# Fishing with Otters



Otter swimming in Goalbari, Narail.

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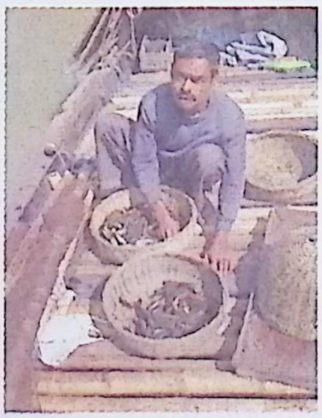
By lunchtime it's unmistakable: the sunshine is bringing new warmth to winter's end. Water hyacinth lazily rides the currents on the offshoot of the Chitra River in Goalbari village of Kalora Union, Narail. Along the riverbank wives have hung clothes to dry and below, where a muddy track leads to water's edge several canoe-like boats are moored. It could be a pleasant scene from any fishing village except that as well as the boats Goalbari harbours a unique fishing tradition.

Lunchtime finds Bhoben Biswas, 35, aboard his narrow boat in front of his modest house. Sitting on haunches he's sorting small fish. He's not examining his catch but arranging a raw fish lunch for his Indian smooth-coated otters – called either *udhbiral* or *bhodor* in Bangla, and as *dhere* in Narail.

Fishing with domesticated otters was a practice once found in several countries but is nowadays most probably restricted worldwide to southwest Bangladesh – more specifically to Mongla and Narail. As is still true for eight other Goalbari families – in a village of two hundred households – Biswas inherited this livelihood from his father who learnt from his father before him. Otter fishing has potentially been part of the small community for many centuries, but is in decline.

Biswas's son has manoeuvred the boat onto the water at our request while his father spreads the fish onto a large metal feeding tray. At one end of the boat is a covered area where the customary crew of four somehow find sleeping place during extended fishing expeditions, while at the other is the long box of bamboo slats where the otters live.

The otters are also aware of tradition. They similarly learnt the art of fishing with humans from their parents and grandparents; and they know when it's lunchtime. There's a lot of shuffling inside the box. Tips of noses, claws and eager eyes are finding gaps between the slats; a shrill rat-like squealing challenges the Chitra's tranquillity. The otters are ready.



Bhoben Biswas, 35, preparing a raw fish lunch for his otters.



Biswas's son helps his father by supervising the otters.

Biswas signals his son. With the lid's opening there's a scramble of seven thick-coated furry bodies – an otter can weigh up to 11 kilograms – leaping up and out, with each body momentarily rainbow-arch-manoeuvred in a beeline to the fish feast on deck. Squealing stops as gorging begins.

His otters eat about five kilograms of fish per day which costs up to 400 taka. Presumably this is more burdensome on the budget when the troop is in their home port, because otters will eat crustaceans, insects and even small mammals – while on a fishing expedition keeping their bellies satisfied must be simpler.

"Some people are scared of them," says Biswas, "but not me." It mightn't be easy to be scared of an otter from a distance, as they look storybook cute: but watching them eat with sharp gnawing teeth and mesmerising pink gums, seeing right into their throats as morsels of fish slide down, noting their ravenous manners, beady eyes and what may be a battle scar or two – it doesn't inspire putting one's hand between an otter and its lunch. Yet for