

Star Holiday

DHAKA TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 8, 2009

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Galaxy Holidays



Looking for the Temple Tiger-3

Aila's fallout and a day with a broken engine

NIGHT crept up on us with the stealthy feet of a tiger. And before we knew it, it was murky dark. An owl hooted from one bank of the river and it was replied by another from the other side. A little later, a crescent moon appeared on the sky and cast a mesmerising subdued glow on the forests around. The forest silhouetted against a dark sky and looked like a huge ancient animal breathing in deep slumber by the riverbank.

Soon the insects started buzzing around the hot filament of bulbs, like disoriented ideas in a head. It seemed the night was trying to suffocate us with a duvet of humidity, which stretched over the stooping treetops before touching the water. Our ship changed positions quite a few times and even crossed a whole channel in the dark to blow some wind onto the deck.

We lay down against the cool steel of the deck, listening to the generators rumbling away continuously in the bowels of the ship. We switched off the ship's lights to enjoy the darkness. Now we knew night has its own brilliance as a zillion stars blinked back at us -- they were mingled with the forest in a secret intimacy. Like they shared stories every night.

The bright celestial pinheads reflected all around us in the rippling water. And the sky's face was

occasionally streaked by a sudden shooting star, which glowed for a few evanescent seconds, carrying the wishes of so many people. The smell of the night mingled with the salty green smell of the river.

Ideas were exchanged and stories were swapped over steaming cups of teas on the deck. Siraj talked about the man-eating behaviour of the Sundarbans tigers. For some strange reasons, 90 percent of the man-eaters exist in the west Sundarbans where we are now. He told us amazing stories of courageous men who had fought tigers barehanded and survived. He saw a man half of whose skull was crushed by the powerful punch of a tiger and yet he held the dislodged bone in place with his hand and swam a river to a rescue boat. The man survived but many of his senses have dimmed. All amazing stories. Then there was this man whose face the tiger tried to bite off. He survived by poking his fingers into the eyes of the tiger. The man recalls how his face was wet with the tiger's saliva.

As the darkness deepened, the heat subsided, and tiny drops of dew landed with their soft feet on our bodies. The cushions we were lying on got damp and started giving off a musty dank smell. It dawned on us like a surreal, dali-ish dream - we were in the middle of nowhere, out of the clutches of

network, and the grasps of the web. There were nocturnal beasts that lurked in the forests, just out of sight. Or maybe there were pirates, some way up the river, quite unlike anything we had seen in Pirates of the Caribbean.

We were lying there, spotting satellites and constellations, when we noticed the Milky Way, our own galaxy. It stretched like a very long and winding, misty road all across the sky, pressing close to the earth. It seemed we could just reach out and touch it. All this time, I had known Milky Way to be one single stretch of whitish streak. But here, to my wonder, I discovered that it has two almost parallel stretches, one a little shorter. Then an aircraft crossed over the Sundarbans from a great height and we watched its blinking lights until they vanished. We listened to the forest song as thousands of crickets chirped; chirped and fell silent as if to make us know the difference between absolute silence and the forest's own noise. We heard the night birds that flitted above. And then we fell asleep.

Morning brought a cooling relief as a cloud smudged the sky. But the humidity still hung in the air. As I climbed onto the deck for breakfast, the ship was already moving down the Shibshah River. Clusters of golpata-thatched huts came into view. Each of these clusters had a red flag flying from long bamboo poles - a clear sign of distress, a sign of people in want of relief even after so many months of cyclone Aila lashing the coasts. People were lined up there by the bank waiting for any succour. We talked to some of them they need shelter and food, but they

need water most. We later learnt how terrible the situation is here with almost all ponds the only sources of sweet water spoiled by salt water. We visited some shelters at ... where we were stranded for a long time because of engine trouble. These people are living almost an inhuman life. They had spread pieces of polythene sheets over their hut roofs and placed pitchers below. Then they used long wicks to channel rainwater all the way to the pitchers. That is all they have rainwater to survive. And if rain does not come -- as it had not in the last few days the situation turns desperate. They have to travel up to 25 miles on boats to bring water. These people are living in a pale existence of poverty ravaged by a cyclone. All through the day the only relief operation we witnessed is two relief-laden launches run by Medicine Sans Frontier, the French organization. The Frenchmen sitting under the sun with lifejackets on waved at us they could still smile in this heat.

We got stranded at Nalian Bazar with a broken engine before it was noon. We had our lunch and watched the launch terminal, the last point of the Sundarbans where people can reach by a regular launch service. We watched the launches approach and moor by the pontoon. A few people got down and a few boarded; then the launch lazily beeped and went back to Chalna where they came from.

After lunch we lay on the front deck downstairs and did practically nothing. We just lazily watched the mechanics working on the engine, taking it apart bit by bit and putting in new spares.

Someone took a boat to the shore and brought some horrible tasting biscuits which we ate with tea. And still the engine did not start. At last when we heard the rumble again, it was afternoon.

The ship moved fast now through the Shibshah because we wanted to reach Ada Chai forest office before dusk. The scene was changing from here already the trees looking taller and greener and the forest even lonelier. We knew we were in deep forest now. Fishing boats were fewer and far between too.

An ominous black cloud gathered in the south and it slowly spread northward, like a giant squid, like a leaden heart over the magical emerald forest. The light changed instead of the intense light that made everything look burned out with deep shadows, it was now a soft glow, a golden glow mixed with a strange green, almost translucent like some green amber. The mysterious forest looked glorious, almost smiling and still somehow sombre. The river was turning choppy. The rain came down in drizzle first and then in torrents obliterating everything from our sight. We could only make out the distant figures of trees if we squinted hard. And they looked like washed away paints in monochrome watercolours.

When we reached Ada Chai, the rain had stopped. And a piece of the sun had broken through the black cloud in its last effort to bid us goodbye. Our ship had slowed down and was moving at an idling speed. The river looked wide here, very wide indeed. There appeared a beautiful small patch of forest on an island just in the middle of the river. We circled it slowly and approached the blackish wooden structure on the shore the Ada Chai forest office. Then we stopped and the anchor was dropped in the clanging of the running chain. We would spend the night here. Up along the right bank we could see the Shibsha channel where we would go tomorrow in the morning in search of the Temple Tiger the magical beast that stays there and dodges every eye. We felt a strange anticipation in our heart. We came all the way to here in search of this majestic tiger, and would we find it? But for now, we decided to make a quick visit to the Ada Chai forest office. The engine boat was already throbbing for us to board. We set off for the shore before it was too dark.

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