

Of stories from tidal villages by a vanishing forest and a fast-rising sea

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Maybe it was Anita Desai's book *The Village by the Sea* or was it that movie *My Japanese Wife*—I do not remember so clearly now—that had us all riled up during that short four-day long journey down to the last villages of the Sundarbans.

Monsoon had just hit the land of Bengal—this was nearly four years back—when four of us boarded a small microbus from Dhaka city en route Khulna and then on to Rainda. With bags full of posters and placards for raising awareness against the hunting of an endangered bird, the Masked Finfoot, we set off.

As the cityscape changed from towering concrete buildings to multi-coloured one-storied buildings plastered with advertisements of long-forgotten products—



PHOTO: TURASA NAHLA

Uro cola, RC cola, Pocha soap etc—we could sense the variation in the species composition of the landscape as well. Bigger buildings and dusty pathways gave way to small stores and eventually tin-shed buildings slowly giving way to greener pastures. Homestead forests—tall supari trees, short stocky babla trees, mango and jamrul trees, small and big ponds and a range of domesticated and wild species of birds—covered both sides of the highway past Khulna.

It was late afternoon by the time we made it over to the small ghat perched on the banks of Balaswar River. A tiny yellow ferry, with just enough space to hold the one car and two or three motorcycles, ferried passengers, goods and everything in-



TRAVEL

between both banks. We left our microbus and crossed the ferry on foot.

While I have visited villages in the Sundarbans before, this would be my first stay in one such village. It is difficult to describe the landscape and be pragmatic at the same time. It is at once beautiful and devastating. This particular village—Rayenda—was just a few kilometres from the Sundarbans but the forest and the village are connected by one fine invisible thread. The vegetation is unique—from the lush green to shrubs and even cactuses line the boundaries of most houses—and the air too feels heavy with salt. We hired a van fitted with an old engine from a boat, another usual mode of transport in these areas, to take us from the ferry ghat to the main Bazaar of Rayenda.

We stayed in one of the few four-storey building complex/NGO training centre/cyclone shelter/office in the bazaar during our few days there. From my window, I had viewing access to bits and pieces of the village. A school could be seen in the distance, also used as a makeshift cyclone shelter. Everything slowed here during the monsoon—the season during which we were visiting. Rains meant most fishermen were home and the rice fields—the few that were arable in the area—were also oddly devoid of any activity. This is because most people had opted to either change to shrimping from rice farming or fishing in the Sundarbans, thanks to rising seas resulting in salinity intrusion from the downstream. There is an onslaught from the upstream too. Construction of dams in the upstream restricts flow of freshwater into the rivers of the Sundarbans, especially on the Indian side.

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