their part they're unaffected by the new human barely two feet away.

Biswas says all his otters are the same – he doesn't have names for them. Perhaps they feel the same about their humans.

The team leaders – the adult otters, wear rope harnesses with Biswas's son holding the other end. The younger otters remain free. It's the system that's used as the otters work, as they shepherd fish into the net attached to a long bamboo pole that's currently rolled up and stored along one side of the boat. "They focus on the bamboo pole," says Biswas, "and drive fish towards it."

Like for all Bengalis the otters' year begins on Pahela Boishakh, 14 April. It's an important day that marks the embarkation in their motor-less boat for five months of fishing in the Sundarbans wilderness. "It takes two days to get there," says Biswas, "but if we hang onto a trawler we arrive in one."



Lunchtime for the otters.

The crew of four will spend five days at a stretch fishing the jungle river channels before heading to a nearby settlement to sell the catch. The crew cooks on a solar powered stove and drinking water lasting for several days is stored in a large urn. Fishing occurs at low tide, day or night.

"If we get fish we are happy," says Biswas, "But when fish are few our stomachs aren't full." It's a sentiment most likely shared with his otters.

During the fishing months it's dacoity, robbery, which is the biggest problem. There's not a lot of security on a quiet deep-jungle waterway. "Last Aasha month we were held hostage by bandits for twelve days," Biswas recalls, "We had to pay a 10,000 taka ransom."

It's also difficult if the fish are few. "Once a whole month passed with no fish," he says, "We had to take a loan to come home again."

For the otters dangers include illness and crocodiles. According to Biswas an otter can live up to thirty years if there is no misadventure. And of course a problem for the otters is one for the humans and vice versa. It's a joint venture arrangement that Biswas has pursued for the last fifteen years.

These are the types of concerns that hold sway over Biswas's face. If he stopped to think he might take pride from pursuing an ancient tradition. He might enjoy the inherent adventure. But his thoughts are family-centred, on his wife Mira, their two sons and daughter, who must manage alone during the fishing months. The pride he seeks is providing for them and it's when he says "The best thing is if the catch is good. Then we make lots of money and the family runs nicely," that his face finally surrenders to a broad smile.

With the five months completed both humans and otters return home to Durga Puja. Afterwards they will leave for a shorter three-month expedition on the nearer rivers of Faridpur. There are few surprises in the otter-and-fisherman life cycle.

After lunch the otters head into their element – the water. "They like to take a drink," says Biswas. They also play and scamper about the riverbank in search of things of otter-interest. It's demonstrably apt that the English words 'otter' and 'water' stem from the same ancient root. A good half an hour later, Biswas calls "Ay! Ay! Ay!" to his otter team and they return to their bamboo home. But Biswas is in no rush to disrupt their play. It's clear that despite the hardships he holds affection for his animal assistants.

Back at the house Mira expresses her hope that her son can run a shop. Biswas too wishes to see an end to the otter fishing for his family. "I hope my sons do not do it," he says, "But the oldest one doesn't study properly." You see, even otter fishermen face that familiar problem – and one cannot but be in two minds upon hearing it. On the one hand, who could wish any student not to do well in their studies? On the other, it is regrettable to concede that before too long otter fishing might finally meet history's relegation.

A brighter future might lie in tourism. The first-rate otter drawcard already lures a trickle of intrepid westerners to stay with local families for several days – perhaps inspired by the BBC documentary. But the sector is unorganised, and even were its potential realised, there is risk that otter fishing would become more entertainment than living tradition, as lucrative tourism taka displaced the drive for Sundarbans bravery. ■

PHOTOS: ANDREW EAGLE