UNTOLD STORIES OF TANGUAR HAAR

UNION

INTERNATIONAL UNION

PO Box 3202, Khulna 7801, Bangladesh
Tel: +880-171-110000
Fax: +880-171-110000
www.iunion.bangladesh

A membership Union uniquely composed of locally governed and child
society organizations. It provides policy,
local and non-governmental organizations
human progress, economic development and
relation to development. Together,

Created in 1994, IUNION is now the world's
largest network of Child
child organizations
network, spanning the ideologically
region of Childail and

IUNION provides a neutral space in which diverse
organizations from throughout the world, including
IUNION's member organizations, local communities,

IUNION works with many partners and cooperates,
ICTs enable a disaggregated and diverse
portfolio of communication and information tools.
Combating the failure rate, building
"I am not a statistic" and

www.iunion.org
https://twitter.com/IUNION
Untold Stories of Tanguar Haor

Iffat Nawaz

IUCN (INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE)
BANGLADESH COUNTRY OFFICE
JUNE 2016
The designation of geographical entities in this book, and the presentation of the material, do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature concerning the legal status of any country, territory, administration, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The views expressed in this publication are authors’ personal views and do not necessarily reflect those of IUCN.

Publication of this book is mandated and supported by Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) under the 'Community Based Sustainable Management of Tanguar Haor Project' of Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) of Government of Bangladesh.

Published by : IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Copyright : © 2016 IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources

Reproduction of this publication for educational or other non-commercial purposes is authorized without prior written permission from the copyright holder provided the source is fully acknowledged.

Reproduction of this publication for resale or other commercial purposes is prohibited without prior written permission of the copyright holder.


ISBN : 978-984-34-0933-1

Photography by : Saadul Islam

Cover Photo : A bird sanctuary at Tanguar Haor © Saadul Islam

Design and Printed by : Bangla Communications Ltd.

Available from : IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature)

Bangladesh Country Office
House 16, Road 2/3, Banani
Dhaka 1213, Bangladesh
Tel: 880-2-9890423, 9890395
Fax: 880-2-9892854
E-mail: info.bangladesh@iucn.org

www.iucn.org/bangladesh
Note of Thanks

The book ‘Untold Stories of Tanguar Haor’ has been published under the project ‘Community Based Sustainable Management of Tanguar Haor’ (CBSMTH) which is being implemented since 2006 by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) of the Government of Bangladesh with technical assistance from IUCN Bangladesh Country Office, and financial support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). This book is a compilation of some interesting stories of Tanguar Haor where the haor people tell their own stories of culture, tradition, joys, deprivation and struggle for survival. The story book is a unique document for the Tanguar Haor community whose voices are represented here very lively and artistically. What makes the book distinctive in character for Tanguar Haor is expressing the wetland differently from its popular known as the land of nature and natural resources.

Inevitably, full credits of the story book foremost reach to the author, Ifkat Nawaz, who has written this book with much caring and enthusiasm. The author has captured the words in winter from different villages of Tanguar Haor, and has transformed those into several pieces of stories amazingly. In doing so, the author met a number of local people there of whom few names; Abdul Ghani, Sree Tirthobasi, Kala Mia, Shivananda, Sree Sunil Barman, Bojlu Mia, Mouz Ali, Gofur Ali, Robin Dajel, Sobita Dajel, Nomita Dajel, Martin Dajel, Seebnath, Joinuddin, Mohammad Shamim and Okil Das are significant to mention.

However, the publication of this book could not have been possible but for the involvement of staff of IUCN Bangladesh Country Office. I consider myself privileged to be able to participate in developing the story book. We would like to thank Haseeb Md. Irfanullah for his entire and valuable efforts from providing technical advice to ensuring publication of the book. Our appreciation goes to Md. Wasim Newaz who was endowed with the responsibility of focal person for coordinating the development of this book at all stages. We also remain thankful to all the photographers, especially Saadul Islam, for enriching the book with many splendid images.

Finally, we acknowledge the contribution of CBSMTH project team for bringing out the book successfully.

Ishtiaq Uddin Ahmad
Country Representative
IUCN Bangladesh
Tanguar Haor at Glance 01
The Tales of Majherchora 10
Kalamia-The Master Fisherman of Mandiata 15
Songs of the Garo Sisters of Bangalbhita 23
Shivananda Recites at Indrapur 26
The Colors of Rangchi Baag 34
The Myth of Bula-Buli 38
Mujrai-Where Nature Came to Stay 40
The Mystic Entertainer of Indrapur 44
The Cloudy-Eyed Lone Widow of Hatpaton 51
The Darkness of Coal 54
The Words of the Old Men 56
Good Morning Tangua 59
The Children of Bangalbhita 64
After Thoughts 70
The Past, Present and bit of the Future

When travelers enter Tanguar Haor, located in the Sunamganj district, they are bound to be taken over by the force of nature. The green of the grasslands around is hard to leave out as one of the prominent colors of haor life, and so is the clear blue-green water of the haor, a sight incomparable to any other wetlands in Bangladesh. Dragonflies and migratory birds fly high and low as boats maneuver their ways through the haor, a place so vast and filled with r especially during the months of monsoon, it would be hard to navigate without a local boatman guiding the way.

There are around 80 villages and the haor is the source of livelihood for more than 60,000 people. The resources of the haor is boundless, as it is one of the largest sources of fisheries for Bangladesh. Tanguar Haor is ecologically critical nationally, and internationally, and appropriately, declared as a RAMSAR site in 2000. Besides providing the entire country with one of the most important delicacies of Bangladesh – hundreds of fishes, Tanguar Haor is also important for migratory birds which call it their home during the winter months. Not to mention its ecological value for its swamp forest, reed land and *beels. Throughout the year Tangua provides a habitat for 150 species of flora, 141 fish species, 208 species of birds, 11 amphibian species, 34 species of reptiles, and 19 species of mammals.

*beels are wetland pockets holding water even in winter
However, it took a while to understand the importance of this area and to reach a point of conservation and preservation by the people of Bangladesh. The socio-economic structure of Tanguar is complex and involves multi-level stakeholders and an intricate history of the land. Looking back, the haor basin has known at least several centuries of human habitation and settlement. By the end of the 18th century almost all of the suitable land of the area had been brought into cultivation. However, during the period there was a considerable outward migration from the haor, and as a result, what was then a populous and prosperous area was nearly depopulated by the 1860s. The cause of this decline has been attributed to successive natural calamities and consequent environmental changes. By the second half of the 19th century, the haor basin ecosystem recovered from this environmental stress, regained its productivity, and from the first quarter of the 20th century the area began to attract settlers again from surrounding densely populated regions.

Today the rate of migration out of Tanguar Haor is lower. When one is asked why they do not choose to leave the land of their ancestors, they talk about their bonds with the surrounding nature. The ample of fishes to be caught and birds to be watched keep the Tanguar settlers well grounded to its territories. There are some who have left the land to work in Sylhet or in the Capital Dhaka, the elders mention their far away daughters or sons working at garments factories or some other vocations in these cities.

The water of Tangua has seen many ownerships, and thought them the people have seen good and bad days. Understanding the historical circumstances and traditional practices is important for appreciating the present status of the land, and the land
tenure system in and around Tanguar Haor. The area was under the control of the zamindars (landlords) of Bangshikunda until 1920 and later on it was transferred to the zamindars of Gouripur. With the abolition of the zamindar system (State Acquisition & Tenancy Act 1950), the area came under the control of the government as *khas land. Until 1960, land administration was mostly informal. Traditionally the local people were used to the likhon system, based on indicative demarcation line and approximate area. So the migrated Hindu, Muslim population and the tribal population of Garo and Khasiya, exchanged lucks and lived through different times, depending on nature, the leaseholders and the power of money.

The ethnic composition of the area underwent dramatic changes following the unsuccessful farmers’ uprising in the late 1950s, under the leadership of local leaders, Gaj Dham and Robi Dham. This uprising, called the Tebha movement, was a land tenure movement of landless and marginal farmers, who tried to establish their right to a two-third share of crops, instead of the prevailing one third or half. In the wake of the uprising, immigrants from the plain area, known as Abadi usurped the ethnic tribal people (Kuch and Bangshi), who abandoned their properties and moved across the border to India.

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the people of the haor have encountered many changes. The tribal population left their homes and many Hindu dwellers also escaped to India during the war, when they returned, a lot of what they owned were no longer their. When they returned the land looked different, but many villagers returned to their fishermen-ship working for rich leaseholders of *jalmahals. In the past, fishing was considered a low status choice of career, leaving it only to the lower-caste Hindu villagers, however after the independence many Muslim settlers also started to try their luck with fishing and some became master fishermen of Tanguar Haor.

In those days, the owners of the jalmahal were not native to the haor, hence they held no emotional ties to the land and their sole mission was to reap as many fishes out of the water as possible, hardly aware of the ecological damage they were causing in the process. During the times of these unruly days of fishing and degradation, there were many crimes and deaths which took place in the water. The locals of Tangua were not allowed to fish in the leased water bodies - not even hired as day laborers. The powerful leaseholders used their authority and manpower to carry out many injustices in the area targeting the local community who were dependent on the haor for their livelihoods. Tales of dead bodies of local fishermen buried under water still roam the mouths of grandmothers and grandfathers of Tangua, now the sad tales have turned into ghost stories for children.

**"khas land” or “land in khas possession”, in relation to any person, includes any land let out together with any building standing thereon and necessary adjuncts thereto, otherwise than in perpetuity [S. 2(15) of the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 (E. B. Act XXII of 1951)]

*Jalmahals are administratively used in Bangladesh to define fisheries resources or water estates.
Many villagers recall the years between 1990 and 1999 as a time of hardships. During this period, a very powerful but ecologically unaware leaseholder owned a good part of the haor. During his time, criminal acts were an everyday event, no attention was given to ecological conservation. Efforts were only spent on the purpose of earning the maximum amount from the haor catches. Barely any attention went to preserving these breeding grounds and the future of productive fishing.

The crime and the unfairness of this decade did not only sadden and awaken the people of the haor, but the Bangladesh government started to take greater notice of this area realizing one needs to have ecologically friendly and conservation focused practices in place in Tanguar Haor for a fruitful future.

Currently, most of Tanguar Haor is classified as khas land and is managed by the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF), and the District Commissioner’s Office. Prior to 2000, much of this was leased out as a commercial fishery (jalmahal) but thankfully between the years of 2003 and 2006 leasing was banned and district administration took authority. Since the late 2006, a system of collaborative management started being implemented by the Government of Bangladesh, so that Tanguar Haor’s natural resources are well managed and conserved between its wetland depended community and the Government of Bangladesh. And this is when the local community finally got their due right to save their land and water and live off its resources in a systemic and ecologically friendly way.

Collaborative management of natural resources is a process and a platform where government and stakeholder communities, in this case the local people of Tanguar Haor, work together to conserve, manage and
look after the natural resources with the goal of ultimate nature conservation. The forest cover of Tanguar Haor have dwindled down to less than 5 Percent which was still at about 20 percent in 1947. The tales of vast gardens and forests around Tangua can be found in the elderly mouths. In those days tigers and elephants roamed the place and the woods provided enough goodness to the community for them to call it paradise.

One of the most promising aspects of Tanguar Haor is probably the resilience of the people, along with their determination. In a place where so many are landless, the collaborative management system brought bigger hopes for the poor fishermen of the haor. The water which they were not allowed to fish in even though they were born in its surrounding was finally theirs, giving them a sense of ownership and the strong feeling of preservation and awareness of their land and area. Once the co-management system made sense to the villagers, they elected leaders in their community to represent their villages. Fishes have returned to Tangua since these events and the killings of wildlife like turtles (a delicacy for the tribal and Hindu community) have stopped. Through the platform of collaborative management, the government not only worked with the people of Tangua for greater livelihoods but also brought in the much needed awareness and behavior change activities. The children of the haor now know, migratory birds are not for hunting, which fishes breed at which months and which areas are preserved in what time of the year for the fishes to breed healthily.
As the co-management system has worked in Tanguar Haor, the people have accepted it as a way to a better future. In a place as remote as Tangua, where half the population is still illiterate and not every village holds a school, it is a tremendous gain to have the endorsement and understanding of the community. There are camps set up by the villagers through the co-management committee to look after the fishes, especially during the winter months. The ultra-poor communities of Tangua used to look at the land and water they were born in as assets of the powerful, but this mindset has turned drastically in the past years. Now, the communities earn from their water in a systemic way, work together for a better future, for secured livelihoods and pray that ample fishes continue to swim their waters.

Though, by no means can one say that the establishment of a prosperous community in Tanguar Haor is finished. In some cases, there are still long ways to go for the haor-dwellers to receive and practice basic rights. The collaborative management committees are still growing and learning with the promise of more accomplishments in the future. In an area where medical facilities are few and far
in-between, educational institutions are miles away and often unreachable for children, and there is hardly proper sanitation in place, the work of development in the haor remains endless.

This is why perhaps, this book of stories will bring a different perspective to the community of Tanguar Haor. This book aims to tell the tales of the common people of Tangua, their struggles, from nature conservation to the areas where future efforts can be given to build a more productive community, and the richness they already hold embedded in their culture and strength of life force. This book travels to the past, brings back songs from the mountains which surrounds the north part of the haor, it looks into the huts of lone widows and master fishermen, it records and paints over conversations of the children of this wetland. One will find songs of the Garo communities, stories of mystics, the livelihood methods of the haor among other elements. Through their tales this book portrays a different reality, a significant one, the one which is weaved in the form of lives, something beyond development practices but intricately dependent in the whims of nature and its nurturers.
The village of Majherchora sits at the border of Bangladesh. There are two divisions in Majherchora community, a Hindu neighborhood and a Muslim one. Shituli Devi stands brightly in a field outside, the goddess who is worshiped every spring for good health. Majherchora faced bouts of cholera and small pox, killing many at a time. Shituli Devi stands as a protector from such diseases and ailment.

When the late afternoon’s sun moves to the west, the young fishermen also prepare for the night. They pack rice and daal, vegetables, may be some fish if they are lucky. They wrap it all in a gamcha -Bengali cotton towel, and set out for the field. Sometimes, before they start their day’s work they quarrel about which net to take, whose boat to ride on, which method to use for fishing and where in the haor they want to go that day. The quarrels last no more than five minutes, soon the fishermen are seen walking hand in hand towards the water, to catch fishes for their family and for the rest of the nation as well.

An old man, Abdul Ghani, who fished all his life, projects signs of his past strength through his voice. The stories he tells of the past are of inequality and of the first days of community resources group, he was one of the first initiators of such efforts in Majherchora. He recalls days when they had gathered the poor fishermen and built community groups with the help of the government. There were all-night programs of songs and inspiration to unite the community of fishermen to work together and conserve. There were hijol and koroch tree gardens and
tigers roamed the area back then. Hundreds and Thousands of birds flew the skies of the Haor and no-one hunted them or harmed, but then again the past is always perfect through an old man’s eyes. The old man remembers the days which he labeled as good and the days after which were bad. Today, he is older, he watches the others, young men going to fish, whom he tries to transfer his knowledge to.

Then there is Sree Tirthobashi, now crossing the borders of his mid-life, as talks about his childhood from somewhere else. He too is a fisherman since he was fifteen. He once lived in near Mandiata village. But there were only ten fishermen in his village called Jaypur, all of whom were his brothers. With time his brothers left for new destination. Trithobashi started to get scared living alone with his family in the middle of the haor, floating with fishes but too far from the rest of humanity. So he moved to Majherchora and joined a new community. He has been living there for twenty-some years and has taught his boys to fish as well.
Trithobashi laments over his lack of luck, he has no land on his name like many others, a son has left to work at the ready-made-garments factory in Dhaka, the rest have stayed. Some of his old neighbors left for India long ago now. But Trithobashi talks about the community resources group, about the joint effort of community and the government efforts of keeping fishes in the water and fishing at the right time.

He points towards the Hairgatha community guards and community fishermen’s camps are set up during the winter months with members of the Tanguar Haor community. The camp watches over the haor, especially when the fishes are in high risk during winter as the water recedes in lower levels. Fish thieves wait for opportunities for big catches while the community guards rush after them to stop. Sometimes there is conflict, sometimes there is stealing but Trithbashi appreciates the efforts of the community stepping up to protect in this united manner. A community guard he says, receive 7000 taka remuneration from the government, not a bad salary for Tanguar Haor.

Interrupting Tirthobashi, a young man shows eagerness to tell his stories of the water and his days of fishing.
Being young, he shares stories of ghosts and the unnatural. He talks about a day when suddenly the night’s clear sky became darker and a gust of wind and water started circling towards them. The young man was with his father, who was telling the approaching circle to go away. But ball of wind and water came even closer, scaring the young boy who let out a scream and right then the circle became a light and travelled to the sky. To him and many that is the ‘ghost of the water’.

It is not uncommon to hear such stories of Wil-o’-the-wisp, atmospheric ghost fires which are usually seen over bogs, swamps and marshes all around the world. The scientific explanations are too boring for the young men of Tangua and they rather believe in the light ghosts of the water, making their haor abode more mystical and mysterious.

That is how the days of Majherchora are spent, praying to God, praying to Shituli Devi and fishing all night and sleeping for a good part of the day. The women and men are not unhappy there, the past is not erased, the future may carry a few ghosts and many fishes, as the fishermen’s lives move in a circle, from fathers to sons to fathers again.
“If I can name the birds of this haor, aren’t they then mine? Kites, Swallows, Skimmers? Aren’t they mine? Tell me?” Kalamia spoke with authority, sitting in his brother’s front yard. He was the best fishermen of Tanguar Haor. Even if the title is slightly self-proclaimed there were definite inklings of Kalamia’s excellent fishermen-ship of being close to the best hence making his words true. The entire village of Mandiata was there. Kalamia in the middle of the crowd, on a chair, sitting with his legs apart, holding all ownership of the ground beneath his feet and the sky above his head. Men, women, children covered in mud, all encircled the impromptu midday celebration of the past.
Kalamia spoke like royalty though he didn’t own a home or a piece of land. The stories of his fishermen hero-ship was all his though, and the confidence he told his stories with, was absolutely his own as well.

Kalamia went on, “you want to know names of fishes? Rui, katol, Boal, shoal, Gonia, puti, these are the fishes left now. I was a 9/10 years old when I started fishing, many years before Bangladesh was liberated. I remember this strange happening, right when the Pakistanis left, the fish Nanid also left the waters. Right after the war of independence it was like magic, Nanid fish no more. Great mystery, no one could solve the linkage between the disappearance of Nanid and the independence of Bangladesh.”

Kalamia’s white t-shirt had a pocket sown into it. It could not have been mistaken for a patch, the pocket was placed with care and held important things, like Kalamia’s cigarettes and his pride. It even held the sound of the storms he encountered, and that too was not only a one time happening.
The children of Mandiata are eager to learn. Increasing schools in this villages will prove beneficial for a brighter future.

“I followed the fishes. They know nature more than we know it. When the sky looked gloomy and the fishes started to jump out of water, moving in a different direction, it was because they got the news of the approaching storms before we ever did. So I did what I do best, I followed the fishes.”

As though Kalamia’s life could be drawn in the shape of a fish, the ones he killed and the ones who saved him. Kalamia’s photos embraced the newspaper often, “The shot of me and my raghob boal - Wallagu Attu was printed in Indian papers, I am not just known in Bangladesh!” He lit up the cigarette he was holding all this time. “I could be in knee deep water and still find the biggest fish, that’s how it worked for me.”

As Kalamia and his village reminisced his fame-filled days, they also talked about the changes. The village of Mandiata is sinking lower into the earth by the day. It’s not in the same height as it used to be and every monsoon they fear water from the haor will flow into their homes. It is a constant struggle to stay dry in those months. Though, the concept of keeping dry in the haor area is a bit of a joke, especially when speaking to fishermen and their families. Even in the middle of winter,
there is both positive and negative anticipation for the water that will come in the new year.

The Bangla new year starts 14th of April and the haor is filled by the end of May. Around that time, the villagers who are growing crops are constantly looking at the horizon to see when the water arrives. The common prayer is to tell the God to wait till their crops have matured and they have reaped their earnings. However, year after year some of their crops are diminished in seconds, there is not date or time of arrival for the water, except for a general time frame of May. You can wake up with dry lands around you one morning and by night the haor could be filled with water. The lucky ones would already have taken home the crops while others watch as their crops rot under water. The land around Mandiata do not hold much value for this reason, the villagers of Mandiata keeps pleading with authority to build a barrier to stop the water from destroying their crops, their request goes unheard mostly.
There is one school in Mandiata, but it has only one teacher who is understandably unable to attend to the number of kids who needs education. What do the kids do then? They literally are the children of the earth. Some completely covered in mud, a morning time activity to get as dirty as possible and remain so for the rest of the day. The population is rising fast in Mandiata as well, with more children than adults, but there is no future plan yet of how these mouths will be fed. Fishing is the fate of most Mandiata boys, thankfully they have someone like Kalamia holding immense knowledge, which needs to be transferred to the new generation - sons learning from their fathers and grandfathers, like old traditions call.

The weddings are saved for the monsoon months as well.

“No fun in walking for miles to get married in the winter. The boats are decorated vibrantly and we love weddings during monsoon.”

Though Kalamia’s fame exceeds himself, he has never been to the capital city Dhaka. This remains a grief of Kalamia, along with the fact that he lives in his brother’s home and even with all the fishes he captured in his life to feed his village and the rest of Bangladesh, he doesn’t own a land or home.

The biggest fish Kalamia caught was 40 kilograms, it was a Katol fish. Kalmia didn’t sell his best catch, he fed it to his family and village.

“Now things are changing. We are all getting mixed up, it has been a time of transition in regards to tradition. There
are more mixing of communities and religion. Socio-economic status decide traditions more now than the past, who and how one earns decide their life’s path and who they end up building homes with.

It was great to hear Kalmia talk about the evolving and more inclusive community of Tangua. Traditionally, Tangua villages were divided by one’s religion, where Hindu, Muslim, Garo/Christine villages usually lived separately. A big part of identity in the Haor comes in the form of religion, because everyone has fished at some point in their lives, and they have also done farming. But it appeared this was a changing phenomenon now, Garo Christians now have Muslim neighbors and the people of Tangua are learning to look beyond labels of traditions.

While visiting past, present and future, Kalamia returned to his younger days when the land was filled with deers and honey. “I used to eat venison when I was a kid, none of these little ones here can ever claim to taste such delicacy. Deers roamed this area, my grandfather hunted them for us. He also collected honey.”

Suddenly Kalamia’s torso grew a few inches taller speaking of the honey. He stretched up a few inches more. “See these muscles, see how strong I am at 81? It is because of that honey. My grandfather brought the most precious honey from these fields, back when it used to be a forest! The power of the honey still runs in my blood, see?” Kalamia’s body could not get any bigger but his stance definitely did.
The echo that remains from Kalamia’s childhood honey-tasting is of the sad tale of losing greens. A substantive amount of trees have been cut around Mandiata and other villages in Tanga in the past forty years. The tigers, elephants, deers and other wildlife left the vicinity first as the degradation began. And eventually the forest became a few trees of koroch and hijol, under water in monsoon and providing some necessary oxygen in winter. Not enough to hold beehives in branches like they once did.

These days Kalamia, along with his village of Mandiata, waits for the charity which comes from the cities. Sometimes, they are in the form on winter blankets and other times they are seeds to grow crops. The villagers do not wish to migrate out of Mandiata as a strange spell of nature’s love and the legend of the brave fishermen still tie them tightly to their land.

The future is not known to anyone, but for Kalamia, there is still hope for travel to the capital, for a land of his own, for some due recognition at his old age honoring all his grand catches. Will Kalamia receive all that he wishes for before he sees the end of his life? It seems to almost not matter, everything he really wanted are resting safely near his heart, on his sown-in t-shirt pocket, one just need the right set of eyes to see the wonder.
Songs of the Garo
Sisters of Bangalbhita

© Iffat Nawaz
The Garo community is rich with poetry of life. There are numerous songs which tell Garo history and convey their zest for life.

The sisters of Bangalbhita sang a song, resembling the sentiments of their resilient community. The song is translated with the hope of keeping the key essences.
After crossing a thousand
Demands
And rivers of sadness
We have arrived
At a new horizon
Leaving behind
A hundred years of memories
Delta, soil and destiny
We have arrived
At a new address
We will write
A new poem
About those
Who hold little
We will recite
Life’s poetry
Of those who
Were left behind
After crossing a thousand
Demands
And rivers of sadness
We have arrived
At a new horizon
Shivananda Recites at Indrapur
Shivananda never owned a piece of land. He never had a portion of water allocated to him, in fact nothing of any material value was ever just his. He spent his life catching fishes for others, and growing crops on borrowed fields.

But still, Shivananda’s mouth is full of pearls, his smile beams sunshine. He sings like he was taught by some great guru of ragas. He is shaped like a sculpture, the fruit of his labor, productiveness, dedication, love, gratitude flow out from every pore of his body and soul.

Shivananda sums up majority of the population in Tangua. Those who are landless, those who are dependent on nature, those who were the victim of powerful and corrupt leaseholders, and found solace once the people of the haor established community resources groups to give them the share of the water, they had always deserved.

Shivananda is spiritual, Shivananda is truthful, Shivananda knows how to laugh. His wife is a beauty from a-not-so-far away village. With her and their five children Shivananda lives in the mouth of Indrapur, not too far from the Hatirgatha beel of Tanguar Haor.

When Shivananda is asked about fishing and conservation and past and future of Tanguar Haor, he answers with music. And what does he sing? He sings songs he has written himself, Shivananda is a singer-song writer. Through his music, he has summed up the emotions and thoughts of the folks of Tanguar Haor as well as the best practices for nature conservation and healthy fisheries.
Though the rhyme and meter are lost in translation, Shivananda’s songs go something like this:

*Tanguar Haor*
*Once was a*
*Dark Dark Sea*
*Many leaseholders*
*Came and became rich*
*But still the poor*
*Did not flee*

*And then in a*
*New dawn*
*Came a new establishment*
*The new practices*
*Returned the fishermen*
*Our true living astonishments*
*For then till now*
*A while has passed*
*We have created*
Communities and groups
Leaving behind no one
So that we could build
A stronger mass
Oh the big waves of the river
Tides high and low
Tanguar Haor
Is the king of fishes
And over them fly
Migratory birds
Whom we all adore
Shivananda thinks
Shivananda sings
Embracing this earth
One must love
All that is nature
Then why will poverty
Remain for?

Oh my Fisherman friends
Oh my Neighbor friends
Tanguar Haor is
Six times twenty Beels

And nine times twenty *kanda
And when the flood waters rush in
The fishes infinitely well built
Then they themselves
come to our homes
Leaving no need to destroy or steal

Shivananda thinks
And tells you to stop catching fishes
with methods which harm the nature

If we do not conserve now
All our days will turn into nights
And all we have will become a failure

We will learn one day
If Ramsar* leaves us
That day if we do not
strengthen our
Community organizations
We will face our darkest hours

* Kanda is Bangla for raised land
* Ramsar is referred to the Government project in Tanguar Haor
Oh people of Tangua
88 villages share the haor’s resources
A fisherman teaches his son
How to fish from the day he is born

Oh my dear people
Keep your good values in place
And our fishes as our assets
Please remember
During every spring and early summer
Our fishes carry eggs

Tanguar haor
Once was a
Dark Dark Sea
Many leaseholders
Came and became rich
But still the poor
Did not flee
Shivananda spreads messages of nurturing their land with his sweet singing and strong lyrical senses. His songs are then memorized and sang by many more mouths, many more singers and non-singers. Shivananda doesn’t get any remuneration for this hobby of his, but he gets immense amount of pleasure in giving what he creates and seeing Tangua transform further into a place of conservation. His words encourage children to love the migratory birds who come for visits in the winter and not hunt, and let the fishes remain in the water till the right time comes for catching them, so that fishes are always in ample in Tangua.
Shivananda recalls, during his childhood days, he remembers the fishes playing and jumping up from the water every other second. The private leaseholders anti-ecological practices had caused damage to the haor and fish population once, but through his songs Shivananda hopes those days of his childhood will return.

Shivananda is not far from the truth, many children and teenagers echo Shivananda’s sentiments, singing Shivananda’s songs, learning and growing with his messages everyday.
The Colors of Rangchi Baag
The colors of Rangchi Baag (forest) has faded with time. But the bride-viewing-light of each evening still stands a second longer on top of the hijol and koroch trees of Rangchi, to admire its own reflection against the beautiful green.

Elephants roamed this area once, during the era of the British, and tigers as well. The people of Rangchi where scared to leave their homes after 5 pm, it was not uncommon for cows and goats to be taken by hungry tigers, rarely did they attack humans. But humans failed the tigers and elephants of Rangchi, as the British left India and during the time of East Pakistan.

Simply out of habit, the people of Rangchi still calls the dwindling hijol and koroch garden their deep forest. The waves of the haor were higher in the past too, the people were closer to nature. During Bangladesh’s liberation war in 1971, the people of Rangchi supported the freedom fighters hide in their forests, giving them food and other forms of aid, most of all a portion of their nature.

Today, the population of Rangchi is higher, the resources are lower but the dream of the deep forest’s return along with the tigers have not left the minds of the children and adults. They still hope one day they can rebuild the forest, plant more seedlings, aid more people through their surroundings.
No one knows if that will be possible, if the tigers who are long gone will make Rangchi their home again. The children have the highest hopes though, listening to their grandfathers, they are getting to know every inch of their lost deep forest. And when the light of the late afternoon sun makes everything appear brighter, their dream too become a true possibility, for Rangchi Baag, and the magical light on the face of each Rangchi children.
Once upon a time in late autumn, in the magical land of Tanguar Haor, the goddess Buli and the god Bula arrived side by side. They brought promises of good fortune, and found places for themselves on the walls of Hindu villagers, as prominently drawn stick figures.

Today, Bula and Buli stand with their god-like postures, protecting the villagers from the devil. As late autumn brings the news of winter, it brings new fears and unknown evil-eyed threats from the dry lands. Winters bring the possibilities of many ailments. Bula and Buli are embraced by the Hindu villagers as the gatekeepers of their fate during the winter months. On the last day of the Bangla month Kartik, Bula and Buli are the last touch of a practical ritual in the Hindu villages of Tanguar Haor, as on that same day the mud huts are renovated and fixed to face the months of winter. After ‘ghor bandha’ - building home, the villagers draw their Bula-Buli with chalks, some of these evil-chasing god and goddesses are drawn small and some big - depending on the artistic mood of the accidental painter. The drawings of Bula and Buli are among the few home produced touch of art one would come across in the haor area.
Mujrai—Where Nature Came to Stay
In a winter’s afternoon when you come upon the village of Mujrai, mainly known for its master fishermen, it will strike you as barren. No, there is no abundance of beauty, green grazing lands, trees going up high into the sky, and waves splashing in Bangla sound, cholat, cholat, chol. Mujria is not barren of nature’s beauty but it is barren of sustainable wealth. There is a mark of daily struggle in the corners of Mujrai’s women and children’s mouths. It seems, rather than turning to their mothers for food, the children of Mujrai beg to the sky for early monsoons, so that the haor fills up again with water and their fathers can bring home fishes and sustenance.

The winter months are tough in Mujrai, there are around two-hundred and fifty villagers, and most of them know not much more than fishing. So during the winter, they turn to being day laborers, a profession needing strong arms and legs, which almost all fishermen possess. The women they marry are from near by villages, women of haor who know hardship as well as they know the memories of their past. The children avoid the water during monsoon, staying home -skipping school, the waves scare them they say.

In Mujrai, no one gets in and no one gets out. A young man commented “no one thinks of leaving this village, because we are in a bond with the green, in trance with the blue water. It’s a complex relationship which we carry around, blaming our lucks for being from the haor, yet loving the haor for the unspoken tie from birth.”
He continued, “Where will we go? And why?”

If you ask him, “why not?” He will say, “what’s out there? we are not fit for such a world. We do not have a school, we do not have skills beyond fishing and earning with the labor of our bodies, who will serve us?”

So they stay. With some recent interventions by the government, young people of Mujrai were trained as eco-guides. “I came first in my class” the young man said. “I know the haor better now, I know its fishes, birds, flora and fauna, I know the dos and donts.”

But the young man has no clients. Nature-tourism is still at a primary level in Tanguar Haor and the marketing skills needed for the young men and women of Mujrai and villages alike, is not something one can learn in a week or two. “The rest of the world seems so far when we are surrounded by water, like we are not a part of it.” The young man philosophical tone echoed in his backward.
Though the villagers of Mujrai do not go far from their almost waterlogged land, they did learn a thing or two during the last decade. They learnt about collaborative management and the rules on fishing during the appropriate seasons, they learned how to protect their haor not just reap from its goodness, they learned about the government’s effort for the growth of fishes, they followed the rules, hoping for a better future for all of them.

But it doesn’t just stop at behavior change, if one were to make a list of improvements in Mujrai, the list would go on for pages. There would be a school for children, there would be support for Nature-tourism, fishermen would earn enough to sustain winters without being day laborers, sanitation would be in place. But most of all, the fear that the people of Mujrai hold, about living in the whims of nature, would disappear perhaps, with some light brought in from the outside. Now though, the ones who visit are journalists and bird watchers, looking for stories, like the one written here, no one comes to stay, and the ones who stay, never leaves.
The Mystic Entertainer of Indrapur
In a mild winter afternoon, in the middle of Tanguar Haor, a place hard to locate without local knowledge, after hours of journey on motorbikes, boats and cars, we came upon a field celebrating the Lord Krishna. It was a village called Indrapur. The celebrations brought people from far-away lands, a fair went on in full swing where the children stole each other’s balloons and ate fried sweets. gods and goddesses watched under a colorful tent, even more vibrant in contrast to its surrounding, water and green grazing lands. Under the same tent, musicians from distant lands sang, they stood center stage and each group seamlessly blended into each other’s tunes and rhythms.

The music never stopped that day, it went on like life moves forward, it was as apparent as each breath. They were singing Kirtan, religious Hindu songs dedicated to the gods, in this case it was for the Lord Krishna. There were shops set up all around the ground of the fair. Fried food and plastic toys, sweet beetle leaf and cosmetics - products sold by the Indrapur villagers.

There was something surreal about arriving in this carnival. One minute you were in the silence of the haor with only the movement of your boat and the stillness of water, and then suddenly there was this irruption of music and colors in the middle of a big green field with mountains far away, right at the mouth of the village. A good amount of money was spent in the arrangements, people came from far away villages and districts, and it was clear that the festivity was not only for gods but for the love of community and tradition. A large pot was cooking khichuri - the mishmash of rice, lentil and vegetables, it was to be served at some eagerly awaited hour. The scent of the cooking was just starting to spread the grounds when we came upon a Sanyasi - a man who has dedicated his life to spiritually and detached himself from material life.
Though the dictionary will tell us about a Sanyasi’s detachment with the material world, the Sanyasi we came across was a shopkeeper at the fair selling beetle leaf of many flavors. On his table there were cubed sized pieces of ginger, carrots, garlic in bottles. His assistant stood next to him preparing the beetle leaf and he, Sree Shunil Borman, the keeper of Indrapur’s Shiva temple, sat there with all his physical and spiritual weight.

Though it was the love for betel leaf that brought me to the stall, Shunil Sanyasi became a bigger attraction to me than what he sold. After an initial casual back and forth, I wanted to know his story, about fifteen other fair visitors did too—such was the air that Shunil held. So Shunil told us about his life.

When Sunil was young, his grandfather took him to India where he spent eighteen years of his life. There he learned to sing and dance. He started performing with different performance troupes and got paid 3 taka per month, which
at that time was enough to meet his needs. After the 1971 liberation war he moved to Indrapur. Sunil told me he became the dancer in his area, performing around the haor while he based himself in Indrapur. Shortly after his return, his father passed away and he was the eldest of his siblings so he raised his brothers and sisters with the money he earned, or as Sunil said “God raised them, I was just an excuse.”

After a couple of years, Sunil Sanyasi started singing keccha songs- songs which tell stories and are performed like theater plays. He boasted about putting on fifty sharis at once, and then taking them off one by one as he moved through the play. No one could guess how many sharis he had put on and how he took them off so fast, crowd gathered to watch him backstage but his secret remained unrevealed. And just like this, five to seven years went by as Shunil Sanyasi performed his keccha theaters keeping up the awe of the viewers.
But eventually Sunil decided to quit the performance business as collecting money from organizers became increasingly tougher. Sunil engaged himself in household and farming work for a few years but eventually his artistic temperament led him to the spiritual path. Others around him were also traveling to places to learn Sanyas - the path of detachment and enlightenment, Sunil also did the same. He found a guru in Bishamvarpur, about four hours away from Indrapur, but considerable distance for the people of the haor with limited access.

A couple more years passed by after Sunil started his journey as a Sanyasi. His guru noticed Sunil’s high energy and spirit and decided to teach him black magic. Sunil had already learned some magic in India and now his learning went deeper. He stayed with his guru in Bishamvarpur for 10-12 years and presented the prayers at the temple. After those years, Sunil moved back to Indrapur and started his own prayer ritual - Pooja.

Now every 15th of the Bangla month Jaystha (around 30th
May), Sunil holds his Pooja, Charak Pooja. Though Charak Pooja is usually done on the last day of the Bangla month Chaitra, Shunil has decided to create his own tradition in Tanguar Haor. Charak Pooja is not a local phenomenal in Tangua, so naturally it brings in many for the festivity. Typically it is believed that the festival will carry prosperity by eliminating the sorrow and sufferings of the previous year. The festival is to satisfy "Lord Shiva." And since Sunil is the keeper of the Shiva Temple in Indrapur, this correlation works well for his annual event.

Going back to Sunil Sanyasi, he told me about the acts he performs in his Charak Pooja, inviting me to the upcoming one. The Indrapur villagers help him gather resources for his big annual event. He recalled back in the days in Indrapur when night came, everyone had their meals and went to sleep. There were no activities for the night, especially the kind of music and rituals Sunil brought to the area - holding the flavor of India and black magic from the outside gurus. I asked him, if he missed his life of dance and performance and he told me he feels ashamed to think of that life now as he has dedicated himself to the gods. He has kept up his Charak Pooja for many years now.

It is not easy to prepare for the festivities for Indrapur villagers, where only a few households are doing financially well, but for the sake of continuity and tradition the villagers help Sunil create his festival every year. What happens at the fair I asked him. Before he could answer, the villagers who were clearly a fan of his magical Charak Pooja jumped in.

"He hooks people by the skin of their middle back on a pendulum like merry-go-round, but no one dies or gets hurt!" One exclaimed.

"I still have the scar from last year," Sunil’s assistant told me as he prepared another betle leaf. He was a young man in his early 20s, with an obvious devotion towards the unknown and Sunil Sanyasi.

"He dug a hole and buried a man under water. We all checked, and he was dead. But after half an hour, Sunil Sanyasi dug him up, alive as a new born."

"He makes people walk on fire, no one burns."

"He takes a machete and strikes people, no one gets hurt."

"He takes a hot rod and places it in someone's tongue, with no damage done."

Sunil smiled and continued, “I break bulbs and feed them like potato chips and walk on broken glass, but no one is in pain. It's a ritual of danger! You will lay on nails but not one will Pierce your body. I do it all, the Sanyasi of Indrapur, the organizer and creator of Charak Pooja.”
On my way through Indrapur, I saw a pond full of lotus flowers, women taking their baths amongst the pink and purple. Apparently that too is Sunil Sanyasi’s doing, he created a pond lotus garden for his Indrapur.

Shiva Temples, Kirtans, Lotus and nails, Sunil Sanyasi existed vividly amidst it all. Though looking back the whole episode seems unreal, the carnival in the middle of the village which will surely be gone when I return again unless it is during the Charak Pooja. The place will be less festive but still will carry molded traditions, some for the gods but so much for the God’s people. I assume where villages are flooded frequently, Sunil Sanyasis are crucial for existence. For his soul is not bounded by water or land but moves with the nudge of the human and spiritual mystery, for his weight holds the power of black magic and on the marriage of religion and nature, but most of all entertainment through the rituals, continuity of life in the haor, that’s what Sunil brings.
The Cloudy-Eyed Lone Widow of Hatpaton
In a place where nature rules
And limitations decide fate
I came upon a lone widow
Stitching a torn net.
Her eyes held clouds
Heavily layered with
Cataract
Her gaze came from a
Far away place
Holding images
Of the past.
I sat down with her
On a *piri
To listen to her tale
Wondering how much
Still remained
Behind those veils.

It was a sad and simple
Story of loss and longing

Every child of her
Heard death’s
Early calling.
One, two, three,
four and five
She lost them all
Not one survived.

The young children
Ill and pale
Drifted in water
No doctors or
Medicines
Arrived to
Aid or nurture.

She lost some to
Diseases
Others drowned
In the ocean like waves

*Piri - Traditional seating tool
Of the haor
In full monsoon
The haor pleaded
Took what it desired
And the widow was left
To guard her ruins.

He husband too
Left the earth
To join her dreams
Her home was built
To let in some light
Taking a daily count
of original sins.

The cloudy-eyed widow still lives
With her wishes and whims
Catching light and darkness
On stranger’s faces
Seeing all which cannot be seen.
The Darkness of Coal
There were two boys  
who grew up to be strong men  
One was called Bojlú Mia  
The other decided his own name.

Seeing their kins  
Searching for fishes  
Which are half gone  
They decided  
Doing business with Coal  
Might not be so wrong.

The brothers saved  
And saved some more  
Then with 10 million taka  
They reached a new shore.

The long term damage  
Of dragging coals  
Through water  
Remains a scare  
But the Bojlú brothers  
Are giving environment  
A full-fledged dare.

Now the richest young men  
Of Jalampur  
Are Bojlú and his mate  
Sadly, fishes do not only decide  
Tangua’s fate.
The Words of the Old Men
In Bengal, the agricultural revolution in the 1960s started around the Sylhet region. Bangshikunda’s Mouz Ali will tell you all about his experiences from those times, when he was a member of the communist party, a few years before the liberation war of Bangladesh. He will tell you about that time and eight-month long schools, he will tell you about how they fought tigers and how he became the man he is from all that he saw since the beginning of his time, which he reminisces to be as close as yesterday.
Roaming around Binodpur you will also come across Gofur, who claims to be a 100 years old. He will tell you about Jhijhikor, the leaseholders who came and took over their lands and added many layers of complications and classes in the otherwise simple lives of Tangua. He remembers days when up to 300 people were shot dead fighting over land, those were the days of East Pakistan. Binodpur’s Gofur is a Jatra theater actor, putting on shows from one village to another, he tells the stories of Tangua’s past and spreads conservation focused messages, as well as, words of general goodness. There is no end to Gofur’s enthusiasm, a 100 year old or not, Gofur holds the insight of an old soul, a gem of Tangua, an entertainer and preserver - with ageless wisdom undeniably incomparable.
Good Morning Tangua

© IUCN/Wasim Newaz
The make-shift tent helps fishermen take rest at night
Fishermen counting their day's work - Shaldigha
The method of fishing is various in Tangua, however, conservation focused practices are always a priority.
There is no lack of energy of fishermen turned farmers - the common religion of the folks of Tangua is to work.
The Children of Bangalbhita
To arrive in Bangalbhita, a village at the lap of Meghalaya, at the border of India, where days and nights blend in like poetry one has to be patient. After riding on cars and boats, and in the winter time, motorbikes on gravely paths, the hills and mountain show up in a not so far off distance. The village is small, and consists of Garos and Muslims, exchanging their happiness and luck, from evenings to dawns, and sunrises to sunsets.

When you ask the history of the place, an old man will tell you, about many wars. You might feel confused, “but there was only one liberation war in Bangladesh!” you will think. However to the Garo community in Bangalbhita, there were many wars not one. They had escaped their homes numerous times, not just in 1971. They had to save their lives during recurring bad periods, as different threats came in the name of politics, leaseholders or religion, time after time.

These days though, things are different. It is not a sad tale that flows through the young blood of Bangalbhita children, who are among the brightest of children you will ever meet, guaranteed. The Garo-Bangladeshi children speak Bangla fluently along with the Garo language. Gathering with their Muslim-Bangladeshi neighborhood friends, they play in the haor holding no fear of heights or depth, as though they have conquered it all.
If you ask them “Do you like the dry season more or the wet?”

They will scream “Both! Both! In the winter we get to play in the fields and in the monsoon we get to swim and catch fishes.”

A little one will add, “but no turtles though, no turtles, that is bad for the environment.”

They will invite you to play with them, and depending on the summer or winter you will either run through the fields with, jumping on trawlers which are parked in the middle of the dry haor. In the monsoon time you will dive into the water with them, looking for fishes and enjoying a pour.

There are three schools in Bangalbhita. They teach the young ones poems the city kids have forgotten. Everyone can sing, and everyone can dance. Not only that, the children of Bangalbhita knows how to spot a snake, and will tell you scary tales of how snakes wrap around the back legs of a cow and drink milk from her udders.

“You have never seen that? We must show you?” They will take you to the fields searching for such a sight, and even if they don’t spot a snake drinking cow’s milk, you will enjoy the walk and their company anyway.
The children of Bangalbhita will sing you songs you had learned as a child. You will hear about the trees, which plant holds which flowers, where do you go to find honey, how do you climb trees, and how does one raise their younger brothers and sisters. They know what you might have not learnt.

The future of the Bangalbhita children lay bright ahead of them. Even the limited knowledge that reaches them, trickling down from the center city of Dhaka to the border village, it is not enough perhaps. Yet they still hold a strong promise of knowing more, being more than what their ancestors were. Already aware of how to preserve, conserve and most of all how to live happily. You will wonder what they would do if they had more resources, how much higher they could jump!
The blunt truth is, you will be mesmerized if you make it there. And when you arrive you will want to give and not take. You will want to sit as the burning sun sets over Bangalbhita village, while the kids play around you, tag teams and ring-a-ring-a-roses. And you will love it all because the children of Bangalbhita knows more than their parents did, than you and I did. They are the generation we have been waiting for.
After Thoughts

This photo is something I had captured during one of the many boat trips through Tangua. Dragonflies are of plenty, this particular one shed a prominent shadow, and gave an illusion of entering the sun head first, with all its grace and pride. To me, this photograph alone sums up the resilience of the community, the beauty, the upward movement and the clarity and transparency of the people of Tangua and the nature that carries them. The stories in this book dive into the lives and minds of the dwellers, the depth of their daily struggles and united efforts are not easy to capture by words. However, I hope this book shows a bit of heart and soul that resides in the North of Bangladesh, in this magical land of Tanguar Haor - these stories are dedicated to the people of Tangua and the efforts of the community to conserve this land.
Untold Stories of Tanguar Haar

ICIMOD is a membership-driven, non-profit, inter-governmental and inter-sectoral organization. It provides policy, regional and sub-regional-level knowledge services to governments, funding agencies and the private sector with the aim of enhancing human progress, economic development and nature conservation to help solve the challenges of climate change.

ICIMOD is based in Kathmandu, Nepal, with an office in Bangladesh. ICIMOD is a member of the ACT Alliance, and is part of the global network of CGIAR centers.

Created in 1989, ICIMOD is the world’s leader in the Greater Mekong sub-region in the field of climate change impacts and adaptation. ICIMOD works to understand the impacts of climate change and to support the development of policies and programs that can help communities build resilience and adapt to the changing climate.

ICIMOD works in close collaboration with governments, development agencies, research institutions, and civil societies to address the challenges of climate change and to support the development of policies and programs that can help communities build resilience and adapt to the changing climate.

ICIMOD is an international organization with a mission to promote sustainable development and environmental management in mountain regions by integrating local and global knowledge and fostering partnerships.

The Tanguar Haar is a unique wetland system in Bangladesh that supports a diverse range of flora and fauna. It is a valuable ecosystem that plays a crucial role in maintaining the health and biodiversity of the country.

ICIMOD is working with local communities to help them adapt to the challenges of climate change and to conserve and manage their natural resources.

The Tanguar Haar Wetland Project is a collaborative effort between ICIMOD and local communities to conserve and manage the Tanguar Haar ecosystem and improve the livelihoods of the people who depend on it.

www.icimod.org
https://tanguarhaar.org