OF DJINNS, PROPHETS AND TURTLES
by Indraneil Das

Mohammed, the prophet of Allah. decreed that his followers abstain from eating the flesh of amphibious creatures. calling them ‘haram’ unclean) A country with innumerable wetlands. the Republic of Bangladesh which chose Islam as its stale religion, has an incredible diversity and population of freshwater, marine and terrestrial turtles, panty because of this protection.

Daily, hundreds of pilgrims as well as curious tourists make a ‘pilgrimage’ to what is believed to be the mazar (cemetery) of Byazid Bostami, a prominent Muslim saint, just outside the city of Chittagong. in southeastern Bangladesh. For! many, the visit is to see djinns or bad people who had supposedly been transformed into turtles by the saint. Attached to the mazar is a tank, eutrophic due to its many uses, which is the only home of a tunic that may not be found anywhere else, evil, yet treated with respect.

Trionyx nigricans, the ‘madari’ of the local Chittagonians or the black softshell turtle, may be a distinct species of turtle, according to available evidence. It was first described by John Anderson, an Englishman in charge of the Indian Museum. Calcutta. between 1865- 86, in the Annals and Magazine of Natural History, in 1875. Adults of the species have crusty-looking shells, while young ones possess eye-like markings that evidently disappear with age as the shell ‘darkens, a characteristic of all turtles of the genus Trionyx from the subcontinent.

Biologists from the Chittagong University, under Farid Ahsan, conducted a long-term study on the turtle recently. According to their findings, the population of the species is wholly concentrated in this tank, since the neighboring pond, just outside the mazar compound which had these turtles, has been recently drained. Nesting takes place during the summer months, when the

female turtles walk up the steps of the tank and proceed to a hillock, situated less than 10 meters away, and lay 10-30 eggs, which arc hardshelled and nearly spherical.

Women and children at the mazar spend a lot of lime with the turtles. It is believed that a barren woman can conceive if she cats mud off the back of the turtle, and on visits to the tank, it is not unusual to see people scraping mud off the shells of some of the enormous tunics, which arc invariably present near the steps of the tank and rarely bite. The high density of turtles in this single tank is remarkable and probably because of the large quantities of food given as offerings by the pilgrims. Strips of beef, bread, puffed rice and banana, sold in shops inside the mazar premises, are eaten by the turtles.

Is the species really distinct, or is it a captive population of the more familiar softshell species found in the country? The highly restricted range seems unnatural, and suggests a conspecific status with the much more widespread peacock softshell turtle. However, the head markings appear very intricate and a white upper lip, absent in the peacock, is visible in all the specimens I observed at the tank during a recent visit. An osteological study, based on a good series of animals will perhaps resolve this problem some day.

The practice of keeping turtles, and sometimes land tortoises, in temple ponds is to be encountered all over south and southeast Asia, among followers of such diverse faiths as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. in southeast Asia, it is believed that delivering a turtle to a temple ensures a future of prosperity. Reptiles have featured prominently in eastern mythologies, and man’s conflicting attitude - fear, hatred, yet curiosity - seems to be the reason for this.

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