

DISCOVER BANGLADESH: THE BIGGEST DELTA ON THE PLANET

HOLIDAY

Star



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3rd Part of five-part series

Kasalang chronicle

We were once again cruising. First, we crossed the lake into the creeks and then we found our way into the Kasalang river. We were now on to another book trail; this time it is Guy Mountfort, the famous wildlife researcher, who visited this part of the then East Pakistan in the 1960s. Khosru was deeply engrossed in his book -- The Vanishing Jungle -- published in 1969. The pages were coming loose now, but Khosru would treasure it like anything, penciling the pages where he found the descriptions interesting.

It is a fascinating description of Guy Mountfort's expedition to this part of Rangamati.

had written about his journey on water: "We lay back almost surprised by the beauty of the constantly changing panorama which streambed by on either hand. We were now entering a wide channel and the banks were steadily becoming higher. Secondary growth and old abandoned plantations began to give way to forest."

Elsewhere he wrote: "The view across the water was wild and romantic in the extreme, with occasional canoes gliding smoothly past among giant trees. To the left a winding track above the reed beds led to the small native village of Pablakhali, which lay hidden among the trees."

It definitely was a wild world that started to unfold before us as our boat puffed its way forward on this crispy morning -- blue as it should be in this hilly surroundings, chilly as one expects a winter dawn to be and lonely as it can be. It's an extraordinary feeling to be sailing on this river flowing down from the hills above. This was the river that YS Ahmad and his 10-year-old daughter once sallied up and down, this was the river where they met the wild elephants by the banks. I could feel the excitement the little girl must have had over 50 years from now. Today, there was nothing, only vastness and

memories. And the mountains like some distant saints trying to wrap us up all the time. We sailed on.

The map showed we were climbing up, but you hardly ever noticed it. The map also showed we were heading deep into Rangamati where the plains people hardly go, unless they are fated to go -- like the three of us -- Khasru, Towfiq and I. The river flowed quietly past the early morning fishermen, past the clouds, past the mist and past the wind and then took a sharp bend.

The scene changed now. Kasalang had narrowed down from here and the landscape became so unfamiliar. The depth of the river also slowly decreased with the narrowing width until it became just a channel not more than 30 feet wide. The rest of river was just silted up

swamp. This is what happens to Kasalang every winter, it trickles down to a thin thread. The rest becomes crop land as it had now.

But then it was not quite a channel. Often the distinction between the channel and the marshland was lost as water was still logged there. The glassy water reflected so quiet on this winter morning, the whole world reflected with it. And then we lost the sense of time and space, because the deep blue sky, the hill range, the trees, the forests -- everything was reflected on the water, and we were lost in a reflected glassy world turned upside down.

We could see the farmers prepare the land and cast paddy seeds, working their way forward in knee-deep mud -- some fields had the cover of light green

slender seedlings. They could be seen either way -- in their correct position or upside down -- depending on which way you want to see this misty morning. They looked more beautiful than the catwalk models. Scarecrows stood desolate and foolish on the fields which were yet to bear seedlings; in their tattered garb they looked no poorly dressed than the men and women working in the field; and purposeless on this mountain surrounding -- who to scare off and why?

A thin mist hung around us to make the whole scene washed in watercolour. When mists float like a thin curtain, the scenes, the trees, the figures, the birds, the butterflies -- everything look smudged and that makes it all the more beautiful. On this vast hilly land, we felt as if we had been transported to an

unknown land by the sudden stroke of a magic wand.

"This can't be Bangladesh," I murmured to myself. "This is Burma. Or Cambodia." It had that striking similarity.

"Yes, it looks like an East Asian setting," Towfiq agreed.

We detoured an upended boat and took a turn to an even narrower path of the river. Then we found company.

Hundreds of swallows -- slender black bodies streaked with white underneath, forked tails, boomerang-shaped wings -- flew with us just above the water. They were all around us; chirping, squeaking and flying in their usual hurried way in angular patterns. Sometimes it seemed that their bellies were actually touching the river. They were beside, in front and behind us, but not above our head where we are used to seeing them. As if they were escorting us all the way; it's an amazing sight. I have never seen swifts this close, I could even see every strand of their feathers. It seemed that I could stretch out my hand and touch them.

Some of them sat on the barren bush branches where the wild roses grew. We could see the roses -- white and pink -- looking like thousands of stars burning bright. The black swifts just sat there like some precious gems, I have never also seen any immobile swift before. Every time I see them, they are flying in their hasty way.

For the next one hour, we never had a chance to be without them. Then a hill covered with lofty trees came into view. The boat slowed down and took a final turn. There was a small jetty.

We had reached Guy Mountfort's Pablakhali.



stayed at Pablakhali for quite some time, traveled and filming the exotic wildlife. The descriptions are simply extraordinary.

At one place of the book he



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