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BANGLADESH



RATARGUL

The forest for Hansel and Gretel

We followed a narrow canal into the Ratargul swamp forest and were immediately sucked into a sinister looking wonder. We had never seen anything like this before -- all around us are Karach trees and some

occasional Hijal and Borun trees. And they were all partly submerged in a huge basin of water. Some were just visible above the surface. Others were submerged half their trunks.

The canal became narrower

and narrower and we had to stop our engine boat and get on to a paddleboat. It was a narrow thing; we could hardly fit into it with efforts. And any movement proved to be dangerous as the boat jogged perilously. With the

stroke of the paddle the boat progressed swiftly across the still water.

We left the canal and ventured into the forest. We had to be extra cautious this time as the serpentine trunks and branches blocked our passage at every corner. It was a strange place -- the shaded sunlight, the tree trunks and the serenity makes you feel that you are in a village woodlot where children would appear anytime to play with spins or marbles any time. But then you know this is not to happen. No children will ever play here; only water will lap, and crabs and snakes will slither across the water.

The trees had given off long braid like roots dangling from their branches. As our boat created small waves, the roots danced from side to side like some ancient creatures waiting in lure for their prey. As the sunlight patches played on the water and the grotesque looking Karach trees created a huge canopy over us. Their reflections on the water were even more bizarre. We came to a place where the trees were at least 40-50 feet high. Sitting on the boat, they looked overbearing; as if this forest was looking down on us with contempt for breaking its sleep. We got engulfed by the greenish ambiance. And we imagined we were in a fairy tale forest where each tree is an ogre, hissing at us as we pass by them. We could feel them turning and twisting and whispering to each other about a sinister plan to catch us and tear us apart. We were the Hansels and Gretels. The forest was so witchlike that we felt an unease in heart. The uneasiness increased even more because of the strange silence. And it was even more eerily barren. No birds, no nothing.

Then we saw the snake, slowly writhing across a canal. Its head above the water and the body creating a ripple. And we saw a long soggy snakeskin wrapped around the trunk of a tree. Leaves and reeds had created a thick coating on the

water and floated like rafts.

We saw the monkeys. High up in the Karach trees, the primates were plucking leaves and chewing. The unknown guava like fruits we saw earlier were surely their staple food. We were startled by the sudden flapping of wings -- for a fleeting second we saw a large bird, about the size of a kite, with off-white feathers vanishing behind the Hijal branches. We could not recognize the bird.

Strangely for a water body so huge, the place seemed to be devoid of fish because we did not meet any fishermen here. And the forest was pristine in the true sense of the word. No human invasion has depleted it, no illegal logging was visible.

"Nobody touches the forest because Karach trees are



"basically useless things," a forest department official later told us. "They make some poor firewood. But who cares to come all the way here to collect wood?"

So for now, we have a clean forest, an untouched greenery. That is until the fishing project that has recently started takes over the greenery.

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