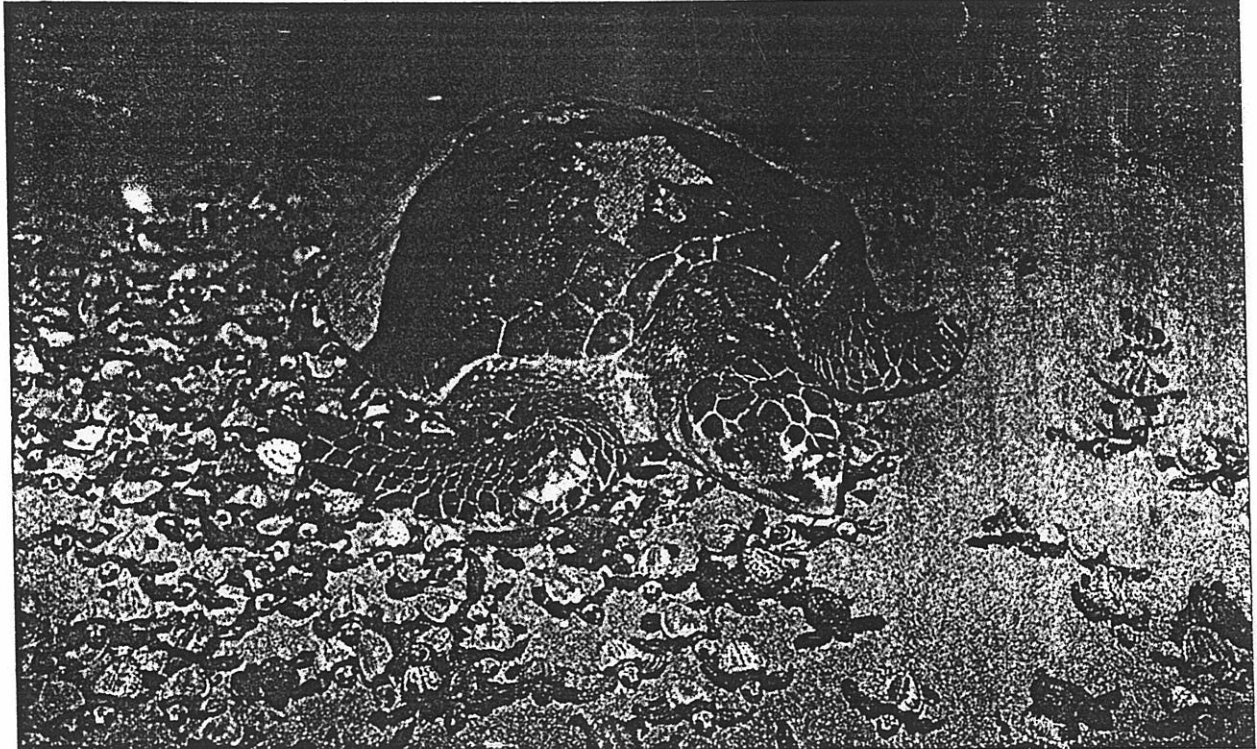


ORISSA

# Turning the Turtles Away

A fishing jetty endangers the survival of Olive Ridley turtles and their habitat

Photographs by SHEKAR DATTARI



By ROHIT BRIJNATH with RUBEN BANERJEE

**T**HE sea must be undisturbed. The sky blotted by clouds. The south wind swirling gently. Midnight close at hand. And then, out of this sea of silence, they come. Green, huge, they scrunch across the sand in ones, tens, hundreds, thousands, and soon the entire beach is one moving mass. It is the time of the *arribada* (arrival) of the Olive Ridley turtle.

Every year in a trick of navigation still unexplained, they come to a tiny strip of sand on an Orissa beach off the coast of the rich mangrove forests of Bhitarkanika Sanctuary to lay their eggs. Last year 610,000 came to lay a possible 53,680,000 eggs. It is nature at its most awesome, a phenomenon that is yet to be understood.

Now perhaps it never will. For in a series of moves—many of them illegal—the Orissa Government has threatened the very survival of the turtle and its habitat. Top on the list of violations is the creation of a fishing jetty—besides the one already existing—within the sanctuary, at Talchua, that is certain to disrupt the turtle breeding ground. Now more than 1000 fishing boats will

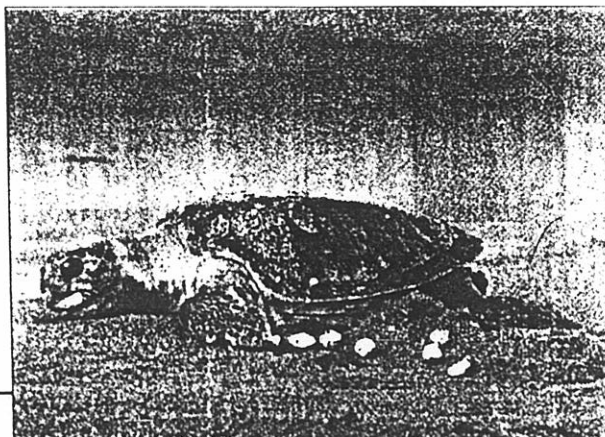
A Ridley with newly hatched turtles; (below) laying eggs

vie with the turtles for food in an unequal relationship in which the fishing nets win and the turtles die.

To build the jetty and enable fishermen to transport their catch to urban markets other violations are being committed. An 80-km long road with three bridges is being hacked out through the core of the Bhitarkanika sanctuary. The fragile eco-system of the mangrove forests has already been disrupted by the massive encroachments committed by the 40,000-odd people who live around its periphery. The Orissa Government also proposes to raze standing forests under the guise of relocating cyclone affected villages. It is a flirtation with havoc, but the Government seems unconcerned with its Fisheries

ministry just last fortnight deciding to construct three more jetties in the area.

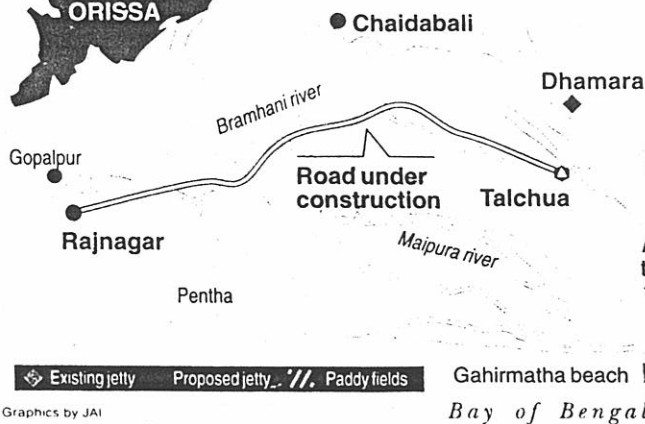
Reaction in the form of outraged environmentalists has been immediate. Says Belinda Wright of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature: "The Talchua fishing complex will probably be the biggest single blow to the continued survival of the Olive Ridley. It will destroy the largest congregation of ma-



Enlarged area

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## BHITARKANIKA: TURTLES IN TROUBLE



Graphics by JAI

rine turtles in the world and irreversibly damage this extraordinary rich ecosystem." Marine scientists worldwide are echoing her call, for the Ridley has vanished before, from Mexico's Pacific coast where development went unchecked. Now apart from India the only other large population breeds off the Costa Rican coast.

What has irked environmentalists is that a convenient working jetty already exists at Dhamara on the river's north bank. The fishermen using it are already posing a multiple threat to the turtles. Apart from depleting their food source many of them are trapped by the plastic gill nets they use. And breaking their skulls or backs is the acceptable alternative to cutting a net to free them. In 1991, 1,000 dead turtles were found on Bhitarkanika's beaches; recently scientist Dr C.S. Kar recorded as many as 3,000 dead on a 15-km stretch.

Surya Narayan Patro, Orissa's minister for fisheries, however, insists that his Ministry has neither been callous or violated the law. His rationale for sanctioning more jetties is that the existing one at Dhamara, apart from being inadequate, forces the 20,000-odd fisherman into taking long detours to land their catch. Before the jetties were cleared the Central Institute of Aquaculture had studied the proposals and cleared them. Patro says: "It is improper to paint me as a destroyer." To prove his eco-friendliness, he asserts that he has created a 20-km limit for trawlers as a protectionist measure.

But not everyone is impressed by Patro's gesture. As Sanjeev Chaddha, Bhitarkanika's district forest officer, says: "Who would enforce such rules? My department has no seafaring boats." Chaddha says that various constructions within the sanctuary violate many laws. "Prior permission of the chief wildlife warden is necessary before any area of the sanctuary is put to any other use," he explains. "In this case, the state Government has so far not taken permission."

Even Union Environment Ministry officials are peeved with the state Government for going ahead without proper safeguards. They had wanted an environment impact assess-

Turtles come in the period 7 days before and after a full moon between October and May from the Indian ocean or from Australia through the Pacific ocean.



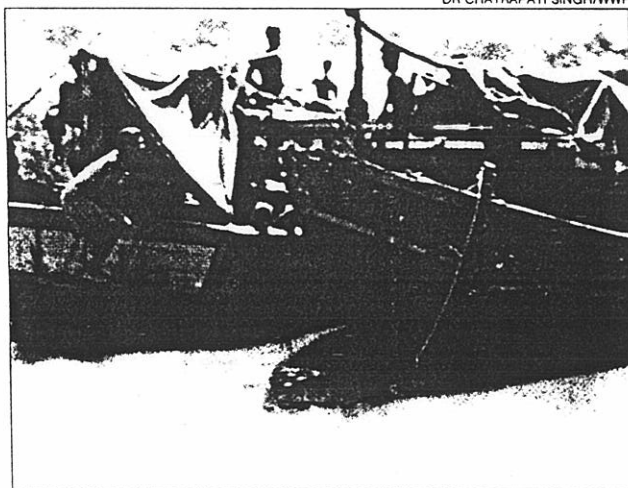
65,000-hectare sanctuary have been encroached upon, with only a third retrieved.

**D**ESPITE this reality, the state Government wants to raze over 500-odd hectares to relocate two coastal villages—Satbhaya and Kahnupur—which it insists are cyclone affected. It is a confusing logic for mangrove forests act as a cyclonic buffer zone. But as local activist Banka Behary Das explains, this storm is more a political one, with ministers and vote banks involved.

So the flurry of allegations, insinuations and excuses continue, yet the hazards of the project appear as clear as the Orissa Government's uncompromising stance. For environmentalists there is no compromise: the jetty must go, trucks cannot be allowed to roar through the forest, the turtle area should be cordoned off with markers to keep fishermen at bay, and human beings must co-exist with the forest. Their arguments are not without force, most valid of all is the Olive Ridley's sensitivity to disturbance and its unexplained reaction to it. Not much is known about them, though one fact has been confirmed: when

faced with a threat, turtle populations collapse.

The Orissa Government is not convinced, yet it may be forced to be, for the Centre for Environmental Law has decided to file a case against the Orissa Government and the Central Government over the jetty and the road. Whatever the outcome, it is somewhat strange that whenever nature chooses to bestow upon the human world a majestic, magical phenomenon, it is often eventually spurned. Meanwhile, the Olive Ridley turtle, hovering quietly beneath the sea, continues to swim the fine line between survival and extinction, waiting for man to decide. ■



Fishermen at Talchua: endangering the ecosystem