

South Kolkata neighbourhood in search of a Pied Piper

The director of Zoological Survey of India thinks the rats can even jeopardise the railway tracks passing under Dhakuria bridge in south Kolkata.

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A rush hour view of a week day on Dhakuria bridge. (Inset) A hole on the walls of the structure through which rats have made burrows.

Six-year-old Tumpa Mondal has not yet read about the Pied Piper of Hamlyn at the municipal corporation-run school she attends but every night she keenly watches her mother chasing out an army of rats from the 10 square feet space covered by bricks and tin sheets that Tumpa calls home.

“Some of them are as big as the puppy I have adopted,” emphatically points out the slum child as she stares at Dhakuria bridge that runs over the tracks of the south-suburban section of South Eastern Railway and carries the load of thousands of vehicles that cross over from Dhakuria to Golpark and vice versa.

On the bridge, a section of the road leading to Dhakuria is blocked so that Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority can carry out emergency repairs. It’s a tedious job and workers can be seen filling up large gaps on the surface with concrete even as moving vehicles create vibrations that seem to shake the structure.



The rail tracks below the bridge is not safe from the rodents either. Experts feel the borrows might endanger the safety of the rail lines that are lined by shanties on both sides.

“The bridge was made around 50 years ago to provide the shortest connection between south Kolkata and Garia in the southern fringe. But it has suffered wear and tear. The foundation faced risk a few years ago because rats chewed away soil from its base. Repairs had to be carried out. Right now we are filling the gaps that have appeared on the road surface because certain portions have sunk in,” says a KMDA official as drivers stuck in traffic honk their hearts out.

Worse, experts feel, the rodents can even jeopardise the railway tracks running under the bridge.

“I won’t be surprised if the railway tracks, too, are affected by the burrows beneath. The biggest feature of these rats is adaptation,” adds Dr Kailash Chandra, director, Zoological Survey of India.

“These are common black rats or *Rattus rattus*. They are found in every continent. Their natural instincts drive them to breed. To survive, they look for food and make home everywhere. They will not be deterred by vibrations felt under the gradients of the bridge because they are accustomed to tremors and earthquakes for centuries,” adds Chandra.



Below the bridge and in the densely populated area around it, life is more miserable for those who have to share space with the rodents.

Tumpa and her mother Lakshmi - a woman in her late twenties, who works as maid for four families so that she can run her own - make it a point to hide everything edible.

For hundreds of families living in shanties along the railway tracks and in adjacent slums at Panchanantala, this is routine. So is buying traps and rat poison.

Dangerously outnumbering humans in a cosmopolitan neighbourhood that has everything from high-rises and schools to opulent showrooms and a big private hospital, the rats have created a subterranean world the capital of which is believed to be located below the gradients of the bridge.

“It is not a modern pier structure. This technology is obsolete. The gradients were made on ramps created by dumping earth. Concrete walls were set up on either side. Some holes were left in the

concrete walls so that natural gases from below the surface could escape. Those holes became passage ways for the rats,” says a KMDA engineer.

“Over the years, the rats made burrows not only under the bridge but even under roads in surrounding areas. They emerge at night and raid every nook and cranny for food. With so many road side eateries, houses and exposed garbage dumps, they don’t have to work too hard,” says Panchanan Halder, a caretaker at Shibnath Bhawan, a multi-storied housing complex located within 12 metres of the northern ramp.

“You can see a burrow right there,” adds Halder, pointing at a gaping hole in the ramp of the bridge. “We have tried using rat poison. But there is a problem. If you can’t find a dead rat before it starts rotting you will be driven mad by the stench,” he laughs.

Ratna Chakraborty, a working mother who lives on the ground floor of an old building in Dhakuria, has had a first-hand experience of the adaptation the ZSI director refers to.

“My husband was transferred to Assam soon after my son was born and I decided to stay with my parents for a few months. By the time we returned, the rats had taken over the apartment. They followed the sewer lines and entered through the toilet. Ever since then we place heavy bricks on the toilet cover before going on vacation,” says Chakraborty.