

# A WATERY VISIT TO INDIA: ASSAM, GOA, THE GANGES, AND THE SUNDARBANS

## PART I 'EUROPE ON THE GANGES' AND THE SUNDARBANS

On this, my fifth visit to India, my goal was to explore three areas new to me: the Sundarbans (the coastal area of the Bay of Bengal), the Brahmaputra River in Assam, and coastal Goa on the Arabian Sea. Hence “Watery” in the title.

The planning began in March 2024 when I saw an ad from French tour promoter Terre Voyages for a 7-day river tour in Assam over the Christmas holiday. Expecting it to fill up during this prime tourist season in India, I booked it knowing that the cancellation cost would be much higher than normal due to the date.

But obviously, one doesn't dash off to India for just a week (except in 2011 when I did so to organize a week in Rajasthan for a friend working in Afghanistan who had a 7-day R&R travel window). Given winter weather in Paris, warm weather is a priority, and I had never been to Goa. Since 2024 was a year in which my time and organizing capabilities were overtaxed, I asked Thomas Cook India to organize this part of the trip: hotel stays in the north and south, airport pickup, transfers and touring days. What a nice, non-stressful solution this turned out to be.

For the Sundarbans, which I had hoped to fit into my last trip in 2019, I booked a two-day one-night stay at Tour de Sundarban eco-village in the National Park. Unfortunately, just before my trip park management decided to close the park to visitors on Fridays, the second of my two days, so I had to make do with one very long day from Kolkata to at least have a taste.

It is about a three-hour 130 km drive from New Town Kolkata to Godkhali, the starting point of my day-long boat trip. New Town is just that, a new town near the airport with the metro extension under construction.



Sujit Bose is a member of the West Bengal Assembly for the local area and a minister in the government of West Bengal. Her photos are everywhere.

We quickly transitioned to the countryside and its traditional transport of goods, people



and agricultural products. We were following the Bagjola canal southeast, originally built by the British to drain wastewater from Calcutta. When they built the city's sewer system in 1875 it rivaled London's as the best in the world. Unfortunately, the storm and

sewer drainage have never been effectively separated, the canal now serves a region of 15 million people and siltation requires a five-year cycle of dredging. It ultimately empties into our destination on the Bay of Bengal where, hopefully, the mangroves are still capable of doing their filtering job. On the other side of the road were huge inland wetlands which are active fish farms. Further along there is an area on the other side of the



canal with lots of brick factories and what I thought were also fish farms on the canal side.



In addition to bricks there is a lot of transport of bamboo poles used extensively in construction.



The rice harvest had just been completed and the road was lined with the stalks that become thatch for roofs, sometimes still spread out across the road. They don't thresh all the rice at once, it is stored in mounds in fields.



One of the defining experiences of road travel in India are the free-roaming cattle everywhere which, of course, have the right of way.

My hotel room (Taj New Town) came with breakfast so since I was being picked up at 5:30 am I ordered a take-away box since breakfast wasn't scheduled until we reached our boat about 9:30 am.



We passed through many small towns with commercial activity all along the main highway. This is one of my favorite sights in India, the wide variety of "shops", the constant activity, color and energy.



My driver-guide made a convenience stop at a gas station after about 1 ½ hours and brought me a chai.

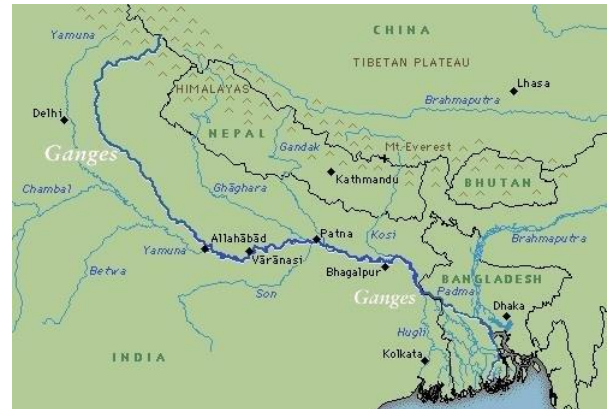


I was able to get close-up photos of the fabulously decorated trucks that add to the color. They say Blow Horn on the back because that is the rule, you blow your horn indicating your



intent to pass which creates quite a cacophony in busy areas. Along the way we passed frequent small Hindu “chapels” and every town also had a mosque.

This map of the Ganges River basin shows the complex system of rivers that ultimately empty into the Bay of Bengal.



There are many one-day Sundarban

tours on offer from Kolkata. I decided to splurge on a private tour with one of the eco village staff members as my driver/guide. At about 9 am we reached the end of the road and left our jeep for the day.



Godkhali is the jumping off point to the Sundarbans and there is a shrine to the Goddess Bonbibi, protectress of the forest, venerated by both Hindus and Muslims in the Sundarbans.

We took a boat ride (private also but there were constant ferries) across

the Bidyar River to Gosaba Island where we hopped an auto rickshaw for the 8 km ride to Pakhiralay Village where we would meet our boat. We were on what was obviously a raised dike a few feet above the abutting land/water. It was only recently converted from dirt to concrete but was still a very bumpy ride. Here is “my” boat for the day. Very shortly I was served a freshly made delicious curry breakfast.



We then made a stop at the forest ranger’s offices where we paid for my park entrance fee and collected our mandatory official ranger guide. There is an interpretive center here and that was the destination



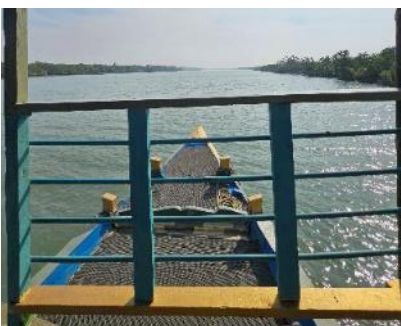
for many tour boats. It was low tide and you could see how much the tide would rise that day based on the mud covering the steps.

me were searching the shoreline for there are 86 species of mangrove and Some literally function as air tubes while others have fine intersecting roots and branches for entrapment.

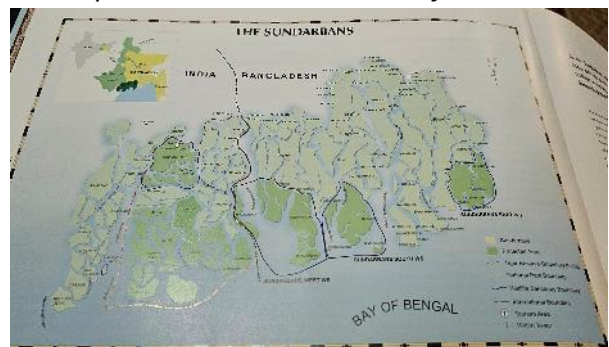
So now two people in addition to signs of wildlife. I had not realized they have different purposes.



The park/forest is divided into multiple usage areas. We were primarily passing areas reserved for wildlife with extensive fencing to prevent animals from encroaching on the



inhabited areas. We passed a lot of fishermen, but not many tourist boats. There are frequent small channels entering our larger one as well as other large ones. The bulk of the preserved area is actually in Bangladesh.



These maps provide some idea of the complexity of the area in India. The traditional livelihoods are fishing, wood cutting, and honey collecting.



We made one stop at a watchtower. There are others which with more time can be visited. Three dry riverbeds converged here, and I saw a macaque monkey, wild boar, spotted deer and a monitor lizard. There were excellent billboard

exhibits describing the various flora.



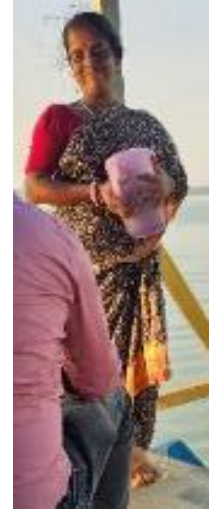
This area is a tiger reserve and I wasn't so lucky to see one but my guide had two days before and shared his photos with me. Here is a sampling of them.



We saw lots of birds and one large crocodile. Even without a lot of sightings, I was just content to spend hours on the water.

I had selected non-veg lunch which was a mistake. The non-veg portion was several forms of fish. I couldn't bring myself to eat them after seeing the fish farms on route this morning. I hope someone else on the staff ate them! Everything was delicious and prepared by this lady.

The trip home reversed our same route. On the rickshaw ride I saw women returning from collecting water at the communal tap and we crossed the inland waterway at sunset.



Now we were going through the same small towns at night which meant lots of lights and even more street life.



At the Taj I broke my own rule against eating buffets because it was very economical, about \$20 for a huge variety of Indian and non-Indian choices and a fabulous dessert bar. However, I stuck with my practice of not eating anything non-cooked (salads) and selecting only from the made-to-order items or casseroles that were piping hot. At breakfast it was the first time I had seen an entire honeycomb on the buffet.



The next day I again took a private tour, this one north to an area nicknamed 'Europe on the Ganges' due to the history of colonial settlements: Portuguese, Dutch, Armenian, French and British. It was a rainy day and for the first 20 km or so we followed the route of a new super-highway construction so it was potholes, diversions and mud, mud, mud.



Our first stop was Bandel, about 60 km north of Kolkata. In 1579 the Portuguese built a port on the banks of the Hooghly River (as the Ganges is known here) with permission of the Mughal Emperor, who also gave permission to teach the Christian religion.

They brought Augustinian Friars and built a church in 1599. In 1632 it was burnt down by the invading Moors and rebuilt again in 1660. The Basilica of the Holy Rosary was made a



Minor Basilica in 1988 by Pope John Paul II. The ship's mast in front was presented to the church by the captain of a vessel whose rescue

from a storm in the Bay of Bengal he attributed to Mary's intercession. I had not noticed the 'no photos' sign on entering, so here are some. There are three altars and several tombstones in the floor. It is the oldest Christian place of worship in Bengal. There is still a monastery although the last of the Augustinian Friars died in 1869. Christmas is very actively celebrated with decorations available everywhere.



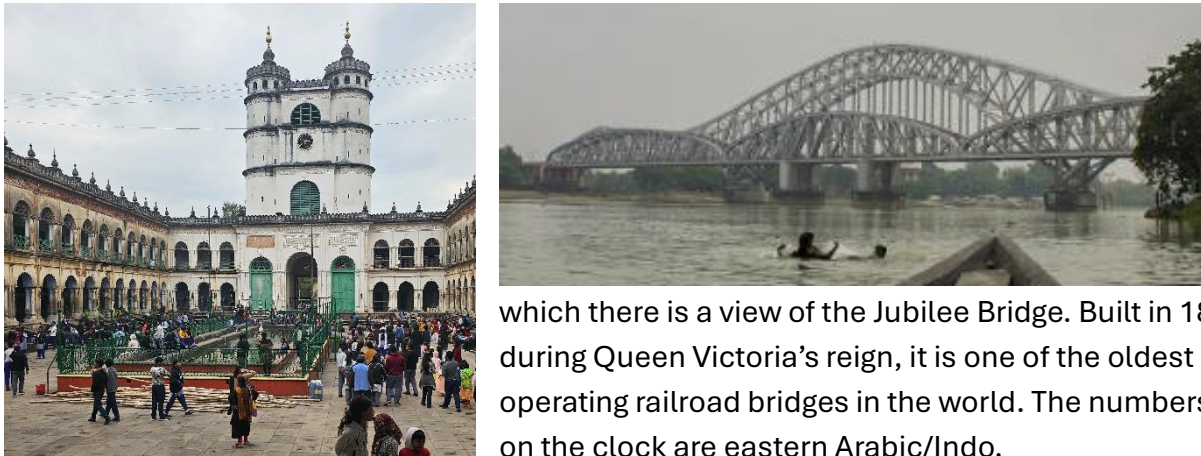


There are several locations to light candles, one in front of the image of Our Lady of the



Happy Voyage. The Salesians of Don Bosco look after the church as well as operating St John's School (co-ed Bengali language) and Don Bosco School for Boys in English.

Also in Bandel is an Islamic school, Imambara, founded by the philanthropist Hazi Muhammed Mohsin in 1861. There are two towers, one each for men and women from



which there is a view of the Jubilee Bridge. Built in 1887 during Queen Victoria's reign, it is one of the oldest operating railroad bridges in the world. The numbers on the clock are eastern Arabic/Indo.

There are some handsome calligraphy and a sundial. Since it is not a mosque, non-Muslims can enter the main hall but I chose to stay outside to take my photos.



We headed south to the next stop of Chinsurah. The Dutch settled here in 1625 but very little remains of their period other than the cemetery which we did not visit. The Dutch

Embassy in India has begun a project to restore some of their colonial era buildings. In 1825 the Dutch traded their Indian territories to Britain in exchange for Sumatra in Indonesia. This painting depicts their fort. There is also a clock tower built by the British in memory of King Edward VI.



We stopped at Bankim Bhawan, a house built in 1840 where Chattopadhyay Chandra Chatterjee, an Indian philosopher and poet lived from 1877 to 1881. He is the

composer of Vande Makaram, India's national song (not anthem). The house is notable for its stucco architraves, timber louvered screens, and Italian cornice bands.



Armenians also settled in Chinsurah in 1645 and built the Armenian Church of St John the Baptist in 1695. It is the oldest Armenian Church in India, is maintained by the Armenian community of Kolkata, and is open each year on January 13-14 for the Saint's feast day.

Our final stop for the day was Chandernagore, one of five French colonies in India founded about 1673. It was a thriving trading hub of 100,000 population when Calcutta was just a poor cousin. It moved between French and British rule until 1816 and then remained French under Pondicherry rule until 1950. The Museum and Institute of French antiquities was unfortunately closed on Saturday.

We did look at the "Underwater House" (Patal Bari) whose lower floor is submerged during the monsoon, but it is not open to the public. Frequent visitors were the poet



the poet Rabindranath Tagore and social reformer Igwar Chandra Vidya Sagar.

Colonial buildings line the strand for about a kilometer along the river.

My guide, Saurek, who is a teacher, and I lunched here on board La Rivière Habitat and shared my two favorite dishes, Chicken Tikka Marsala and Lamb Biryani.



Sacred Heart Church from 1884 was beautifully decorated for Christmas but was unfortunately closed for renovation. It is known for its stained glass windows which I, unfortunately, did not get to see!



This completes part one of this trip.