

DHAKA TUESDAY OCTOBER 6, 2009

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Looking for the Temple Tiger-Last part

## The temple at last

**A**DA Chai forest station looked forlorn in this deep forest -- an outstation with a pale existence. We walked down a long wooden pier that had developed gaping holes through its rotten wood planks. At the end of it was the wooden station its planks blacked by continuous rain, damp, musty smell hanging in the air. The lanterns could hardly beat the gloom of the gathering dusk as we entered the ramshackle station. The dampness enters your inside and you feel dizzy. I was taken aback by the unbelievably sorry living condition of the foresters.

What surprised me more was the backyard of the station. A long pier about ten feet above the ground had run to the toilets. And it was protected with tightly knit golpata partition all the way. The floor was also made with solid wood.

"The man-eaters," one of the foresters smiled. "This is a tiger infested area. Only a few days ago, a tiger visited our station. We don't want to get dragged away at night while going out to the toilet."

We took a short walk at the back of the station. Thick thorny hetal bush had spread all the way to the keora forest.

"Don't walk any further," a forester warned. "The tiger often sleeps in this forest. We should not take risk at this hour."

We felt bad for these people who were living in constant fear of the big cats. And worst still, their life had turned bleaker by the lack of drinking water. The only fresh water pond had become unusable after Aila had dumped salt water into it. Tonight they were left with only a jug of water and if fresh rain did not come tonight they would be left without any.

It was getting late and we had to leave the station in a sullen mood, leaving the poor souls to fend for themselves. As our boat crossed the river to the ship, we could see Shibsha forest on our left where that mysterious temple sits tight amidst thick forest and where that even more mysterious tiger lives. Tomorrow we are going to look for it.

The day began with a heavily overcast sky. It rained the whole time last night and it was now drizzling. Breakfast was quick and then the ship set out along the Shibsha River. But at the entry to the Shibsha canal we had to anchor again. It was now low tide and we waited for the high tide so that we could enter the serpentine canals in an engine boat.

From here, I looked out to the deep forest lying ahead and wondered what a daunting task it was for Raja Pratapaditya to set up a township here to fight the pirates some 450 years ago. Who were those brave men and women who came to this wilderness and tried in vain to make this place liveable? We were here to get inside that deep forest to have a look at the remnants of the temple that was built by the Pratapaditya settlers.

The tide turned soon and we took the engine boat to cross the choppy stretch of the river to enter the channel that twisted through the deep forest and gradually became narrower. We saw a huge white-bellied sea eagle slowly winging above us to the other side of the forest. What a majestic

bird it is! We saw a honey buzzard and a grey-headed eagle too.

The journey was becoming mysterious now and we felt a kind of adrenaline rush thinking about the temple tiger. We were slowly rowing and a strange kind of silence had wrapped us tight. There were no songbirds singing. Only the crowing of an occasional red jungle fowl proved that it was not a dead forest.

Rows of golpata and hetal bushes frilled the blackish muddy banks. Beyond them stood the sundari and kewra and myriad other varieties in a tangle to form a dense forest. Reza Khan pointed out to the hetal fruits and said these are a variety of dates. They looked brilliant orange. Mudskippers and blue fiddler crabs crawled the banks among sharply pointed breathing shoots.

The canal had become so narrow here that the boatmen climbed down in the mud and pushed the boat as oars were of no use here. Khosru was looking intently ahead to locate the canal that would take us closest to the temple. The spiky hetal branches were brushing our faces and we had to be careful to save our eyes. It was drizzling again.

Suddenly Khosru signalled to stop. He was silently pointing to the bank. The pugmark was definitely imprinted a few minutes ago -- a huge male tiger had jumped across the canal. The claw marks were sharp and fresh -- the swampy mud had not blunted them yet. We silently watched the mark, a weird feeling descending upon us. We did not know whether the tiger was watching us from behind the bushes. What was he thinking?

From the boat we stepped right onto the bank and sank knee-deep in the spongy mud. Very slowly we climbed up the steep slope and found ourselves into a heddo bush. Heddo is the ideal place for tigers in the Sundarbans as the cats can use the reed like plants as mat to sleep on in the swamp forest.

"Everybody! Shout! Shout loudly!" Siraj yelled. "Not every forest is a good place to sight a tiger. Make noise as much as you can!" Siraj had seen some recent human victims of tiger attack and the memories were still fresh in his mind.

"Whaaaaoooo," we hollered, almost in unison. And we started walking, trying to cross the heddo brushwood as quickly as possible. But however fast we tried, our progress was painfully slow. Every step saw us sinking deeper in the most sticky mud. And we almost lost balance with every step too. That posed a most perilous prospect as the sharp breathing shoots were everywhere around us in great numbers. One fall and at least ten of them would pierce you through.

But then there were two more dangers. Our shoes were getting stuck in the mud and we had to vigorously pull our legs to free them. This was really challenging. And then we had to first place our foot slowly and carefully to be sure that we were not stepping on any breathing shoots hidden in the mud.

Some of us were slowing down and Khosru shouted us to a halt. "One guard in the front and the other in

the rear," he ordered. "Everybody must be covered by the guards. No-one should fall behind!"

I very much doubted how much protection the two forest guards could provide in case of a tiger attack. Before they could aim their rifles, they would skid and roll over on the mud. But still they gave us a kind of mental protection -- by now a strange kind of fear had seeped into our mind and we did not want to meet this mysterious temple tiger any more.

Soon one by one we got rid of the shoes because with them on it was impossible to move any further. Barefooted, we were exposed to more danger though. Anytime a breathing shoot could nail through our soles. And a little later our situation was further jeopardised as Reza Khan dragged

here. And I did not know whether I would have the energy left, if not life itself, to cross the same distance back. Worst of all, we had no idea how much path we had yet to cross to the temple.

"Shout louder!" Khosru ordered and we tried to best use our lungs. Someone suggested the guards shoot in the air. But the foresters looked unsure they have to explain to their officers for any bullet spent.

"It's useless," Ronald Haldar murmured beside me. "If it is a man-eater, no shouts can deter it."

"But we are twenty together. The tiger surely would not dare to attack such a large pack," I said hopefully.

"Ha! There you say," Ronald snorted. "I know of tiger attacks on bigger packs. Man-eaters are man-eaters."



out a dog-faced water snake by its tail from the mud. Who knows how many of them are lying on our path. And I remembered Khosru warning us to be extremely careful at the temple sight because it is teeming with cobras.

Thickets brushed against our faces and they stung like wasps. The drizzle, the danger, the crooked branches of the trees and the deep shadow of the forest created a ghoully atmosphere. Suddenly Reza Khan stopped dead. He was the only guy still courting a boot.

"The tiger is close by," he whistled. "It is stalking us."

The words hit us like bullets and froze us for a moment. An icy wave trickled down my spine. We felt helpless in this terrible terrain. For the first time, I resented having come

We started walking faster now probably by the fear of the unseen tiger softly following us. And no-one wanted to be too far away from the guards. After sometime, I lost track of time. We were all walking mechanically like some haunted souls. Plop, plop, our feet rose and fell in the mud. I was no longer glancing at the reeds that almost sandwiched us from all sides. We just kept treading. In empty heads. In empty minds. And then finally came in view a bright brick structure through the bush.

Slowly the temple became clearer. It is about 30 feet high, a very old structure. The thin bricks had lost their sharpness of edge over the centuries. Plants had grown all over it, darkening its haunted look. There was an opening through which we tentatively stepped inside and held still for a few

pugmarks of the temple tiger. So fresh that even the grasses were yet to lose their rumple. It looked like a tigress. Was the large canal-crossing male its mate? The tigress was probably resting on the high ground of the temple when its sleep was disturbed by our shouts. She got up and went down to see who the intruders were to enter her kingdom.

"We must get back fast," Khosru announced.

Headcounts were done and we lined up again -- one guard in the front, another in the rear. Then we plodded on through the mud, through the needles, through the same danger. Again.

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