

ART. V.—CAMEOS OF INDIAN DISTRICTS.

III.—*The Sundarbans.*

THE Sundarbans is the name commonly given to all the southern portion of the delta of the Ganges, but in its stricter sense it means so much of that portion of the delta as was excluded from the Permanent Settlement. The Sundarbans stretch from the Hooghly on the west to the Meghna, the estuary of the Ganges and Brahmaputra, on the east ; and comprise the southern portions of the present districts of the 24-Parganas, Khulna and Bakarganj. The old districts differed very considerably from the present division of the country. The district of Bakarganj was carved out of the old Dacca district ; and Dacca Jellalpur disappeared long ago. Many minor alterations have occurred, and lastly Khulna was carved out of Jessore and the 24-Parganas a few years ago.

Various derivations have been suggested for the word Sundarban, but only two appear probable. One is *sundari*, the sundri tree, and *ban*, forest, the whole word meaning "the sundri forests" ; and the other *samudra* (through its corrupted and vulgar form *samundar*), the sea, and *ban*, forest, the whole meaning "the forests near the sea." There are two arguments in favour of the former derivation, first, that the sundri tree is the commonest tree there, and secondly, that the word is sometimes locally pronounced *Sundariban*. There is one argument in favour of the second derivation, that the same name is given to similar forests in the south of the Chittagong district, where, I have been told, sundri trees do not grow, or are rare. I believe, too, though I cannot recall any passage, that the word *samudra-vana* occurs in Sanskrit authors as meaning large forest tracts near the sea. The second derivation seems the more probable, though it is possible the former has also exerted some influence in the present form of the word.

The Sundarbans are entirely an alluvial formation. They are pierced by large estuaries throughout, especially in the west portion where there are no rivers, for the Ganges and its branches have long ago left that part of the country and their waters pour out further east. Most of the branches now intersect Bakarganj, but a few are found in Khulna. The estuaries and rivers run generally north and south. The three largest estuaries are called the Matla, Roymangal and Sipsa rivers, the first running up to Port Canning and being connected with Calcutta by Tolly's Nullah. There is little or

to obtain immunity from wild animals. Some fakirs have a great reputation. The chief local divinities are the Boy Saint (*Sawál Pir*) and the Forest Lady (*Ban Bibi*); both seem from their names to be of Mohammedan origin, but they are worshipped by both Mohammedans and Hindus, and their shrines are often marked by nothing more than a bamboo with a flag at the top. These men can get near places, where they intend to cut timber, by means of the khals that penetrate everywhere. It is difficult to wander far through the forest in the west, as the ground is low and swampy, but there is no hindrance in Bakarganj except for the khals. Perhaps the greatest advantage the woodcutters enjoy is, that the forest has little undergrowth, and they can keep a look-out for some distance around. The *báwális*, or regular woodcutters, are very poor and must venture their lives to gain their living; as they graphically express it, their choice lies between starvation and risking themselves against the tigers. Raiyats, however, from Jessore, Khulna and Bakarganj often undertake expeditions to the forest when they have no pressing work at home; and much of the rice crop is also reaped by such men, when the Sundarban cultivators are unable to gather it in unaided.

There is plenty of sport in the Sundarbans, though it is not to be had easily. Tigers, deer and wild pig abound everywhere, and especially on the confines of cultivation. Deer are especially destructive in November and December when the rice has grown, but has not reached maturity. The wild pig are always at hand to dig up the ground for whatever they can find. The tigers stalk the deer and the pigs, and will swim broad streams in their search for prey. Buffaloes are found in the eastern parts, and rhinoceroses in the depths of the forest near the sea coast. Abandoned clearances, where grass has grown up, are excellent places for finding deer, which may be seen browsing there at all times of the day. Such places are better and more numerous in Bakarganj than in the west, for when land is abandoned in the west, a kind of wild palm, called *hetál*, and low scrub or reed spring up and thrive more readily than grass; but in lands that are much impregnated with salt, little will grow besides a low reddish succulent herb, and the *jhau*, which is like a casuarina. In the east, the land being high, grass grows readily, and will maintain its position for years before it is ultimately extinguished by the encroachment of the forest. Such spots are very plentiful in the lands near the sea coast in the extreme east, which have been reclaimed and abandoned by the Magh settlers; and they generally possess deserted tanks which contain fairly fresh water, and are visited nightly by wild animals.

driving him into them ; though he can leap a long distance, he cannot, they say, spring over a net seven feet high. I have never seen wild buffaloes, though their tracks around deserted tanks, where they go at night to drink, are common enough.

An officer's duty in the Sundarbans is a mixture of sedentary life, rough out-door work, and jungle wandering. It consists in surveying, settling and leasing out lands of every description, from the most thoroughly cleared estates to the wildest forest, during the cold season ; and while travelling from one place to another, days may be spent in the confinement of a boat. Much of the work must be done with a gun in one hand, and every one who has served there has no doubt tales to tell of the risks he has run. The drawbacks are many and obvious ; yet there are fair opportunities for sport, and living so entirely among the isolated people, to whom the slightest medical attention is a great boon, for months together, with so few of the usual official accompaniments one may learn very much of their ways and language, and more perhaps may be learnt of the rise and growth of the land system of Bengal in the conditions, both crude and highly developed, which are found in the Sundarbans, than in the ordinary districts where the changes that have been at work have been almost hidden from notice by the Permanent Settlement.

F. E. PARGITER.
