

Sea Dreaming

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They're slightly odd, those human choices: we'll survey the scene in front of us much more readily than we'll cast our minds inwards; we'll champion the future while neglecting the history which cooked it; we'll focus on the upwards achievements more than those of the downwards variety. Yes, in the human sphere most often it's the sky which rules the ground.

We know the first person on the moon for example – conspiracy theories aside – but not the one who reached the greatest ocean depth and resurfaced to tell of the ride. We know the planets – can name several of the stars and Everest, but hardly the trenches where the seafloor falls away just as remarkably. While we've barely discovered the fish and life forms of the great depths, is what I'm saying, we're pondering if there's bacterial life on Mars. We tend to look up.

Architects and engineers are hardly free from the fever: forever they conspire to construct taller towers to support longer spires. We celebrate that. We reproduce pencil-tall building images – now on Instagram, once on postcards. But which building has the deepest basement? Which tree has the deepest roots?

Yet in Dinajpur there's a series of impressive constructions of the downwards type to challenge the human predilection for heights. The grandest of them all lies in village Tejpur.

It's slightly odd, there's a monkey in that tree and you'd hardly expect to see him here. Friend says, "Maybe he escaped from his cage?" I say, "Maybe he's a rhesus macaque?" But the Assam macaque looks similar and come to think of it, maybe he's a she? But for the picnickers to enjoy there's a half-zoo over the long mound of grass-covered tailings to the right, so friend's cage-escape theory holds some merit.

To the left is a large rectangle of water. Yes, you've guessed it: we've reached Ramsagar. It's the most famous of Dinajpur's seven historical tanks and the largest manmade lake in Bangladesh. It has a water surface area of 77.90 acres – not to be sneezed at. Certainly those who dug it out by hand couldn't have taken it lightly. "Nobody knows its depth," friend says.

As I understand it, convention is that a monkey on a branch doesn't look inward in quite the contemplative way a human can. They may be better attuned than us to hunger, exhaustion or thirst. Convention is that a monkey, regardless of location, can't be expected to think in any historical way – which is not to say he doesn't know where he was on the day before yesterday.

Yet there's one thing that monkey does: in equal measure he looks all around. You can watch him as



The macaque may have escaped from his or her cage.

he shifts attention from further up the branch to across the water, from the treetop to the ground.

Would the human perspective be altered if we spent greater hours climbing trees? Would the imagination of "progress" be aimed equally at downward feats?

There's a sign which says the water body was excavated by the local king Raja Ramnath in the mid-eighteenth century; though I have doubts that monarchs personally spent much time with a shovel in hand. It'd be interesting to know how many hundreds or thousands of people were involved in Ramsagar's excavation.

The sign says construction continued for five years – presumably at its peak during winter months and resting for the monsoon, if contemporary pond construction methods are anything to go by. And when it was finally done, the tank that by the mid-twentieth century was renowned for fishing, boating and picnics, it took the name Ramsagar – the Sea of Ram.

Of course this "Ram" refers to Raja Ramnath while the "sagar" is most commonly attributed to its impressive size. But couldn't it be, just as easily, that the "sea" title reflects the sweat and effort of the workers having dug the entirety of seventy-seven plus acres... enough to make the tailing-hillock to hide the half-zoo from which the monkey escaped his cage?

Surely if you'd been involved in digging out even

one acre by hand you'd be calling the result a "sea" too. Matasagar, Anandasagar, Suksagar... all seven tanks are "seas."

And then, when it was finally complete, did Raja Ramnath say, "Okay, that's one down and only another six to go?" I'm taking the liberty to assume Ramsagar came first – but being the largest it might rather have come last.

But what was it exactly that induced him to



Ramsagar is the largest manmade lake in Bangladesh.



Ramsagar is the largest and most famous of Dinajpur's seven tanks.

consider such a flurry of downwards construction? He had a palace. He completed Kantaji Temple. It's not as if he had an aversion to buildings. The answer is simple: water. People needed clean, pure drinking water.

But of course I'm not suggesting that the escapee macaque appreciates any of that.

Nowadays Ramsagar is a National Park, an oasis for Dinajpuris and people from beyond. The fresh air, with water yet clear enough to easily spot a hand-sized crab, Ramsagar is for family and friends; the snack stalls and tea stalls are straight ahead don't worry, just up there by the tank's far end.

If you take the time to soak in the scene it's quite the place to be inspiring – for while the parkland beauty must keep us looking out, the serenity is enduring enough to coax a looking-in. And while the future is, as always, ever beckoning, you'll forget that, at last, to consider the magnificent achievement of the past. In that place the upwards focus of many-where holds no sway, not against the downwards accomplishment of Raja Ramnath's day.

Yes, at Ramsagar it's the ground that rules the sky, capturing indeed its very reflection. Over chotpoti and a cup of tea you'll realise that they're slightly odd, those usual choices of human perception.

And if you've travelled up from Dhaka in this day and age, you're surely as delighted as that monkey who escaped his cage. So then: What's the tallest building in Dinajpur town? The answer: "Who cares? Look not up, but down."

Covering an area of 77.90 acres (the water only), it would be interesting to know how many workers it took to dig Ramsagar by hand over the course of its five year construction period.