

# EXACTLY HOW DO YOU REHABILITATE PIRATES?



Many former dacoits have surrendered their arms in search for a fresh start to their lives.

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## DIPANKAR ROY

Palash Sheikh, a man of 32, runs a tea stall at Narkeltola Bazaar near Mongla upazila under Bagerhat district. Just a few miles south of the bazaar, lies the world's largest coastal mangrove forest, the Sundarbans.

Forest gatherers such as fishermen, wood cutters, nipa palm harvesters, honey collectors, all spend a few minutes at Palash's tea stall after returning from the forest. Over a cup of tea and a plate of cookies, they share stories about the forest's current situation with each other and predict tomorrow's weather. Regarding weather and risks in the forest, they take advice from Palash, who according to them knows the forest like the back of his hand. Thanks to Palash's knowledge about the forest, his tea stall has become a popular spot since its establishment in May this year. However, Palash's famed familiarity with the forest and its weather has a

questionable source. Just six months earlier, Palash was one of the most feared pirates and poachers of the Sundarbans. He was second-in-command of the notorious "Rajon Bahini", one of the largest groups of bandits and poachers.

They used to live by extorting forest gatherers and poaching tigers and deer. Many of them have allegedly killed forest gatherers in cold blood when they refused to pay tribute to the bandit groups. However, according to Palash, they never harmed any forest gatherers from their native villages. This might be one of the reasons behind Palash's acceptance in Narkeltola Bazaar despite his sinister past. Palash now saves forest gatherers by providing them with survival tips and has already earned respect among them.

Palash is not alone. Due to escalation of anti-piracy and anti-poaching raids

in the Sundarbans, many of his comrades have surrendered their arms and are trying to restart their lives.

"My group member Mansur is now a muezzin of his village mosque (a person appointed to recite the call to prayer); another member, Horish, lends fishing equipment to the fishermen. Some of them purchased rickshaw vans and easy-bikes. We received Tk 1 lakh from the government and we have invested this fund to earn an honest livelihood," says Palash while serving his customers with tea and cookies.

"When we were dacoits, our lives were extremely uncertain. We could not return home even once a year. One of my group members managed to return home after eight months, only to see that his wife had abandoned his children and fled the village with another man. Members of the law enforcement agencies used to shoot us on sight. If we failed to obey the orders of our godfathers (*mohajons*), they used to kill us or hand us over to the law enforcement agencies. It was a life full of stress, disappointment and disgrace," describes Palash.

Nevertheless, the disgrace of Palash's past life still affects his family members who live in Narkeltola. Palash's wife, two daughters, and his elderly mother lead a miserable life with meagre income from the tea stall. His wife, Rukhsana, is known as *dakater bou* (wife of dacoit) in the village. His elder daughter, Selina, who studies in grade four at the village primary school, is also addressed as *dakater biti* (daughter of dacoit) by her classmates, and even by the teachers.

During winter harvest, village women are hired by the wealthy farmers to reap the harvest which is a means of extra income for the village women.



Bandits and poachers used to live by extorting forest gatherers and poaching tigers and deer.

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