

# Nadisutra: Update 3

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## Patna to Maniharighat: 10th January 2015 to 24th Jan 2015.

We've completed another quarter of our journey. On the Ganga mainstem, from Patna to 90 km above perhaps the most radical alteration along the entire length of the Ganga; the Farraka barrage. We had entered the Ganga mainstem through the Ghaghra, just a day's paddle upstream of Patna. If there is one statement that could sum up the change in the river that we have ridden on the past two weeks, it is the recurring images, the motif as it were, of mortality. The river is dying, and is near-dead in sections now. After entering the Ganga, we have not seen one single marsh mugger or gharial crocodile. The closest we saw anything resembling a river turtle (which were very numerous upstream on the Sharda and the Ghaghra) was one discarded and muddied styrofoam bowl, and one beached frontal cap from a human skull, come apart at the sutures. And everywhere, always startling for a moment, headless torsos and whole child-sized bodies of drowned straw and mud idols, with multiple arms and wide hips lying askew on the sand. Thousands of such idols are drowned in the Ganga, both of gods and goddesses, to make their way back to heaven we are told. One of them, we could tell, was of Ganesh because of the elephant trunk still intact. Streetside idol makers that we have seen at Patna, Monghyr and at Katihar seem to have a prototype for the lower body irrespective of the gender of the deity. The idols being made for for Saraswati puja, which is currently seeing the next spate of idol drowning in the river now, have her riding a *Trynasaurus rex*, instead of our humble tiger.

Dead animal and human bodies and body parts afloat were not infrequent, some dragged up and being eaten by dogs at the cremation ghats and beyond. There is no way but to paddle past the sights and smells of tens of people being cremated simultaneously every day on numerous ghats, and blazing into the night. Curiously, cremation ceremonies in this part of Bihar closely resemble wedding ceremonies. The bodies are wrapped in brilliant yellow and red shimmery cloth trimmed with tinsel. There is the familiar sound of accompanying brass bands we usually hear at a baraat, with drums and the typically lagging baritone horn, barely carrying its heavy weight to the lively tempo. Even loud crackers and the sounds of celebration. Mostly. Other than a son shouting hoarse over the waters, in grief for his mother.

Black tarry deposits are now frequent on the sand along the banks, and the stench along some stretches hard to take through the night. We have passed large sewer outlets from Faizabad and Ayodhya downwards, Patna, Mokameh, Bhagalpur and Kehelgaon being very major ones. Effluent channels from the NTPC power plants at Tanda and Kehelgaon, and from leather tanneries at Mokameh. And this is only what we have seen and smelled so far. There would be more. We remember now that the massive black sewer at Delhi that is still called the Yamuna, would have met the Ganga upstream at Allahabad. I remember the massive foulage that flows into the Ganga at Kanpur also upstream, both municipal city sewage as well as toxic effluents from the leather factories there. In the news recently, was also the extreme poisoning of the waters by industry, and the debilitating of people along the Sone river upstream. We also hear of industry upstream at other points that dump their effluents clandestinely into the river, carrying it away first in road tankers into the night. Is that why there is not a single turtle or crocodile in these waters anymore? And what else is being delivered death in these waters?

We dare not drink water from the Ganga any more, even through our little filter and chlorine drops. We choose instead to periodically stock and carry water in our boat from groundwater hand-pumps along the way, even while reading that arsenic and fluoride is seriously high in groundwaters in Bihar, and that chronic poisoning affects large populations here. We see people drinking water straight from the Ganga, both ritually by bathers, and regularly by the fishermen and buffalo herdsman who live on the larger river islands. They don't seem to keel over in front of your eyes, as we might expect. In conversation, they insist that that Ganga water is amrit or elixir. And that it is better than the ground water from handpumps at their villages. It may even be.

And fish in the river? We stop often and speak to fishermen. They say that the water in this season now is a fourth of what it used to be, and the fish in the river a tenth of what they used to be 40 years ago. Consistently and repeatedly we are told of the gradual collapse of fish stocks in the Ganga every since the building of the Farraka barrage. This, and the great diversions of water into canals upstream leaving very little water for fish to live and survive on in the lean season. They cite all the species of fish and the large Macrobrachium shrimp or Jhangur that have now been wiped out upstream of Farraka due to their passage up from the sea being blocked by the barrage. Hilsa, Sokchi or the Ganga stingray, Pangaar and the Bhulwa. We see fishermen using nets finer than mosquito nets, and make do with eating fish no larger than a finger. They barely have enough to eat they say; that more than half of their community are unable to support their families on fishing anymore, and have left for cities as migrant labour. And no one we've met on the river yet, has even heard of the government's plans to further drastically reduce flows in the Ganga by further diverting upstream tributaries to cities like Delhi, and on to desert ecosystems in Rajasthan and Gujarat for industrial scale agriculture. The metropolis of Delhi, grasping at rivers across all of north India.

We meet and on occasion stay with fishermen enroute, and hear incredible stories of their lives here. We were repeatedly warned that this area is the 'wildwest' of Bihar,

and sure enough it does seem to be. Complete with horsemen and guns as if from a movie set. Rivers have always harboured wildness; land and property being completely impermanent on the shifting floodplain, and contestations thereon renegotiated, mostly by force, frequently after major floods. And always, a refugia for fugitives. It remains so here even today. Rangdaari or extortion and protection from armed gunmen thrives here still. It is an extension of feudal zamindaari on the river. We hear names such as Bucci pehelwan and Naresh boss (pronounced bose) who are still very much around. And first-hand stories of encounters and dealings with Ram Balli, and Kundan Yadav. And their flamboyant successor Kailu Yadav, who was betrayed and killed by one of his own men on an island we had camped on a night before. The fishermen bear the brunt of it, having to give up as much as half their earnings from fishing to this mafia equivalent. They are also the transporters and feeders of the Rangdaar fugitives across islands and riverbanks on boats. They are killed if they resist. Seven people were killed for resisting extortion in 2007 from Kagazi tola, Kehelgaon, where we stopped to speak to fishermen. At the ghat at Bhagalpur, fishermen told us of Prakash Mahaldar, a boy who resisted them and was abducted from his boat and hacked to death last year. It did make the news in Bihar, but no one is ever convicted. Witnesses are intimidated or dealt with, and political patronage is the name of the game anyway, they say. We are often warned and alerted by fishermen on where to expect possible trouble, which ferry-points and secluded channels to avoid. We are sometimes assured that we are unlikely to be robbed, appearing to be urban, and likely to attract wider attention in such an event. Even so, we are fortunate not to have encountered anyone but friendly fishermen, with whom we very quickly build kinship, being boatpeople ourselves. They live by their wits, and keep their harpoons closeby, always.

The journey though, has been far from bleak. We see and hear dolphins every day, come up to breathe with a whoosh and a sigh. Their resilience despite the state of the river so far is completely surprising. Late one evening, we saw one exult in a clear leap right out of the water, its tail still flipping in the air, and its wet smoothness glistening in the golden light of the setting sun. Completely breath-taking, in more ways than one. Our grey, cold and foggy mornings are unfailingly lightened by the visit of confiding White Wagtails whirring and chipping near our tent. Western Curlews fly bye in the oddest of ways. A Little Ringed Plover hangs around less than two feet away from us, alternating lightning-fast bursts of walking, and a staring stillness with its yellow goggles. Walk around a sand island in the mist, and you see Little Pratincoles sitting unmoving on the ground, with their shoulders shrugged-up in seeming gloom at the grayness, but when they fly, their unusually long and pointed wings boast such thrilling sophistication. And Sand Martins flying intimately close to the water, their wing-beats the softest of any bird you ever saw.

Our progress in terms of movement downriver remains impeded by thick fog on most mornings, and we have to wait till it lifts to be able to move at all. We even see local ferry boats lose their way and call out in the mists. This gives us fewer hours of paddling. It does however give us more time for roaming the sand islands we camp on, and to have conversations with fishermen passing by on land. We encountered high winds and cloudy

weather for days at a stretch, resting out the tail end of it with fishermen at Monghyr, who said we had no business being out on the river in such weather. We have had some days where we've had a strong tailwind, enough to wrestle with our sail but cover long distances, combining with paddling. We've had days when we pass large confluences with other rivers from the Himalaya, like the Gandak and the Kosi, and the waters in the Ganga seem clearer and glassy-green again. And the river, and the waves, now much bigger still.

We have met and been educated by remarkable and knowledgeable people. Fishermen most of all, Narain, Gopi, and Tulsi Sahni, Bunt, Balmiki, and Sudam Mahto, Israael, Assad, Bishun and Yogendra, among many others. But also people like Prof. Wasi Ahmad, Prof R.K. Sinha, and Ishteyaque Ahmad at Patna. All with long histories and a deep passion for the Ganga. And countless stories which we strain to catch. All this, and the gift of getting to meet Malika, our family, who comes down to Patna for us.

We have stopped for rest and recovery at Katihar now, near Maniharighat. From here is the final quarter of our journey, past the Farraka barrage, into the navigation channel from there to the Bhagirathi river, and then the tidal waters of the Hugli and the Sundarban to the Bay of Bengal. It has been over two months now; and only 600 kilometers and perhaps less than a month more to go with our river to where she meets the ocean.