

ECOLOGY



PHOTO: ABM SAROWAR ALAM

# BRINGING BACK 'JATAYU' FROM THE CLUTCHES OF 'RAVANA'

## The story of saving the vultures of Bangladesh

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As my mother describes scenes of her childhood, images of post-Liberation-War-torn Bangladesh mingled with the 2014 coming-of-age movie *Boyhood* flit through my mind.

Nestled by the now Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary, my mother's stories of her village often feature a large, grotesque monster of the skies, she called *hogun*. Any time a cow died, or a pet dog passed away, the *hoguns* would descend, huge flocks of them, like a black cloud, ready to take apart the animal, piece by piece, bone by bone.

And, *Ma*, then only a few years old, and her older siblings, would all sit by the rice field, enthralled at the sight of the jungle pouring into the village. From her stories, it seems, back then the jungle's borders were porous—an animal that breached that border into human territory could go back, alive and sometimes well fed.

But not anymore; when an animal walks or flies out, it usually becomes road kill, or if it happens to be a vulture feeding on dead cattle, it dies of diclofenac or ketoprofen poisoning.

You have most likely heard of diclofenac, consumed it even—these are the red or pink dye-coated painkillers, often taken for severe migraines, headaches, joint pain, etc.

Diclofenac and ketoprofen also happen to be administered to livestock as anti-inflammatory drugs in our country. But when a vulture feeds on the dead cattle, their kidneys malfunction and eventually stop working, essentially killing them off, says ABM Sarowar Alam, Principal Investigator of the White-rumped Vulture conservation project in Bangladesh.

### Where have the vultures gone?

The White-rumped Vulture—grotesque, humungous and surely the anti-hero of our skies—was once abundant throughout Bangladesh.

Surveys were not required to acknowledge that. A look through the photographs of post-Liberation Bangladesh, and it is clear that vultures descended upon the casualties of war, often left rotting on the many fields of Dhaka, to feed on the carcass.

Over the years, as humans encroached into natural spaces, the large forests were slowly pushed farther and farther away. The big trees, mostly needed for nesting of these spectacular White-rumped Vultures, were also stripped away.

Add to that the blow of human-administered painkillers to cattle—diclofenac and ketoprofen—and it spelled disaster for these birds, so crucial to the intricate food web.

Scavengers by nature, the vultures are known to feed on these dead cattle and other dead rotting, often sick, animals that would otherwise pose major health risks to humans and other animals of the forest.

They do our dirty work and clean up the environment. And as their populations plummeted, examples from our neighbouring India pointed towards an imminent need to protect them.

### The long and winding road to saving the last vultures

The motorcycle traversed through muddy roads, villages, small bazaars mingled with smells of hot *peyajju* and incense, then one long Bailey bridge and we were in jungle country.

This jungle country was special to me. My mother's village was around and she spent a good part of her childhood here. Legends in this region say people were killed and left in tall sugarcane fields and no one would ever find the bodies. I attribute that to the vultures now.

By the time the motorcycles entered the Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary, dusk was approaching fast and everyone was ready for lunch.

But lunch was not to be. We were here to witness something. Something that looked demonic and in my imagination, what rituals from witch hunts or pre-historic tribal killings would look like.

A cow (that died of natural causes) was being carried by two men. Forelegs and hind legs tied together and balanced neatly on a sturdy pole of bamboo. I learn this is food for the White-rumped Vultures.

Once the cow is left at a clearing on the forest bed, we all head to a small house (a vulture monitoring centre) camouflaged to blend into the forest. With bated breath, we watch.

Scientifically named *Gyps Bengalensis*, the White-rumped Vultures (only a little smaller than the Californian Condor), ominously swoop in near the carcass, their wings spanning eight feet into the sky.

Their landing: clumsy. Bouncing and steadying themselves, they prod at the cow. Talons claw at the animal. With a decisive move, one goes for the slit in the throat. The bloody trachea is pried out in one long slurp. There is a gaping hole now. Through openings varying in sizes

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from small golf-balls to large tennis balls, the *Bengalensis* devour the animal.

In the fading light of dusk, the sight is hypnotic. New diners, all grey and black, are quick to join the party, 20–30 feeding at any given time.

Even the feral dogs that tried to join in for their share were unable to break through the wall of the White-rumped Vultures.

In the forest, around the large *Garjan* and *Chapalish* trees, they seemed invincible. Then why were they at our mercy? Why did we need to save them?

ABM Sarowar Alam says that in the last few decades, the vulture populations in the Indian subcontinent have reduced by 99 percent.

The problem: simple enough. Until it was identified that is. When livestock administered diclofenac or ketoprofen



PHOTO: NAZIMUDDIN KHAN PRINCE

passed away, they were either thrown into the river or indiscriminately buried (burial of cattle is an expensive and labour-intensive task). The vultures, blessed with sharp sight and keen sense of smell, eventually scavenge on the carrion. What follows next has been widely documented in the subcontinent.

It was in India, around 2003, that scientists first came across diclofenac as a possible cause of death and possible decline of vultures, writes Elizabeth Royte in an article published in *National Geographic*.

In vultures, diclofenac causes kidney failure. Autopsies revealed organs coated with white crystals, she adds in the article.

The impact of the decline was acutely

felt in India, a country with one of the largest cattle populations in the world. Practicing Hindus make up a huge part of the population and cows are revered. With minimal consumption and large populations of cattle, the disposal of dead cows became a pressing problem.

The benefits of saving the vultures far outweighed the cost of building carcass-rendering plants, Sarowar says.

In a decisive move, the Indian government banned veterinary diclofenac around 2006, he adds.

Nepal and Pakistan, also the range of the White-rumped Vultures, in followed suit.

“Natural-disaster-riddled, densely-populated Bangladesh was not far behind. Conservationists banded

Every year, the first Saturday of September is celebrated as Vulture Awareness Day.

**VCT (Vulture Conservation Team):** Teams formed at grassroots levels run the feeding station, monitor and survey for harmful drugs, assists nest monitoring and population surveys.

**Vulture Feeding Station:** Feeding station is not open to public and is overseen by Bangladesh Forest Department and IUCN. When a cow dies naturally in the vicinity, the VCT is notified and they source carcass.

**BNVRC: Bangladesh National Vulture Conservation Body** established in 2013. Only vultures have a national government body.

**Bangladesh Vulture Conservation Action Plan (2015-2026)** was passed in 2016.

together to push through bureaucracy, successfully banning [veterinary] diclofenac in 2010 across the entire country,” Sarowar shares.

Then, under the White-rumped Vulture conservation project, which was first conceived in 2014, ketoprofen was banned in 2017 in the Vulture Safe Zones, he says.

The government of Bangladesh has declared two Vulture Safe Zones (VSZ-1: 19,663.18 sq km and VSZ-2: 27,717.26 sq km) on December 23, 2014 under the Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2012, as specialised 'Landscape zones'.

These are the only government-declared safe zones in the world. They also share boundaries with India.

Big pharmaceutical companies were urged to use alternatives—readily available—which could be sold at the same price band.

“We were also out in the field, talking to locals and children, trying to get the message through that vulture are not evil. These apparently invincible creatures need us to be a little more aware and in return we enjoy a free clean-up service,” says Sakib Ahmed, Programme Assistant of the initiative.

Often in making the case for conservation, the question arises: what is in it for us? Usually the answers are in economics. And the economics of conserving vultures are strong.

Vultures have a high stomach pH. This means their stomach fluids are acidic and can neutralise anthrax, rabies and botulism among other pathogens, says Sarowar Alam.

Lose them and we risk a growth in stray dog populations, more dog bites and possibly more cases of death from rabies, and no easy way to clean up the dead animals. Lose the vultures and rat populations grow and diseases spread.

Diplomacy has resulted in the government creating an action plan for vultures, the first of its kind for any bird species in the country.

In these Vulture Safe Zones, no ketoprofen or diclofenac is administered to cattle. Vulture 'restaurants' have also ensured access to safe source of meat for

the vultures, Sarowar says.

Artists have even gone to the last echelons of the forest, where a primary school stands. It has been painted with murals of vultures, all in a bid to change the dialogue against them and change is happening, says Tarik Kabir, wildlife biologist of the initiative.

They are not dismissed as ugly *hoguns* by the schoolchildren any more—they are looked at with awe. And the next generation is our strongest ally in saving nature.

White-rumped Vulture populations have stabilised in the country and conservationists are hopeful they will grow. This only goes to show what conservation can do to turn the clock back on a species.

The *Bengalensis*, named after this very land, cannot be left for doom. And unsightly as it may be, even in *Ramayana*, the great Hindu scripture, it is a symbol of good. Jatayu, the vulture, tries to save Sita when Ravana abducts her. As the story goes, Jatayu is eventually killed.

But through combined efforts, Jatayu can slowly and surely make a comeback in the skies of the Indian subcontinent.

After all, George Schaller, the luminary conservationist did say, “A large animal needs a large area. If you protect that area, you're also protecting thousands of other plants and animals. You're saving all these species that future generations will want—you're saving the world for your children and your children's children... The destruction of species is final. If you lose a species, you lose the genes, you lose all the potential drugs and potential foods that could be useful to the next generations. The ecosystems will not function as they have.”

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Conservationist Sayam U Chowdhury and Photographer Nazimuddin Khan Prince were two of the first people to come across the vulture colony in the Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary.

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