for one night)
Total: Tk 6,000

Contact: NACOM
House 8/12, Block 13
Lalmatia
Contact person: Abdul Manna
Tel: 9121437

Travel tips

Take a pair of binoculars for bird and dolphin watching.

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.

Take swimming gear if you care to take a dip in the Padma.

Sunglasses.

And lifejacket is a must even if you know swimming.

Take lunch with you.

Caption (clockwise from left): Going through meandering watery canals. Safe water for Baro Bahadurpur villagers. The dolphin watch tower. Cormorants resting at Baro Bahadurpur village sanctuary. Spreading wings in style. Nestlings cuddling together. Eggs of Cormorants. Wet in drizzle. The Heron. Crossing the Gopinathpur beel with the Banyan in front. The quack dentist at work. The Baro Bahadurpur village.