



Birds of Baikka Beel

NINE kilometer towards Moulvibazar from Sri Mongol and you find a gas station. A small, little-used metal road runs to the left. Our car followed that path and in two minutes the landscape began to change. It looked like a vast wasteland. As far as eyes could stretch, there were hardly any signs of human habitation. The look and colour of the earth made it clear -- this land remains under water for most of the year. The whitish big chunks of fine silted earth.



Only in winter the water recedes and the land surfaces. And then agriculture is practiced here, mostly rice. The variety is different. Not the HYV that cannot tolerate flood, but long-stemmed local varieties.

As the road wound into the hinterland, the place became even more desolate. Habitation became even sparser. Our eyes stretched for miles until vision got blurred in a bluish line of mist. The car was now moving

at a snail's pace because the metal road had suddenly ceased to exist. It was raw earth and the bumps were nasty. The car's shock absorber groaned and moaned as we negotiated difficult bends.

A long canal was running in parallel to the dirt road, its clear water looked like the eye of a crow. A reminder of the receding haor. And by the haor are the fishermen's huts scattered over a vast swath. Poverty was visible both in the looks of the huts and the people. The bamboo walls had worn out, showing gaping holes. The grass roofs were almost gone. The shredded edges spiked against the deep blue sky. In winter, the cruel north wind blew in and in monsoon the rain. And the people were some lanky characters, darkened by years of exposure to the blaring sun. Their ribs pushing against the skin. They were mostly bare-chested and somehow wrapped in a loincloth.

They were trawling the dried-up canal with nets tied to bamboo poles. What they could scoop out were mostly black mud and rotten reeds. And sometimes, there were a few jumping fish. We found a few fishermen with bamboo baskets heading for the market. We peeked into their baskets. Live koi, tangra, bain, kholisha and many more unknown fish were slowly opening and

closing their gills in death agony. One basketful of koi costs Tk 700 here.

We crossed a small market place with a few restaurants, a rickshaw mechanic's shop, a medicine shop selling some strange brands of paracetamol and anti-biotics. A homeopathic doctor's chamber. Jilabi doused with loads of red colour were sizzling in blackish thick oil. And thousands of flies buzzed over the stack of jilabi and singara. A small crowd clung around the clump of shops. They looked at us with open curiosity -- not many visit this faraway place.

We saw marsh harriers with long tails lazily hovering over the barren land. The harriers always make me feel dreamy. I feel a kind of itch in me -- an itch to be someplace not here.

But the joy of bird watching was tarnished by the bumps and jerks. The journey was proving too much now. With every bump, we ouch. And then finally we saw the watchtower in the distant. The concrete stilts supporting a two-storey box.

As we parked our car and cut the engine, we were drowned by birdcalls. We knew we are at Baikka Beel. And then we saw them -- thousands of them on the shallow haor water. The water looked like a molten piece of still mercury. We had first come here about two years



ago and then against last year. On both occasions we had witnessed the astonishing beauty of the haor. When the first time we went there, it was like a boat journey through the Amazon basin with huge thorny lily leaves and unknown flowers. Then we found a big area with blooming lotuses. Thousands of them in white and pink. We were amazed by this lotus bloom. I

remembered we caught two beautiful black rats resting on a lily leaf, photographed them and let them go for the dinner of the egrets and eagles.

But this time, the lotuses were gone. This was not the time for the flower. But the birds were there -- purple moorhen, jacanas and teals. The jacanas had lost their long tails after breeding. And in the distant, we saw the pair of fishing eagles in a low and slow flight, hovering over the haor for food. We could go so close to the moorhens that we could actually see their eyes. Their eyes black as the haor water.

And then a fisherman came in his boat close to the bird colony. There were swishing noises as the purple and black and brown and white birds took on their wings. The sky got almost blanketed by the flying birds. We watched the in wonder.

Story: INAM AHMED
 Photo: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

