

# Sundarbans of Bangladesh

This story is about Laila, a seven year old bibliophile (lover of books), who used to live with her family in Bangladesh.

One day Laila found a large book on her father's table. On the cover of the book was its title, Sundarban, written in big green and gold letters. The book had many pictures of animals in a jungle. Among them were spotted deer, turtles, snakes, and even a crocodile. As she turned the pages, Laila found the picture of a large, splendid-looking tiger as well.

“Baba, look,” she cried, pointing to the picture.

Her father smiled. “It is a Bengal tiger,” he said. “Doesn't he look like an animal king? They call him ‘the royal Bengal tiger’. He lives in this forest which you see around him. The forest is called the Sundarbans. And guess what, Laila, your mother and I were looking through this book because we want to take you with us to see the Sundarbans.”

“But the tiger?” said Laila, looking worried.

“They come out at night,” replied Baba, “though also at sunrise and sunset. But don't worry, we will leave the Sundarbans, well before tiger-time. The king hunts at night, so that is the time when he is fully awake.”

“How will we see the tiger if we go in the day then?” asked Laila, looking disappointed.

“Well, you can either see the tiger or not see him,” replied her father, laughing. “Perhaps we can catch a glimpse of him while he is asleep” he added, thoughtfully.

That afternoon, Laila called her best friend, Neelu, a Bengali girl, and told her what her parents had planned, whispering that she might even catch a glimpse of the Bengal Tiger from afar.

“We call a tiger Bagh in Bengali. But Laila, when we are near the Sundarbans, we must never say the word ‘Bagh’.

“Why?” asked Laila.

“Because” replied Neelu slowly, if you say ‘Bagh’ you will see the tiger, and he will see you. And guess what, the Bengal tiger is an excellent swimmer. He can swim more than four miles without getting tired!”

Frightened, Laila told Neelu that she would never say ‘Bagh,’ even on the journey to Sundarban, which will take them through water, and she would also warn her parents not to utter the word.

After talking to Neelu, Laila rushed to her parents, who were making plans for the trip.

“Baba, Amma! She shouted. “You know what Neelu just told me? We must never say ‘Bagh’ on the trip. Otherwise, the tiger will find us and get us!”

Laila’s father laughed. But Laila’s mother only smiled. She drew her daughter to her, kissed her and said, “Neelu forgot to tell you the other

part of the story. Actually, what I have heard is that instead of Bagh, if you refer to him as Mamu (uncle) he will do you no harm.”

“You know that is nonsense, Afia” Baba said to his wife. “People make up such stories just for fun. Laila, the Bengal tiger understands neither Bagh nor Mamu. If a stray cow looks at him sweetly and says, ‘Moo, moo, mamu!’ and he happens to be hungry, he will still eat her. You are a sensible girl. If you are afraid of something, find out more about it. That will teach you how to stay safe, and not be frightened of it.”

Early on a winter’s morning that weekend, Laila was on a boat with her family. The day was not cold, just pleasant, and the early sun had lit up the water with a touch of gold and red. On the coast before them stretched the jungle, as far as the eye could see.

“Those are mangrove trees, Laila,” said her mother, “bees go there to make honey. They made the honey we have at home, which you love.”

Laila was looking eagerly at the jungle, hoping to spot some of the animals whose pictures she had seen in the book about Sundarbans. But so far, she had not seen any, only some birds. Suddenly she cried, “Amma, Baba, look! There is a monkey walking along the coast with its baby on its back.”

“Where, where?” said Laila’s parents, and looked.

“The baby’s enjoying the ride,” said Amma, smiling.

Baba handed his binoculars to Laila saying “I think they are rhesus monkeys. They are common in mangrove forests. Now look to the right. Do you see that long log of wood in the water?”

Laila looked through the binoculars. She said, “I can see it, but it . . . Oh Baba, it’s not a log, it is . . . a crocodile!” She exclaimed.

“You are right. It is a crocodile. He is going to catch fish for his breakfast.”

“The poor fish!” cried Laila.

“Well, everyone has to eat. The fish are also busy getting their breakfast.”

“What do they eat?” asked Laila.

“Fish eat worms, insects, smaller fish, mosquitoes and flies. The fish here also eat rotting mangrove leaves and twigs, which fall into the water. They are healthy food for them.”

Soon it was lunchtime, and one of the boatmen served them lunch, which he had been cooking on the boat. The lunch consisted of boiled rice and fish curry.

“Try our chingri fish curry,” said the smiling boatman, and the family who were very hungry by now, gladly dug in. They realized the ‘chingri fish’ was actually prawns.

“We caught the chingri before sun rose. Then I cooked.”

“Excellent” said Baba, “*Apnake anek dhanobad*” (Thank you very much).

“Delicious! Best prawn curry I ever ate.” Said Amma, smiling at the boatman.

“Thank you, Madam,” he said, and went away looking pleased.

The boat had now sailed into one of the narrow streams which cut through the mangrove forest. Laila was straining to find a sleeping tiger through her father’s binoculars, but to no avail.

“Afia, Laila, look! Baba was pointing to the opposite bank of the river. They looked. A herd of reddish-brown deer with white spots all over them were there. A couple of them were drinking water from the stream, while most others were grazing in the grass. One big deer, with long antlers, stood at the edge of the water, staring at them, as though guarding the herd from strangers.

“Oh look Laila!” exclaimed Afia, “Look at the spotted deer. They are called chitals. Aren’t they beautiful!”

Laila looked at the deer through the binoculars, smiled slowly, and said, “They look as though a rain of stars fell on them!”

Afia laughed. “Yes, they do, with the sun shining down on their white spots.

Soon, the boatman appeared again, with tea for the guests. “This is spice tea” he said

“O I love this!” said Baba, and grabbed a cup.

Amma picked up another.

Then, with a smile, the boatman asked Laila, “Tea or milk, Bibi?”

Laila looked at the tray. A cup of tea, and a cup of milk were both there. She picked up the milk, and said a shy “Dhanobad” to the boatman.

A couple of hours later, the boatmen told them that they should now turn back, as about sundown was when the tigers woke up, and it could be dangerous to be seen by them on the narrow stream among the mangroves.

Soon, the boat had turned around, and now they were on the way to Khulna, which was where they had started their journey.

The family resumed their search for Sundarbans’ animals.

“What is floating in the water? It looks like the face of an animal,” said Amma, passing her binoculars to Baba.

Baba stared at the object in the water, and gave a low whistle.

Suddenly, one of the boatmen came running towards them, and said to Baba, “See, see in the water, tiger swimming!”

It was indeed the face of a tiger. The rest of his body was only dimly visible through the water. They looked and looked, while one pair of binoculars went back and forth between Amma and Baba. Laila had one to herself. The royal Bengal tiger was swimming fast, no doubt toward a prey which he had made up his Royal mind to eat.

As they left the forest behind them Laila blew it a kiss, saying, “Good by, beautiful forest!”

“Do you know, Laila,” said her mother, “that is exactly what ‘Sunderban’ means: Beautiful Forest!”

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