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DHAKA TUESDAY NOVEMBER 11, 2008

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THAILAND



Into the waterfall

WE sailed from Pablakhali of Rangamati early in the morning. It was a tiring five-day expedition to the hills of Rangamati and Khagrachhari. And now, it was time to return. We felt both tired and exhilarated at the same time. Dr Reza Khan, the famous wildlife expert, had taken us round the hills looking for birds and animals. It was a great lesson as we sat on the open veranda of the Pablakhali forest

The boat put-putted along the Kasalong river. I had traversed cross this water before in one winter morning. It was a different picture then with the water quite low and the villagers transplanting paddy right in the middle of what once was the river. And thousands of swifts were flying around us. But now it was monsoon and a different Kasalong. Engine boats coasted up and down, carrying

thriving with boats and people and a clump of concrete and bamboo structures. As we were pulling our boat into the cluster, more launches were mooring and leaving. We got down and walked through the milling crowd. Goats bleated and let out blackberry droppings. The magician pulled quite a crowd with his oratory power rather than his magic tricks and sprinkled his product, a kind of sex

enhancing powder, with vulgar jokes. People were selling strikingly white rice -- a clear indication that they came from the relief being doled out in the hills to help out the victims of rat invasion.

Then there was this man selling some magic potions and had a bucketful of blackish things. A closer look revealed them as scorpions each about six inches long. Most of them were dead long ago, the scales

had almost broken down into powder. But there were a few live ones crawling around with their stings held upright. Khan said these were not local species; these people must have brought them from India or somewhere else.

Then we saw this big table topped with dozens of plastic containers and glass bottles containing strange blackish potions. The 'medicines' were omnipotent. They could heal

from the world of magic potions -- a boy was crying at the top of his voice. A man with strange apparatuses was imposing on him, fumbling inside his mouth with thick, dirty fingers. Seconds later, he yanked with all his strength and a tooth came out. The boy gave out an even louder cry as blood trickled down his chin.

We came off from the scene. All this whirlwind of activities was getting too much on us. We

on a sea. A few launches slowly chugged across the expanse of blue water. Our eyes were getting tired from the glaze of the lake. And then we saw the beautiful hills, standing like solid rocks jutting out of the water. Rain and wind had left deep marks on the sides. Waterfalls rolling down the sides like silver tapes. We were amazed at the sight -- we had seen such beauties in East Asian travel magazines. If I were brought here blindfolded, I could have mistook the place as somewhere in James Bond Island in Thailand.

Then we saw this huge waterfall. We could hear the roaring noise of the fall from quite a distance. The waters had come straight down from a tall hill and then glanced down over a long distance over solid rocks.

We moored our launch and carefully stepped on the slippery rocks. One fall could get nasty cuts if one were not careful. We waded through the gushing water and then stood right under the fall in a large pool of water. The cool water splashed over us.

Fine shafts of sunrays wafted down through the leaves of the hills. The waterfall sent fine sprays up, creating ever-shifting rainbows. We bathed in the water and watched this wonder.

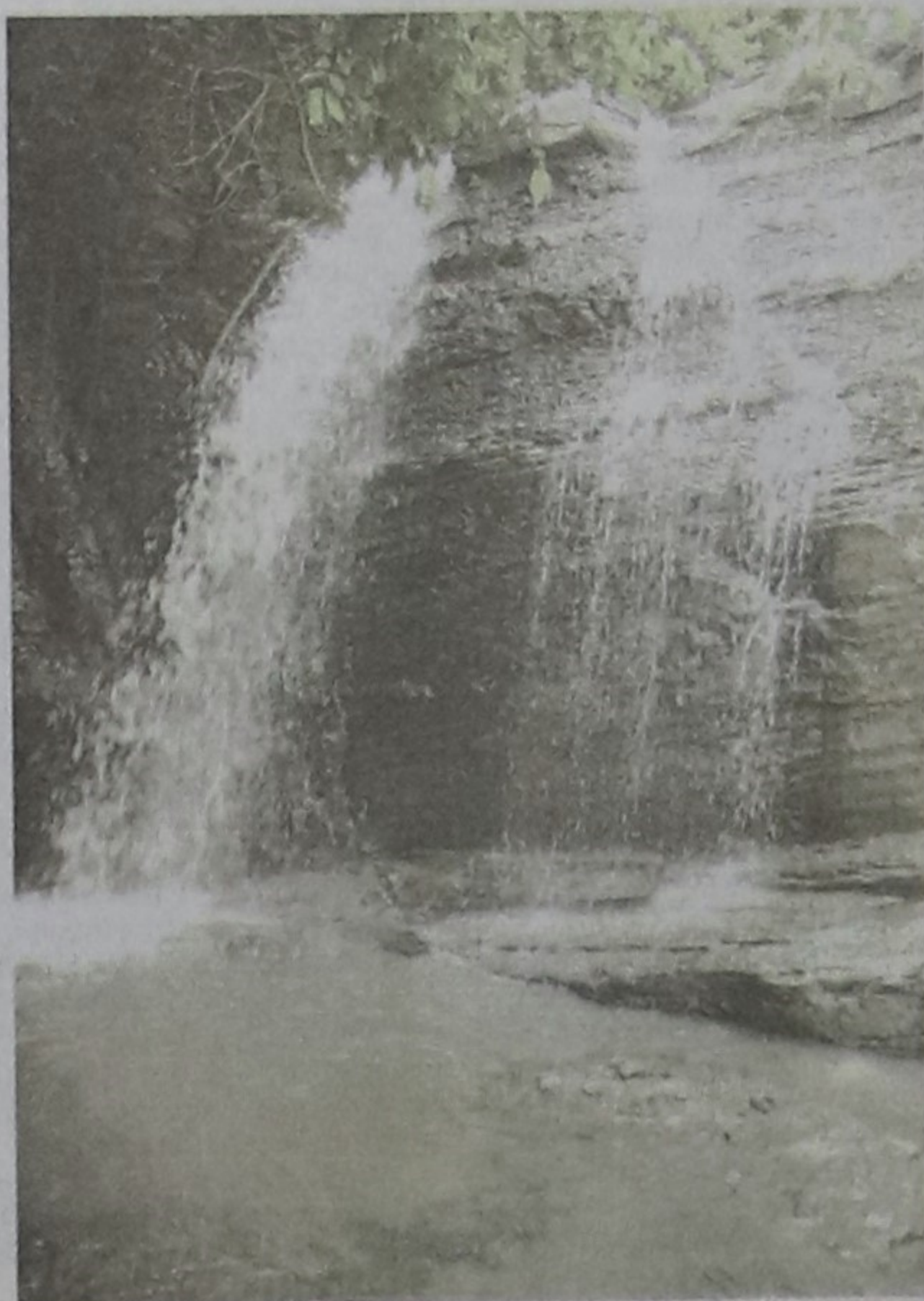
Story: INAM AHMED
Photos: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN



office and listened to owlets and nightjars and other birds. Khan listened and connected the calls to the birds. He showed us what many of us never saw with our eyes wide open. But we were tired too; all this traveling up and down the hills, crisscrossing hill district borders made us wanting for rest. And at last we were going home.

mostly the indigenous people. A big launch appeared from behind the bend and droned past us, creating huge waves. Locals said rain was low this time and the launch service started late. Without the water vessels, villagers are literally stuck in these harsh lands.

We came to a big market place after Mainimukh -- the Maini Bazaar. It was literally



your diabetics, jaundice, tuberculosis or even impotence. And then what attracted our attention was the shrunken carcass, almost mummified, of a deer cub. They had collected it from some hill people and killed and marinated it. Now it was there to demonstrate the super power of the potions.

A sharp noise distracted us

started off again and slowly the din of the marketplace faded away. We were on our own again, lonely like a bird on a long flight. And soon we were coasting by a long range of hills. Lush green trees matted the hillsides. As we came close to the hills, we saw a monitor crawling up.

This lake was so huge and empty that we felt like bobbing

