The Modern Jajabor

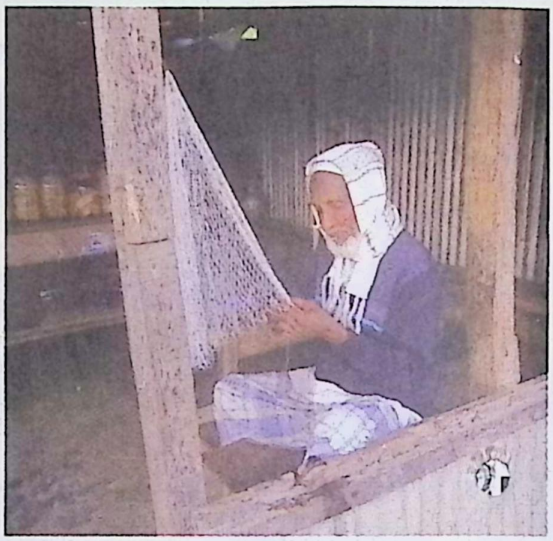
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A meeting of *jajabors* while on the road is a surprisingly uncommon event. Many days may pass without hint of another, and in settled periods the absence of even evidence leads one to wonder if others at all exist. Yet there are the travel websites, with postings like 'I left home three years ago on a three-month trip. I'm never going back.' The *jajabor's* footprints may be light but they step, nonetheless.

When one *jajabor* does meet another, in my experience it's a happy event, a meeting without formality and no more constraint to it than the hopping about of a sparrow on a windowsill. There's calmness in not needing to explain or greatly elaborate; to without effort pursue simple talk of adventure, with travel tales consumed as readily as rice. *Jajabors* don't ask the questions settled people do. They don't need to.

Of course it's *jajabors* of the modern variety of which I write, the ones who use passports and planes; but I should explain first about using the Bangla word, *jajabor*, which is something similar to the English word, nomad. It came about by accident.

In Dhaka people speak of the *Bedey*. I'm not sure if it's the *Bedey* who visit Hatiya Island, but in the winter months the nomads come, setting up their n-shaped tents in thatch and plastic sheeting on any patch of empty land.



Learning about his thoughts is a way to understand our own.



The jajabor consumes travel stories like rice.

I've heard the Hatiyalas say the ones who live on boats can drink brackish, delta water; that they barely set foot on land. I'm not sure how much is true. Like nomads or semi-nomads in many countries they have a reputation for trickery and fortune telling. It may well be undeserved. Still, as in other parts of the country, when the nomads visit Hatiya they camp wherever they find ground and are for the most part left undisturbed.

Yet it wasn't the presence of the traditional nomads in Hatiya that led me to learn the word surprisingly early. I don't suppose 'jajabor' is usually considered basic Bangla. It was because of the Assamese singer Bhupen Hazarika, who sings that famous Bangla tune *Ami Ek Jajabor*, I am a nomad. Unlike in the lyrics I didn't reach the Mississippi, but I did like the idea of the song.

Modern *jajabors* face shared problems and chief among them is explaining to non-travellers about travel. People ask, why travel or why travel *there*? The reasons are many and to account for them properly would require a conversation of some length. It's not always called for, especially as the result is likely to be disappointing. Non-travellers usually have other priorities and a differing world view. They don't understand.

For example, one *jajabor* I know, an Italian Mexican-born one currently 'pausing' in Bulgaria, said that when asked why he lives in Bulgaria he just says the girls are pretty. The Bulgarians are content