

A Jumpstart for Rangamati's People

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KAPTAI Lake at places looks like a sea minus waves. As the tiny speedboat picks speed, its radar ploughs the surface water creating large waves in the process. The white stalks idling away with the lower part of their body underneath the water dance away riding on those advancing waves. Ten to fifteen minutes since we left the shore, the Rangamati town behind us becomes blurry and the small hills lined up on the bank on our right hand that first look liked silhouettes of hills, start to take shape. Around 30 minutes from the town, we come to an area where small hilly islands, each about 20 to 30 feet high from the water, stand. As the speedboat swerves into a water-alley it is welcomed by eager, young children who quickly line up along the bank hearing the loud sound the speedboat is emanating.

Each of these islands with an area of half to one sq kilometre is actually a village. The locals however call them Para. The side of the hill is cut into the shape of stairs and climbing along those dangerously steep stairs needs a lot of courage if not experience. Though most of these Paras which are under Rangamati Sadar are populated by Chakmas there are some where both Chakmas and Bangalis live.

The name of the village, para to be exact, we first arrived is called Kokipara. Home to 23 families with a population of exactly 132, Kokipara still bears the marks of its past identity. Though gradually turned into a human habitat, the place retains much of its original appearance in its myriad of trees, slices of bushes, shrubbery and evergreens. The straw-and-bamboo made houses with thatched roof also go well with the near-forest ambience of the para.

BUT this is not just a picture-perfect village. The people here, like almost all the paras, are extremely poor. These people and their wretched condition is a testimony that technological advancement sometimes can be as much a curse as it is a blessing. Kaptai dam, built for power generation, has devastated the adivasi dominated Rangamati. Thousands of Chakmas who have been living in this hilly region for several hundred years lost their home and land to the Kaptai Lake, a side-affect of the Kaptai dam.