

London School of Economics and Political Science

**Conserving Life:  
Forest Imaginaries and Competing Values in the Sundarbans Forests  
of India**

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## DECLARATION

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## ABSTRACT

The Sundarbans mangrove forests which range across the border of India and Bangladesh are internationally famous as a protected habitat for the Royal Bengal tiger. Less well known are the Sundarbans' 4.5 million people, many thousands of whom venture into the forests on a daily basis to earn a living collecting fish, crabs and honey. This thesis interrogates what conserving life means to the people living alongside a global conservation hotspot. It explores how the fishers themselves understand their relationship to the forest and its resources, which is based on a set of ethico-religious codes known as the “rules of the jungle” [*jongoler niyam*] and other overlapping values. I explore fishers' notions of a sufficient life, what it means to sustain a household, and ultimately the kind of life they seek to conserve for themselves in relation to the surrounding landscape.

This vision is under constant renegotiation. I trace how several forces, including increased surveillance by the Forest Department, recent campaigns by forest rights activists, and changing global supply chains variously challenge and reaffirm it. In doing so, I also explore how these forces, and the groups that direct them, make sense of, value, and construct competing visions of the forest. These groups, all with their own stake in the conservation of the region, are linked by a web of local politics that transcends the “tiger versus people” binary and which reveals unexpected fractures, accommodations, and alliances between them. By privileging the perspectives of the people most affected by conservation, I reconceive what it means to conserve life in the Sundarbans.

For Alpana di, Bhowo da and Rick

For your quotidian courage



*A painting by Avishek Mistry*

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## Key Glossary

In the pages that follow all Bangla words have been transcribed in my attempt to remain as close as possible to how the words were pronounced by my interlocutors.

*Ma'ar khamor*: The jungle was referred to as the “mother’s granary” or the “common store house” of the mother. “Ma” refers to mother Bonbibi – the proctress of the forest.

*Jongol kora*: “To do the jungle” that is to fish, collect crabs, and honey. Two decades ago this would also have included collecting dry fuel wood from the forest.

*Jongoler niyam*: Rules of the Jungle. *Jongol* translates into jungle which in the Sundarbans comprise of rivers and forested sandbanks. *Niyam* means rules but also more broadly moral observances.

*Nauka*: Wooden fishing boats

*Bechey rakhaar niyam*: Rules to stay safe.

*Johurnama*: The booklet recounting Bonbibi’s origin story and the accompanied story of Dukhey whose life she saves from Dokkhin Rai.

*Dokkhin Rai*: The half-human half-tiger demon/god in the Bonbibi mythology

*Jatra*: All-night dance-dramas performed in the village; folk theatre

*Khali hatien*: Empty handed

*Bhoiy*: Fear

*Khoti maliks*: A *khoti* is a small hut on the bank of the river where fishers re-sell their catch and the person who owns it is the *malik* (or the boss of the *khoti*). These are small fish landing centres in the village.

*Adatdar*: Commission agent

*Shabans*: Courage or bravery

*Maulis*: Honey collectors

*Bhikkha kotte*: To go begging. The act of going into the forest was seen as an act of begging for alms from Bonbibi.

*Rix*: Risk

*Lobb*: Greed

*Aubhar*: Lack, poverty, need

*Chahida*: Desire or “want”

*Swabbhar*: Habit

*Koshito*: Hardship

*Anando*: Joy

*Shauk*: Pleasure

*Sadhu*: A holy man, sage, an ascetic

*Fakir / Pir*: A Muslim holy man

*Shongshar*: The household, family and conjugality as it relates to the wider economic and social world.

*Bhalobasha*: Love

*Byabobar*: Social relationships, how two people treat one another.

*Khatirdari*: Hospitality but also implying mutual care

*Baagh*: Tiger

*Churi*: To steal

*Horen shikaar*: Deer hunting

*Jan shunoni*: People's hearing

*Adhikar*: Rights

*Paikadis*: Retailers

*Lajja*: Shame

*Paliyegache*: To escape or run away

*Bichar*: A village conflict resolution meeting

*Juripana*: Fine

*Koda*: Strict

*Dakaat*: Dacoit

**List of Abbreviations:**

SJSM: Sundarban Jan Sramjibi Manch; a local NGO working on the implementation of Forests Rights in the Sundarbans

WBFF: West Bengal Fishers' Forum; A West Bengal Fishers' Union, part of a national fishers' union called NFF

NFF: National Fishworkers Forum

AIUFWP: All India Union of Forest Working People

DSG: Delhi Solidarity Group

TRC: The Research Collective

PSA: The Programme for Social Action

FRA: Forests Rights Act. The full form of the FRA is the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act.

PCCF: Principal Chief Conservator of Forests; the highest ranking official of the West Bengal Forest Department

Ad. PCCF: Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests

STR: Sundarban Tiger Reserve

FD: Field Director

AFD: Assistant Field Director

DFD: Deputy Field Director

BLC: Boat Licence Certificate

WLPA: Wildlife (Protection) Act of India, 1972

APSI: Anti-Poaching Society of India; a wildlife conservation NGO headquartered in Delhi with a field office on Bali Island.

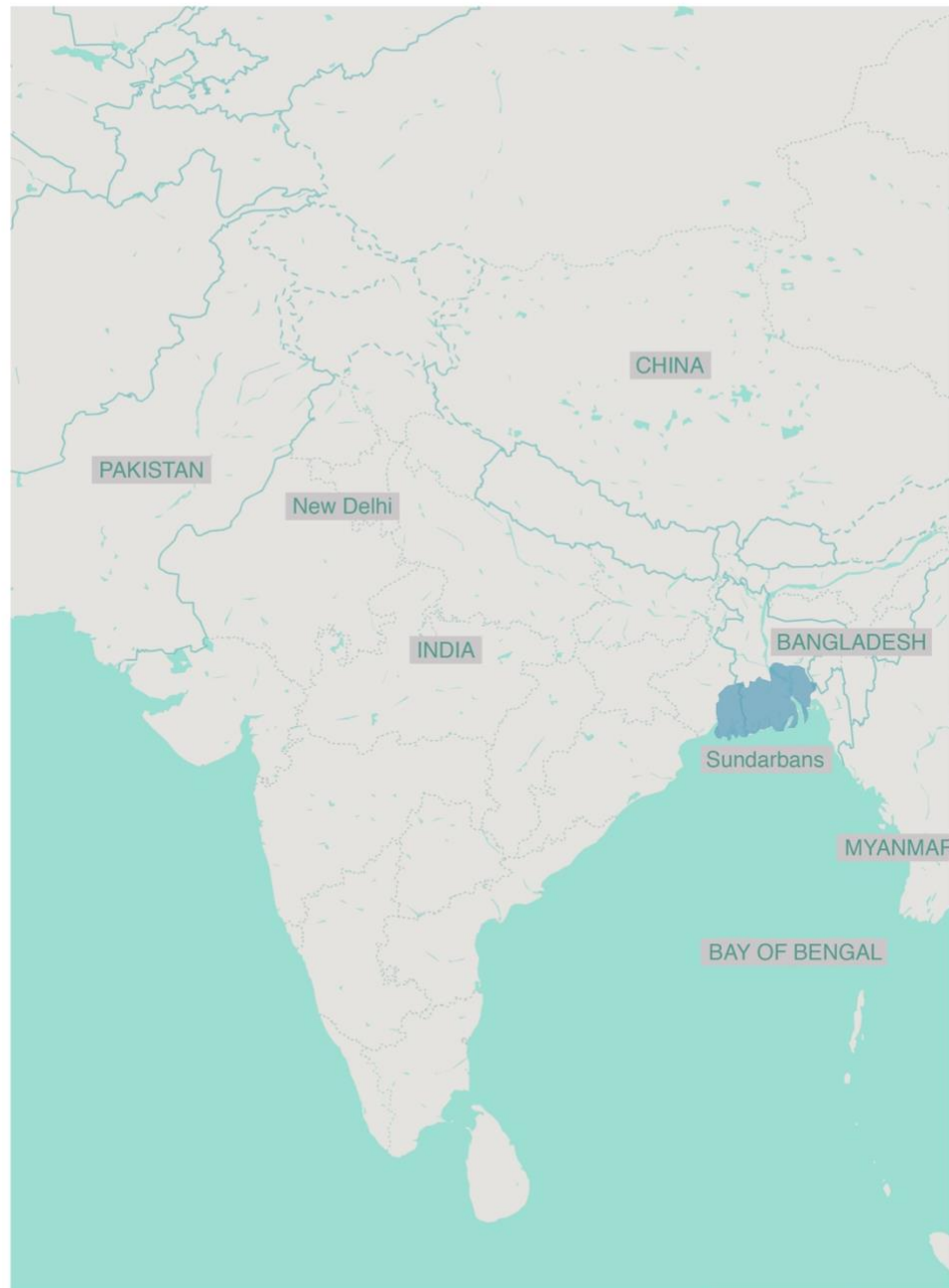
JFMC: Joint Forest Management Committee

WFFP: World Forum for Fisher Peoples

BPL: Below Poverty Line

SC: Scheduled Caste (Dalits)

ST: Scheduled Tribe (Adivasis)



*Figure 1. The Sundarbans forests spanning India and Bangladesh.*

## Introduction:

### Conserving Life

This thesis asks what it means to conserve life for those who live alongside a conservation hotspot. The Sundarbans are a melange of rivers, islands, and mangrove forests that range across the mouth of the Bengal Delta. These forests teem with animals, both human and non-humans: a large population of Bengal tigers; Bonbibi, a Muslim deity who is the protectress of the forest; and 4.5 million people. These include large numbers of political and ecological refugees belonging to some of the lowest caste groups of India, and many hundreds of thousands who earn a living from the forest. Today these forests are being aggressively conserved, but in the interests of only one of the delta's inhabitants: the tiger.

Conserving Life aims to make this selective process of conservation more visible, and to make sense of it. Who and what are worth conserving? Who chooses? Does the choice to conserve certain lives, values and beliefs obliterate others? I challenge the conventional logic of conservation, and its automatic reference to ecosystems, wildlife, forests, and nature. Instead, at the heart of the thesis are those who “do the jungle” by venturing daily into the mangrove creeks to fish, collect crabs and gather honey. In essence this thesis is about putting people at the centre of conservation. What do the residents of the Sundarbans themselves find valuable and worth conserving about their own lives?

In order to answer this question, three conceptual frameworks weave through the chapters that follow. First, I pay attention to longer histories of power, force and sovereignty in the Sundarbans forests. This is encapsulated in what I call “divine and daily forms of governance.” Those who do the jungle follow certain rules and observances that govern their use of forest resources. What is the source of these rules, how are they renewed and undermined, and who do they advantage and disadvantage? What values do these rules represent, and how do they compare to the value systems espoused by simultaneous paradigms of forest governance?

My second conceptual framework explores the moral categories and vocabularies of those who do the jungle. What is their definition of a decent life or a life without poverty [*aubhav*]? What might new patterns of consumption tell us about Sundarbans residents' definitions of need versus greed? This is captured by what I call “notions of a

sufficient life.” This includes not only peoples’ relationship to the forest and their reasons for undertaking life-threatening work, but also broader needs, wants and desires.

Lastly, I show how the project of placing people at the centre of conservation must contend with several local level conflicts and internal politics. These divide groups that are often characterised as unitary, and are rife within institutions, between fishing boats, and inside the household. These “intimate antagonisms” and “unlikely friendships” throw light on how Sundarbans fishers experience and navigate the current conservation paradigm. They reveal both the counterintuitive hostilities and the surprising collusions that transcend the “tiger versus people” binary usually used to describe the conflict in the Sundarbans.

While my main protagonists are the men and women of Bali Island where I conducted fieldwork, their daily lives in the village and the forests opposite their homes only make sense in relation to a host of other actors and forces with a stake in the region. My scholarly and ethnographic attention extends to the wider political, economic and legal landscape of the Bengal Delta, and the various histories and groups that constitute it. Some of these forces have been a part of this region for centuries, such as the forest goddess Bonbibi. Others are relatively new entrants such as the colonial and present-day Forest Department, post-colonial wildlife protection laws secured and upheld by the conservation lobby and – in the past few years – the agents of eco-tourism and national rights activists. I do not typecast these forces as either internal or external, but rather see them as deeply entangled. They compose a web of overlapping conceptions of what to conserve, which lives and aspects of life hold value, and how to imagine the Sundarbans forest.

This introductory chapter to the thesis is divided into four parts. After a description of the contemporary debates in conservation today, I state the means through which I intend to take the conversation forward through the three conceptual frameworks stated above. Following from this, I introduce the Sundarbans: the place, its people and my methods of conducting fieldwork. The last section outlines the chapters that comprise the thesis.





*Figure 2. Those who do the jungle, the protagonists of this thesis.*

## PART I

### Forest Governance Past and Present

Conserving Life builds on the vast repository of literatures on conservation, political ecology and theories of value that align with my interests in putting people at the centre of conservation. Before laying out my conceptual frameworks in further detail, I briefly describe the debates in current day conservation. The contested values, both historical and contemporary, that underpin conservation are what the following chapters are explicitly and implicitly in conversation with.

Much of the classic political ecology literature documenting resource conflicts has been framed through the opposition of state domination and the common man's "repertoires of resistance" (Peluso 1992: 12). This contest lies at the centre of one of the first environmental laws in the history of any nation, the Charter of the Forests. This lesser-known companion to the Magna Carta was sealed in St. Paul's Cathedral in London in 1217 (Standing 2019: 3). The Charter of the Forest was one of the first "truly radical" documents providing "freemen the right to a means of subsistence, the right to raw materials and, to limited but substantive extent, a right to the means of production" (ibid: 4). The monarchy was obliged to support these rights and return enclosed lands to the commoners. The Charter's significance, as summarized by Linebaugh (2009), was its recognition of the state's role to regulate the commons in order to meet the needs of the common man and was an important chapter in the evolution of the concept of a human right to subsistence. It was one of the first laws to effectively transfer much of the authority from the state to the commoners themselves (ibid) introducing what is today known as the principle of local governance or custodianship. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century it placed limits on the exploitation of natural resources and established norms for their use. It also placed value in the requirements of the common person for his or her subsistence (ibid).

Tracing the history of the Charter of the Forests all the way to its 800-year anniversary in 2017, Guy Standing notes how the intervening centuries were characterized by a steady "plunder of the commons" as a result of commercial needs and the "class domination of politics" (Standing 2019: 12). The Charter's provisions were eroded through several phases of enclosures, culminating in "the legalized theft of land" via the "Inclosure Act" between 1760-1870. Overall, between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the British parliament passed over 5,000 acts enclosing more than 6.8 million acres of what had been common, public land (ibid: 13). In his book *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the*

*Black Act*, E.P. Thompson sums up the struggle over England's 18<sup>th</sup> century woodlands and enclosures by observing that "farmers and forest officers had rubbed along together, in a state of running conflict, for many decades and they were to continue to do so for many more" ([1975] 2013: 99).

Thompson's framing of the state vying against farmers' resistance resonates far beyond Britain. It was taken up by Peluso (1992) around the forests in Java; by Guha ([1989] 2000) and Saberwal (1999) around the forests in the India; by Neumann in colonial Tanzania (1998); by Scott (1985) and Bryant (1997) in Burma. This continuity is not accidental. The same laws passed in eighteenth-century England had been established and enforced in all of these forests. Peluso, tracing forest management in Java to practices and expertise borrowed from the colonial West, shows how the post-colonial state employed certain laws to render the use of forests illegitimate and criminalize forest dwellers. She also delves into peasant's various "repertoires of resistance" (1992: 12) by showing us their own notions of morality, rights, criminality and subversion, and the socio-political and technological weapons they fashion to defend these notions (Scott 1995). Guha focuses on analogous forms of peasant resistance in India under the British colonial state and "traditional" kingships. He documents the opposing worldviews of the forests that underlie these conflicts up through contemporary struggles in the 1980s in the Himalayas. Summing up the narrative of both authors, Peluso writes that "the denial of access to vital resources may loom as the most violent crime of the state toward the peasantry" (2017: 14).

Behind the colonial—and post-colonial—state's approach to forest governance has been "the material demands of nascent capitalism" (Grove 1993: 323). The state has viewed natural habitats through the needs of kings and aristocrats, or at other times as fuel for empire, colonialism, and markets (Grove 1993: 318). This is an admittedly cursory history of colonial relationships to forests. Several authors (e.g. Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Grove 1993) have provided the substantial nuances in ideologies and practice in the various British colonies and even within one colony depending on particular forest contexts, time periods and ideologies. For example, colonial administrators, botanists, and foresters held complicated valuations of the forest as evidenced by their preservation of species, their aesthetic appreciation of wildlife, and the creation of botanical gardens (Grove 1993: 336). Undeniably though, the colonial drive to create "scientific knowledge" to understand landscapes, soil, vegetation, plant and animal species, was largely rooted in the aim to generate revenue from forests most efficiently (see Rangarajan and

Sivaramakrishnan 2012; Gadgil and Guha 2012). Forests were indiscriminately felled for timber but simultaneously there were discussions about deforestation and its relationship to climatic changes, aridity, rainfall loss, and the onset of tropical diseases (Grove 1993: 338). In essence, there was an on-going and continuous process, of the valuation of forests whether it was in relation to subsistence woes or the wartime need for timber.

In the Sundarbans, while the process of clearing forests to generate revenue began before the Mughal period, and continued during the Mughal Empire<sup>1</sup>, a systematic felling of large swathes of forests only began after the arrival of the East India Company headquarters in Calcutta in 1757. After 1828, when the British got “proprietary rights” to the forests, even more extensive clearing began, and it is around this time that the first migrants—whose families inhabit the Sundarbans today—began to make the region their home.

Guha (2006) describes a watershed moment in Indian colonial forestry that had an impact across the nation. This was a heated debate between Dietrich Brandis, the first Inspector General of Forests in India, and B.H Baden-Powell, a civil servant who would later be the conservator of forests in Punjab. Brandis represented the view that communities should have rights to the forest, which was opposed by Baden-Powell on the grounds that they didn’t have the capacity and know-how to manage forests. Baden-Powell won, and the Forest Act of 1878 vested the Indian Forest Service with power to oversee forest use and paved the way for commercial forestry (Poffenberger and McGean 1996: 59). Forest Officials justified their control of a full fifth of India’s land mass on the basis that they alone had the scientific skills, technical knowledge, biological expertise and administrative competence to govern the forests (see Guha 2000; Rangarajan 1996; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Agarwal 2005). Thus began a process in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century where Indian forests were aggressively reserved and nationalised, eroding all customary use of their resources and distinguishing the British, in the words of Guha, as “world leaders in deforestation” (2006: 118).

The Sundarbans escaped this fate at first. Unlike African landscapes, ascribed the image of an “unspoilt Eden” (Anderson and Grove 1987:4), the Sundarbans was considered a “sodden wasteland” (Hunter 1973 [1875]: 240) with an inscrutable

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<sup>1</sup> The Sundarbans forests were by and large outside the ambit of the zamindari system (land revenue collection system). There were however small *laathdaars* or owners of small *laaths* [plots] of land. However, the ecological vagaries of the region and constant unpredictability forced most of these small landowners to abandon their plots, making way for peasants, ecological and political refugees, to clear the forests and make it their home (see also Iqbal 2010).

geography (Ranald Martin: 1837) of shifting sandbanks [*chars*] and dereliction by rivers (Bhattacharyya 2018: 19-22). It was W.W Hunter, who in his Statistical Account of Bengal, first dedicated an entire section to the Sundarbans, cataloguing its flora and fauna, and mentioning only in passing a few “wandering gangs of woodcutters”(Hunter 1973 [1875]: 35). He writes, “Tigers are very numerous, and their ravages form one of the obstacles to the extension of cultivation...the depredations of a single fierce tiger have frequently forced an advanced colony of clearers to abandon their land, and allow it to relapse into jungle” (ibid: 33). The entire Bengal Delta was seen as nothing more than “a pestilential marsh in need of draining” and several physicians of the East India Company considered the delta to be rife with disease and “pathology” (Bhattacharyya 2018: 19). Its medicalized topography was closely tied to the moral geography of the region and its inhabitants (ibid). For Paul Greenough (1998), Hunter’s depiction of the Sundarbans as a drowned land comes from his Victorian sensibilities, with the point of reference for most colonial administrators in both understanding and administering the Bengal delta being European landscapes and rivers. A few years after Hunter, another gazetteer O’Malley described the Sundarbans as a region of “total desolation where there was nothing to induce an influx of immigrants, and where even the fecundity of the inhabitants seemed to be sapped by endemic fevers and epidemic diseases (O’Malley [1914] 1998: 26).

It was only much later, upon the realization of the value of Sundarbans timber, that the region became a focus for logging. Under the imperative to generate revenue for the empire, Sundarbans tigers and other “wild beasts” were primarily seen as a menace to the Forest Department’s balance sheets. This fits with the longer Indian history, during both the pre-colonial and colonial periods, of state-sanctioned extermination of tigers in the name of sport and safety. This is well summarized by the National Geographic writer Sharon Guynup who writes that India’s tigers have been the most highly prized “trophy hunt” from the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Mughal Emperor Jalu-ud-din Akbar began a tradition of the royal *shikaar* [hunt]. The British Raj and its post-Independence remnants continued to pursue this pastime until the late 1960s. Record holders include King George the IV, who slew 39 tigers in ten days, and Colonel Geoffrey Nightingale, who shot over 300 tigers during his time in India (Guynup 2014). The systematic elimination of the tiger “threat” was also incentivised through government bounties. Overall, “over 80,000 tigers...were slaughtered in 50 years from 1875 to 1925” (Rangarajan 2001: 32). Tigers were the animal counterparts of thieves and dacoits [pirates] to “be destroyed in any manner that was effective” (Rangarajan 1996:150).

The Forest Department's exploitative relationship to the Sundarbans forests, and attitude toward the tiger, took little notice of Independence. Post-colonial forestry was largely an extension of colonial forest laws, a pattern prevalent across India—and many other colonies—where forests fuelled industrialization and economic growth in the post-colony as they had for the colonizers (Gadgil and Guha 1995). The Forest Department governed the Sundarbans forest, and maintained a dominant, exclusive right to exploit its resources to enrich the state. Timber logging only came to an end in the Sundarbans in the early 2000s.

### ***From Forest Management to Conservation***

Conservation is merely the latest skirmish in the long-running contest over forest governance between state and people. As the intrinsic value of nature has gained popularity and a political constituency, conservation and preservation emerged as the new terms of debate through which the state would continue to control access to and use of the forest. Where forests were logged and degraded, they would now be preserved for wildlife; where Forest Departments used to exploit, they would now protect. The discourse of protection glosses an old form of exploitation rooted in the state's monopoly on power. Sivaramakrishnan (2015) summarizes this exact sentiment: "Protection was always, of course, also the language that masked acts of expropriation. Resources, livelihoods, homes and futures were taken away, by national and regional states from their citizenry, in the name of protecting everything from soils, to species, to sacred spaces, and citizens themselves" (ibid: 1295). Contemporary forms of "mainstream conservation" (Brockington et. al 2008) restricts people from entering and using forest resources via the promotion of protected parks. These "fortress conservation" models (Brockington 2002; West, Igoe and Brockington 2008) militarize green spaces (Duffy 2000; 2014; Lunstrum 2014) and attempt to dichotomise nature and people. The current ecological crisis, and accompanying discourses of catastrophe, have seen renewed calls to uphold and sharpen this militant dichotomy. Renowned biologist E.O Wilson (2016) has inspired a "Half-Earth" campaign to fence off half the "natural" world from people.

In contrast to this sharp and violent line between nature and people, a separate set of conservation practices have sought to conceive of people as part of nature (for a review see Buscher and Fletcher 2019). Many of these practices, such as ecotourism, operate within the logics of capitalism, and become "new appropriations of nature"

(Fairhead, Leach, Scoones 2012) that—mirroring older forms of accumulation—preserve forests for a narrow constituency rather than a broader group of people (see Brockington and Duffy 2011; Fletcher 2010; West 2006; 2016). Fairhead, Leach and Scoones (2012) use the term “green grabs” to describe practices that, building on “long term histories of colonial and neo-colonial resource alienation in the name of the environment” (ibid: 3), have introduced new market-based actors that can accrue profits from nature into the conservation arena. Older forms of “green imperialism” (Grove 1995) and “green grabs” are compatible in their underlying logic of dispossession. A growing body of literature in political ecology and conservation tries to understand the unlikely alliances of these “green grabs” (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012; see also Igoe et. al 2010; Buscher et.al. 2014).

A third camp of conservation practice seeks to place people at the centre of conservation. “Community based conservation” and “participatory” forms of forest management have a long history and take diverse forms. However, these practices have been critiqued for not leading to structural changes in how forests are governed and leaving the deeper power structures and logics by which resources are extracted unchanged (e.g. Spring-gate Baginski and Blaikie 2013; Poffenberger and McGean 1996). In India, community-based conservation by and large failed to take into consideration people’s values, beliefs and historical or customary relationships with nature (e.g. Spring-gate Baginski and Blaikie 2013; Padel 2012; Shrivastava and Kothari 2012). Like in other parts of the world, it airbrushed local politics, power differentials within communities and people’s own readings of landscapes. More radical proposals to place people at the centre of conservation efforts include convivial conservation (Buscher and Fletcher: 2020; in press) which is built on “a rejection of both nature-people dichotomies and a capitalist economic system demanding continual growth via intensified consumerism”, and seeks to address the socio-ecological roots of the biodiversity crisis head-on (Buscher and Fletcher 2019: 286). Attempts to put into circulation people’s own readings of their landscapes (e.g. Leach and Fairhead 1996; Agarwal 1994; 2010) have been seminal in trying to shift the discourses of values around nature. More recently, India has also had its robust forms of convivial conservation expressed in the form of a “radical ecological democracy” (Kothari 2014) with terms and practices such as “eco-swaraj” and “degrowth” attempting to put collectives and communities at the centre of governance and the economy in relation to furthering ecological justice.

In the Sundarbans, the conservation movement largely pushed forest governance toward the first camp of “mainstream conservation” practices characterised by a parks

versus people paradigm. In the late 1960s, as wildlife numbers dwindled, a number of former hunters “hung up their rifles” and began to advocate for the cause of conservation across India. These included Anne Wright, the daughter of a British civil servant and founding trustee of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and her husband Bob Wright, a merchant in Calcutta, who were particularly instrumental in politicising conservation into a cause célèbre.

Anne and other trustees of the WWF met Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, and urged her to put stringent laws in place to save the tiger from extinction. This culminated in Project Tiger, the 1973 creation of nine inviolate tiger reserves, including the one in the Sundarbans. Meanwhile the wider conservation movement saw through the passage of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 (WLP), the legal cornerstone for the conservation of biodiversity.<sup>2</sup> The WLP parcelled out the Sundarbans forest into pieces: core, sanctuary, and buffer. The first and largest is reserved only for the tiger; the second is for the tiger and tourists; and the third and smallest area is shared by the tiger, tourists and fishers. Traditional livelihoods were made illegal overnight. Fishers beyond the buffer were now trespassers; deer hunters were now poachers. By realigning the Forest Department’s mission to keep the Sundarbans’ own people out of the forests, the WLP spurred the classic “park vs. people” issues that still plague the region today.

Leading scholars of the Sundarbans—including Jalais (2004; 2007; 2008; 2010); Mukhopadhyay (2016), A. Ghosh (2017), P. Ghosh (2015), and Mallick (1999)—have all argued that the main regional stakeholders governing the forest—administrators, the Forest Department and conservation NGOs—have variously privileged revenue generation over the Sundarbans’ people, or the tiger over the people since the WLP. Amites Mukhopadhyay (2016) contends that the Sundarbans are currently governed by a “vision of conservation where displacement works through the principle of denial, that is, denying people access to resources of the region” (ibid: 38). Local inhabitants are criminalised as intruders, rendering them refugees of conservation (ibid 42; see Jalais 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> There are a number of relevant historical details that surround the passage of India’s Wildlife Protection Act. First, it was based in large part on the Kenyan Wildlife Act via the intervention of the Wrights. As Anne Wright says in an interview, “By another stroke of good fortune the Kenyan Polo team was due to play polo in Calcutta in the winter of 1971. Bob wrote to the captain who kindly brought a copy [of the Act]” (Sanctuary Asia Meet Ann Wright 2012). Only a year earlier, the Charter of Forests in England came to its formal end, and was replaced by a piece of legislation analogous to India’s WLP called the Wild Creatures and Forest Laws Act of 1971 (Standing 2019).



The most violent example of displacement in the Sundarbans was the massacre that took place in 1978 on an island named Marichjhanpi. Mallick (1999) and Halder (2019) in narrating the tragedy both show how the state gave primacy to the ecology and revenue over people. Marichjhanpi was being used by the Forest Department for coconut plantations when lower-caste refugees from East Bengal, promised and then denied resettlement by the West Bengal Left Front government, began making a home on the island. They were massacred for having encroached on “tiger territory.” Recounting the massacre from oral histories of survivors, Halder (2019) estimates the number of people killed and thrown into the Rai Mangal river to be in the thousands.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to keeping local people out, conservation has shifted forest governance in the Sundarbans toward the commodification of nature via eco-tourism.<sup>4</sup> Conservation and tourism dollars have replaced traditional timber revenue. One of the most egregious demonstrations of this form of conservation came in 2002, when the Supreme Court of India ordered the eviction of the fishers of Jambudwip Island to make way for a Rs. 5.4 billion [GBP 65 million] tourism project. This project, sanctioned by the West Bengal government and funded by the Sahara Group, sought to create a “world class city-centre spread over 250 km of water surface” with a helipad, club house, and business centre (Jalais 2007: 335) so that elite tourists may enjoy the mangroves in luxury. In an article titled “*The Sundarbans: Whose World Heritage Site?*”, Jalais (ibid) highlights the hypocrisy of shunting lower-caste refugees from the islands while facilitating the entry of big corporations, and what it reveals about the ways in which the people of the Sundarbans are erased from the landscape.<sup>5</sup>

The displacement and suffering of communities living alongside the Sundarbans have also given rise to initiatives in the third camp of conservation practices that attempt to put people at the centre of conservation. In India, the first step toward integrating forest-dwelling and forest-fringe communities into processes of forest governance were initiated in the 1990s through Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs). The JFMC model was akin to the seminal Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) in Zimbabwe which attempted to allocate ownership to indigenous peoples living alongside protected areas. JFMC regulations sought to achieve this by stipulating that 25 percent of the revenue generated by the state from timber, and

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<sup>3</sup> Official government estimates place the death toll at a few dozen (Halder 2019)

<sup>4</sup> As I describe in detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> The project was resisted by several activists, scholars and lawyers among them the Bangalore-based organization EQUATIONS working towards people-centred tourism was seminal in its advocacy against the SAHARA group and produced an excellent report documenting the same (Equations 2014).

later through tourism, should be allocated to villages through the JFMCs. While this was an important step, JFMCs did not amend the state's propriety rights over forests or change any of the exclusionary conservation legislations—colonial and postcolonial—that restricted people's access to natural resources (Chapter 1). As a result, “community-based management” did not recalibrate the relationship between people and their forests in the Sundarbans, or in wider India. Scholarship from across the nation has confirmed that JFMCs have largely served to entrench elite interests in village communities and reveal a deep reluctance, on part of the state, to grant substantive ownership of the means of subsistence and production to communities themselves (Kumar, Singh, Ker 2015; see also Poffenberger and Singh 1996: 63).

A more structural attempt to redress the long “historical injustices” suffered by forest-dependent communities, including practices of exclusionary and neoliberal conservation, was the “Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act”. Passed in 2006, this landmark Forest Rights Act (FRA) was premised on the fact that an estimated 200 million of India's poor are partially or wholly dependent on forest resources for their livelihoods but gained little direct control over those resources during either colonial or independent India (Khare et al. 2000 as cited in Springate-Baginski et. al 2013). This was the first time in the history of colonial and post-colonial India that power over forests was, at least on paper, genuinely devolved to people living within or alongside them. The Act's proponents believe that it can catalyse a major redistribution of control over forest resources away from state Forest Departments and toward marginalized forest-dependent communities.

Ever since the FRA was passed it has been mired in issues of implementation where state governments have rejected or simply not recorded the majority of individual and community claims made on forests. In February 2019, three conservation NGOs petitioned the Supreme Court of India, the apex court of the country, to dilute the Forests Rights Act of 2006, appealing the court to “evict” all “encroachers” stating its threat to the conservation of forests. This has opened a new front in the socio-legal battle around conservation pitting state Forest Departments and conservation NGOs, on the one hand, against forest dwellers and the social movements representing them. This front is only just opening in the Sundarbans. The FRA has not been implemented in the Sundarbans to-date, and there is vanishingly little awareness of the Act. Activists have only recently begun to introduce fishing communities in the region to the language of rights, and the

idea of state-guaranteed entitlements as a means to gain control over the forest's resources (Chapter 5).

### ***Contestations in Value: Whose Values, What Values?***

The history of forest governance, and the more recent history of different practices of conservation, are at their core histories of competing values. Conservation, as understood in relation to forests and natural habitats, is one of the most powerful ideas that disrupts the notion that all life, human and non-human, should be considered equal. The act of asserting that certain lives hold less value than other lives (Fassin 2007; Rose 2001) demands a rationale. The judgment of what to conserve, and what to exterminate, calls into question “the arbitrary and contingent character of our values”, and the moral and political economies of society (Fassin 2018: 124). Conservation is an act of valuation, and both the source of value and whose values matter is a question of history, politics, and power (see also Stengers 2010).

In examining how value is made in a Guatemalan cloud forest, in relation to both biodiversity conservation and eco-tourism, Kockelman (2016) theorises a number of distinct sources of value: “use value (function); exchange value (price), semantic value (meaning), and deontic value (morality)” (ibid: 3). His writings “foregrounds the relationship between enclosure and disclosure, showing the ways in which processes that create, interpret, and reveal values are concomitant with processes that capture, carry, and reify them” (ibid: 7). Such a form of revealing, opening, disclosing has always been coupled with knowledge and power and the ways in which “nature-comes-to-be” (ibid; Kockelman 2010).

In a similar vein, Melissa Leach (2015) shows that even what comes to be defined as “green” is contingent. For her, “different ways of knowing are often associated with different ways of being, including different ways of living with and valuing ‘nature’” (ibid: 26). She emphasises that “knowledge politics matter because they are so intimately entwined with material political economy” (Leach 2015: 37). For example, the circulation of misleading statistics around deforestation has led to a gross misunderstanding of African landscapes with major consequences on contemporary policies and, in turn, people's everyday realities (Fairhead and Leach 1996; 1998; Leach and Mearns 1996). The politics of knowledge production and dissemination has led to situations where “inhabitants are denied not only their claims and control over valued resources, but also

their own understandings of vegetation dynamics and the ecological and social histories with which these are entwined” (Fairhead and Leach 1998: 192). By taking a critical view of how knowledge is produced and disseminated in environment and development circles, Leach and Fairhead (1998: 189-90) disclose why certain conservation practices are promoted by particular organizations, who they benefit, and who they dispossess both in terms of resources and values (Leach and Fairhead 1995; 1998; Leach and Mearns 1996; see also West 2016).

Set against this sweeping history of forest governance and conservation practice, I now hone in on the three distinct debates to which my thesis contributes. In each of the three following conceptual frameworks, I locate where the key questions posed by my ethnographic material intervene in the existing literature.

## PART II: Conceptual Frameworks

### *Divine and Daily Governance*

One of my aims in this thesis is to transcend views of forest governance primarily or only as a contest of “dominance and resistance” played out between the state and dispossessed people. One way I do this is by exploring the “divine and daily forms of governance” observed by those who do the jungle. These are grounded in religious beliefs and practices and, I argue, are foundational to understanding how people relate to, value and manage the forest today. Daily forest governance also includes the everyday social relationships of fishers with the forest rangers that patrol the forests.

Marshall Sahlins, following Hocart, argues that the “original political society” was one of cosmic polities, that is, a society “ordered and governed by divinities, ancestors, species-masters, and other metapersons endowed with life-death powers over the human population” (Sahlins 2017: 91). In his review of this phenomenon,<sup>6</sup> Sahlins shows the common trope of gods, deities, spirits or other meta-persons having territorial sovereignty—such as over the sea, the forest or gardens—which they exercise through prohibitions and taboos. When these injunctions are honoured through proper moral and social behaviour, fatter pigs, richer harvests, better livelihoods and life itself is granted. When violated, misfortune results. Hocart’s (1970) key insight into these metapersons, as summarised by Sahlins, was that “human societies were engaged in cosmic systems of governmentality even before they instituted anything like a political state of their own” (ibid: 92). The “original appearance” of government, he explains, was not king, prime minister, treasurer but “organizations to promote life, fertility, prosperity” (Hocart [1952] 1970: 3 as cited in Sahlins 2017: 92). Sahlins confirms Hocart’s thesis to the societies he studies, stating that in many of them “[t]here are kingly beings in heaven where there are no chiefs on earth. Hobbes notwithstanding, the state of nature is already something of a political society” (ibid). For Mauss spirits were “the real owners of goods and things in this world” and it was with them that exchange was necessary (Mauss [1925] 2003: 79).

Sahlins’ description of cosmo-politics resonates in relation to South Asia, which is dotted with gods, goddesses, spirits and saints from a range of religions who exert

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<sup>6</sup> Sahlins focuses on a number of “egalitarian” societies around the world including the Chewong, the Central Inuit, Highland New Guineans, Australian Aboriginals, and native Amazonians among others.

territorial and thematic (fertility, prosperity, knowledge etc.) sovereignty over life and productivity. This phenomena has been described in India at times as a “sacral polity” by Parry (1998); taken up by Shah (2010) among the Munda *adivasis* in Jharkhand; Gold and Gujar (1989) have conceived of the power of deities and *devtas* (gods) as “divine conservation” in Rajasthan; and it has been conceived of as a “political theology” in relation to a god named Thakur Baba also in Rajasthan (Singh 2015). Sean Dowdy (2017) has a fascinating take on the *matsya nyaya* or the “law of the fishes” in Mayong cosmogony in Assam which explains people’s relationships to flooding and the politics of difference among the Mayong which draws from, in their explanations, puranic Hindu mythology. In South Asia, such Hocartesian (1970) cosmo-politics is neither restricted to egalitarian societies nor rural societies, and Anand Taneja (2017) identifies the practice of seeking justice from *jinn*s in the Mughal ruins of Firoz Shah Kotla in contemporary Delhi as a variation of an Islamic “political theology.”<sup>7</sup>

My interest in cosmo-politics, and in juxtaposing them against other forms of forest governance centred around the state, is perhaps most closely aligned with the work of Laura Bear (2015). In her research with bureaucrats, shipyard workers, and pilots on the Hooghly River in West Bengal, part of the same deltaic landscape where I conducted fieldwork, Bear argues for the importance of ethical framings, embedded in ritual associations, to fully conceive of the productivity of the river. Market logics around speculation, predictive technologies and debt fall short of capturing the ways the river was imagined and navigated as a productive site by those who worked on it. The river was, in fact, never called the Hooghly but was known as Ma Ganga, the goddess of the Ganges. As Bear shows, ritual and ethical associations around Ma Ganga are crucial to any analysis of the river’s economic governance (*ibid*).

Where Ma Ganga presides over the Hooghly River, Ma Bonbibi is the sovereign goddess of the Sundarbans forest. While the exact origins of Bonbibi’s story are unknown, her arrival in the Bengal delta was tied to the spread of Sufi Islam in the region in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Eaton 1996). She is worshipped by all those who do the jungle, Hindu and Muslim alike. Her protection and blessing come in exchange for following certain rules known as *jongoler niyam* or “the rules of the jungle.” I explore these rules in depth in Chapter 2, and the extent of her influence on the ethical, social, and economic lives of those who do the jungle in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. I am particularly interested in theorising

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<sup>7</sup> Both Singh (2015) and Taneja (2018) are drawing and expanding, though in distinct and at times it seemed to me opposing ways, on Carl Schmitt’s ([1985] 2005: 36) definition of “political theology.”

her power, along with its limitations and attendant inequalities, as a form of cosmo-politics (see also Stengers 2010). In counterpoint, I reveal how different conservation actors currently conceptualise her, and the values and practices associated with her.

Crucial to my arguments is that cosmo-politics, like those I attribute to Bonbibi, do not depend on an ontological alterity among their believers. Scholarship asserting the rejection of ethnocentric Euro-American ways of relating to and understanding nature, separating nature from culture, human from nonhuman (see Descola 2005; 2014; Vivieros De Castro 2014; 2015; Escobar 2008; 2016; De la Cadena 2016), as well as attempts to revisit the concept of animism (Bird-David 1999), or scholarship that complicates the stark separation between “Life from Nonlife” (Povinelli 2016) have been seminal to understanding certain landscapes and people’s relationships to the various forces of those landscapes. The arguments in this thesis depart from thinking within these categories. Primarily, this is because I take issue with an analysis that sets Sundarbans residents who do the jungle as having a distinct “life-world”, or a separate ontological relationship to their surroundings. For one, such stark separations arise from imposing Western (Christian) categories of the modern, that separates out human and non-human; religious and secular; culture and nature and the agency of humans from that of Gods (see Latour 1993; also Asad 2003; Keane 2007; van de Veer 2001). This dichotomized view obscures the ways in which people in several different non-Christian parts of the world understand their place vis-à-vis their surroundings (see also Graeber 2015). It is not just those who do the jungle in the coastal peripheries of India and Bangladesh that have a relationship with gods, goddesses, demons, spirits and deities. A cursory glance at the Indian state, national politics and the economy will show the pervasive influence of the “non-human” and the religious all over so-called “secular” India (see Madan 2003, Nandy 2002; 2007; Sarkar 2003; Blom Hansen 1999; Bear 2015). The purpose here is not to enter into a debate on secularism and religion in India but to simply state that Sundarbans residents’ do not have an ontology that is unique and distinct from that of any other South Asian. Bonbibi’s rules are contemporary workplace rules for those who work in the jungle. Bonbibi is also not the only goddess worshipped in the Sundarbans and even those who do the jungle worship and revere several other gods and goddesses.

My framing of Bonbibi and her rules of the jungle is instead in line with scholars who write about “indigenous knowledge” and myth as philosophy and theory (West 2016) or others who see “traditional indigenous knowledge” and Western scientific knowledge in less dichotomous terms (Fairhead and Leach 1996; 2003; Peet and Watts 2004; Agarwal

1995). Indeed, cosmo-politics is part of the West's inheritance as well, a point well made by Graham Robb (2007) in his book *The Discovery of France*. Robb traces the histories of several parts of rural France including the various local fairies, saints, demons and oracles that—despite the Catholic Church's best efforts—formed a part of the landscape and people's daily lives. These beings were more than myths: “[t]he social and political development of France owes a great deal to the supernatural acts of inanimate objects” (ibid: 127). For example, for towns in the Pyrenees, penis shaped stones were attended by rituals around storytelling, seasonal celebrations, sex and defiance of the authorities. Later, by stubbornly demarcating common ground, the saints and stones helped safeguard gleaning and grazing rights and acted as a link between communities (ibid: Chapter 7). The contemporary Sundarbans are no more or less exotic than modern day France. There is no stark separation between the so-called “natural” and “supernatural.” Deities, spirits and metapersons ebb and flow with the tides of time, their territories and powers shrinking and, at other moments, coming alive again in the form of entertainment, stories, myth, metaphor, religion and, as I will argue in several chapters of this thesis, as a form of divine and daily governance.

### ***Notions of a Sufficient Life***

Recognising the fundamental role of values in shaping forest governance and the project of conservation, a second theme that weaves through several chapters are the values of those who do the jungle. I ask how they conceive of a sufficient life for themselves in a world in which the possibility of living the best life has been structurally foreclosed. As Judith Butler (2012) asks, “How does one lead a good life in a bad life?” Life must be more than survival in order for it to be liveable (ibid). In answer to this question, policy usually sets quantifiable minimum thresholds of income, utility, standard of living, quality of life, human development or intergenerational welfare (see Dasgupta 2001). The majority of the Sundarbans residents qualify for welfare under the Below Poverty Line (BPL)<sup>8</sup> category. However, these human development indicators reveal little of what it means to live well or live poorly in the terms and categories of Sundarbans residents themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> In India the Below Poverty Line (BPL) index is the economic benchmark used by the government to target government assistance to “disadvantaged populations”.



Amartya Sen's influential "capabilities approach" helps to illuminate the complex dimensions of well-being or a "good life." He proposes that a good life "reflects the various things a person may value doing or being...[which] may vary from elementary ones, such as being adequately nourished and being free from avoidable disease, to very complex activities or personal states, such as being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect" (Sen 1999: 75). Sen foregrounds individual values, and the freedom to live according to those values, at the centre of his expansive conception of well-being (see also Nussbaum 2011). In his words, "we are not only patients, whose needs demand attention, but also agents, whose freedom to decide *what to value* and how to pursue it can extend far beyond the fulfilment of our needs" (Sen 2004: 10, emphasis added).

Sen's definition of the good life rests on a highly subjective set of judgments grounded in particular value systems. Michael Lambek (2008) makes this point most forcefully in arguing that "human life is culturally constituted, so well-being only makes sense with respect to the contours of a particular way of life; particular structures of persons, relations, feeling, place, cosmos, work and leisure" (ibid: 125). Ethnography, with its methodological attunement to specific lives, is well suited to alert political, economic or philosophical discussions of well-being, be it those from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, of the dangers of abstraction (Scheldeman 2008: 93).

Anthropologists have undertaken this challenge in various ways and through various frames. Henrietta Moore (2015) uses the lens of prosperity and asks how to define a prosperous life. From recent research conducted in East London, Moore and Woodcraft (2019) ask how "material wealth and other forms of value are differentially understood and prioritized," and show how people's notions of prosperity not only encompass material security but also broad aspirations for social and economic inclusion in the life of the city. Such findings resonate with many other places in the world, not least neighbouring Bangladesh, where Katy Gardner (2012) shows the importance of "social connectedness" and broader relationships of kinship and mutuality.

Similarly, abundance and scarcity is another lens through which anthropologists have brought values into focus. Augustin Diz (2016), drawing on Sahlins' (1972) "original affluent society" and debates around scarcity among hunter gatherers, turns scarcity on its head to show that among the Guarani of the Gran Chaco abundance is "a temporally bound moment of plenty in which particular forms of sociality emerge" (Diz 2016: 19). Paul Greenough finds similarly productive moments of abundance among the peasantry

in Bengal. Writing against Scott's (1979) "moral economy of the peasant" which proposes that peasants in South East Asia think of subsistence as an absolute right, Greenough argues that "it is more plausible to derive the moral-economic traditions of Bengal from locally generated values of 'abundance' and 'indulgence' than from an allegedly universal set of values arising from subsistence woes" (Greenough 1983: 832). By delving into the thoughts and practices of Gandhi, Thoreau and Nietzsche, Bhargupati Singh (2010) explores a similar set of themes asking how one might move between the poles of frugality, ascetic ideals and excess.

My interlocutors in the Sundarbans, much like the thinkers mentioned above, were constantly contemplating what it meant to be living in need, or to do work out of greed, and the slippery slope between scarcity, abundance and excess. They aspired toward asceticism in the forest and simultaneously pursued their variegated desires in the village. Specifically, at the time that I entered the field, "new money" linked to shifts in global supply chains had converted the jungle-doers from some of the poorest and most precarious on the island to a position of relative wealth. Global capital not only shapes local production, it refashions the lives of farmers and fishers in particular ways (e.g see Mintz 1985; Appadurai 1986; Tsing 2013; Ali 2018). As a result, this was a propitious moment to study the moral-economic values of those who do the jungle. I pay attention to the new practices of consumption among those who do the jungle, and ask what they reveal about underlying notions of sufficiency often grounded in the ethical precepts of Bonbibibi (Chapters 2 and 4).

The crab collectors' newfound wealth also stimulated conversations around their values in a negative way. As some of the poorest of the village became wealthier and bucked usual hierarchies vis-a-vis the local elite, they incited accusations of greed [*lobh*]. I uncover the politics behind who calls whom greedy and why, as well as who avoids such moral condemnation (Chapter 4). I also ask how notions of sufficiency extend beyond the jungle-doers' relationship to the forest and are informed by other needs, wants, and desires, particularly those between husbands, wives and their lovers (Chapter 6). Through these different lenses, and in the service of paradigms of conservation that seek to put people at the centre, I ask and answer how Sundarbans residents themselves define what it means to lead a sufficient life.

## *Intimate Antagonisms and Unlikely Friendships*

The tendency in understanding different practices of conservation, particularly in the Sundarbans, is to analyse various camps as having clear sides that champion distinct values. This leaves the debate mired in a political and moral impasse between camps for wildlife protection and camps for human rights protection. My third framework is aimed squarely at breaking this impasse. It ventures beyond the “tiger versus people” opposition not because it is unrepresentative of the politics of life in the region, but because it elides more than it elucidates. I focus on the various internal conflicts that are subsumed within this overarching binary. My intent is to complicate the idea of “a single, unitary, subordinate” grouping which can only ever be created through “the sanitization of internal politics” within so-called dominated groups (Ortner 1995: 179; see also Gal 1995). The local politics and internal conflicts I show are at times counterintuitive because they occur within groups of people that ostensibly belong to the same camp and who, from the outside, uphold similar values. I also reveal unlikely friendships – expressed through various shades of collusion, collaboration and even conviviality – that grow between groups more often seen as antagonists.

The first relationship I explore is between forest rangers and those who do the jungle. In line with scholarship that traces different modes of intimacy (Herzfeld 2005; see also Bear 2015; Shah 2013) and the blurred relationships between state and society (Gupta 1995; Chatterjee 1993; Kaviraj 1984), I ask what day-to-day interactions and relations are like between fishers and rangers (Chapter 3). This follows Uday Chandra (2017) who, writing about the complex negotiations that occur between the colonial state and *adivasi* society in Jharkhand, terms this relationship through the phrase “intimate antagonism.”

I also re-evaluate the relationship between forest rights activists and fishers, both of whom are ostensibly fighting on behalf of the fishers against the Forest Department. Much of the literature on rights activism in India has concentrated on asymmetries of power and how local institutional structures obstruct people from accessing rights (e.g. Corbridge et. al 2005; Harriss 2013; Gupta and Sharma 2006). Abstracting from this debate, I ask if the language of rights is the only or most appropriate means through which justice and the dignity of work may be addressed (see Asad 2000; McCann 2014). Do rights to the forest, and the well-intentioned “idealistic millions” who support them (Moyn 2010), represent the ethical, social and material aspirations of the people for whom

they are conceived? How does the rhetorical and substantive concept of rights match up to the forms of “divine and daily governance” followed by those who do the jungle (Chapter 5)? I also query the extent to which the fishers’ unions, the other main political actor usually cast as a champion of the people, and the rights movement form a united front, and why fractures emerge between them.

In line with scholars interested in the internal divisions, complexities and the dominations that exist within subaltern groups, I also examine the jealousies and competition within fishing communities (Chapter 3). I show how the relationship among fishers, even while in the jungle, is itself “conflicted, internally contradictory, and affectively ambivalent” (Ortner 1995: 179). I also show that in fact they are not always as “subaltern” as they are made out to be. Fishers depend on rangers, but simultaneously I explore how rangers depend on fishers too. Chapter 6 turns its attention toward an even more intimate antagonism, that between wives and husbands. I probe the values that underlie the fundamental concept of the household [*shonghsar*] in the Sundarbans, and whether these values are diverging between wives and husbands in the contemporary “era of love” [*bhalobhashar yug*] and the new desires that characterise it. Chapter 2 highlights gender inequalities in the ethics around forest-use, Chapter 6 argues that in order to get to the heart of patriarchal relationships, one has to enter the household and the subtle and not so subtle changes it is undergoing. I also pursue the significance of household values to how those who do the jungle conceive of a sufficient life, peoples’ ideas of what is worth conserving, and therefore their importance for thinking about conservation.



*Figure 3 The Bay of Bengal Delta (wikicommons)*

## PART III: Entering the Sundarbans Entanglement

### *The Ecology: Migrating Rivers, Liquid Forests and Vital Monsoons*

The Sundarbans lie southeast of the metropolis of Kolkata in the South 24 Parganas District of West Bengal. The area is a tidally active mangrove forest with 54 inhabited islands, 48 forested islands, and several thousands of smaller sand banks [*chars*] made and unmade with the erosion and accretion of silt. The uninhabited area of forests, rivers and mudflats comprises a total landmass of 10,000 square kilometres. This is a little smaller than Qatar and a bit bigger than Cyprus. These forests are populated by 88 Royal Bengal Tigers<sup>9</sup> and innumerable crocodiles, deer, wild boar, monkeys, sharks, dolphins, fish, mud crabs, fiddler crabs, mud skippers and enumerable smaller organisms that thrive in the mangroves. The forest ranges across the Bengal Delta, formed by three formidable rivers: the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna. Uninhibited by national borders, a full 60 percent of the forested mangroves lie across the border from West Bengal, India in the southwest corner of Bangladesh. The ecological history and current reality of the Bengal Delta is central to unravelling the political and social traditions of the region (Iqbal 2010). Throughout the thesis I show how people's sense of identity draws intimately on their relationship to the environment, and how the environment is in turn shaped by global social, economic and political processes that have been influencing the delta from several centuries ago.

Geological shifts in the region, such as the eastward tilt of the Ganges river and therefore the entire river basin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is one way in which the fluid and constantly shifting topography of the region is revealed. The motions and movements of the delta are also experienced by its residents on a daily basis. The forest is a river. It swells and shrivels with the ebbs and flows of twice-daily tides. Sitting on the edge of Bali Island, where I conducted fieldwork, one *experienced* the river retreating. The gnarled pneumatophore roots of the mangroves became exposed in their convolutions, only to disappear again in a few hours. New mudflats constantly appeared, while others stealthily vanished. The landscape changes every season, every two weeks with the higher spring tide and neap tide, and every six hours with the high tide [*bbora kotal*] and low tide [*mora kotal*]. Labour and leisure, and everything in between from boredom to fervour, depended

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<sup>9</sup> 2019 Tiger Census result

on the waxing and waning cycles between the new moon and full moon. The tide calendar defined the rhythms and routines of people, of boats, and of socio-religious life.

In this constantly shifting delta, humans have made several attempts to exert fixity. Embankments exemplify this. All inhabited islands of the Sundarbans, with a collective perimeter of 3500 kilometres, have mud walls [*bandhs*] that are considered “lifelines” (Mukhopadhyay 2016). They keep the brackish water of the delta out, allowing for freshwater rice paddy cultivation in the islands’ interiors. While I was in the field, World Bank funds tagged for climate change and resilience were converting mud embankments into Dutch-style dykes of concrete and cinder block. The Sundarbans Embankment Reconstruction Project had been allocated a colossal Rs. 50 billion [GBP 562 million] (Bera 2012) to build these “modern” structures. These gigantic walls—five meters high and 30-40 meters wide (ibid)—are promoted by local governments and private contractors to accrue profits and political capital. Drawing on the work of Dewan et. al (2015), Da Cunha (2018) and Bhattacharya (2016), I have argued elsewhere that these embankments are not, in fact, “lifelines” (Mukhopadhyay 2016) but rather “imposed lines” that displace the poor in return for the illusion of safety (Mehtta 2019). It is folly to try and contain, as opposed to adapt to, the delta’s rivers and storms.



*Figure 4. The construction of “modern” embankments on Bali Island began in 2016. The proposed plan is to make concrete walls for the 3500 kilometre periphery of all inhabited islands.*

One of the most striking features of the region is its sustained and powerful monsoons. Monsoons are essential for paddy cultivation. They are also the main source

of freshwater for inhabitants. Rainwater is harvested through man-made ponds dug outside every homestead which enable essential daily household activities like washing, bathing, rearing fish, and irrigating vegetable gardens. While vital, the monsoons are also lethal. *Kal Baisakhi*, or the months before the onset of the monsoons, bring annual strong winds, storms, tidal surges, floods and the occasional cataclysmic cyclone. The most recent was Cyclone Aila, which in May 2009 washed away homes, salinated paddy fields and killed hundreds of people (Ghosh 2017). Almost every adult I knew on Bali had rebuilt their home four or more times during their lifetime due to natural disaster. The monsoons embody the fragile balance between scarcity and abundance, saltwater and fresh water, and death and regeneration.

While the Sundarbans and its people have experienced natural catastrophe for centuries, the current global alarmism around climate change and ecological apocalypse has brought the region, and places like it, into the spotlight. The region is experiencing a rate of sea level rise higher than the global average (Hazra et. al 2002). As one of the most densely populated regions in the world—with almost 900 people per square kilometre<sup>10</sup>, the majority of whom are low caste and poor—this threatens to make millions into climate refugees. Parts of two inhabited islands have already been submerged and are now largely depopulated, and all other islands are continually experiencing high levels of land loss (Harms 2015; Ghosh 2017). This existential threat has begun to attract billions of dollars to create “resilience”, strategies for “adaptation” and “coping” mechanisms. This is somewhat ironic in that it ignores not only longer ecological histories of the region but also residents’ existing histories of flight. Nearly everyone who lives in the Sundarbans is either a refugee of a past ecological disaster, or of violent political upheavals.

### ***The People: The Forest as Refuge / A Forest of Refugees***

The word “Sundarbans” means “beautiful forests”, but a more apt name would be forests of refuge. For centuries the area has sheltered semi-permanent settlers including fishermen, nomadic cultivators, woodcutters, river bandits, pirates, and salt-makers (Jalais 2010). Today, the descendants of these “original people” [*adi lok*] as they were known on Bali Island are a heterogenous group of marginalized fishing and woodcutting castes: *Tetul Bagdi*, *Jheley Bagdi*, *Jheley Kaibarti*, *Rajbongshi*, *Kewot*, *Kawra*, *Malo* and *Mollowck*.

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<sup>10</sup> 2011 Census of India: <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/17-south-twenty-four-parganas.html>



In the mid-1800s, colonial administrators brought *adivasis* or indigenous groups from eastern India—current day Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa—to help clear the forests and swamplands in order to cultivate paddy and generate revenue. Many thousands of *adivasis* were lured by the prospects of forests, fish and deer, only to find tigers, snakes, and crocodiles. Many died of pneumonia and water-borne diseases (Khitij Vishaal, personal communication). Only a few *adivasis* stayed and have descendants who remain in the Sundarbans. On Bali Island, *adivasi* communities were from the *Santhal*, *Bhumji*, *Oraon* and *Munda* tribes.

Bali is a low-lying island and embanking it was more challenging than for other islands. As a result it was not made “*abad*” - cleared and settled - until the 1910s (Kanai Lal Sarkar, personal communication).<sup>11</sup> Once the process began, however, it was possible to acquire land very cheaply from local *laathdaars* [owners of a *laath*, or plot]. People migrated into the region from other parts of undivided Bengal, composed of current day West Bengal and Bangladesh (see Richards and Flints 1990; Danda 2007). In the first few decades of the 1900s, these early settlers came from various socioeconomic backgrounds including well-off opportunists among East Bengali (present-day Bangladeshi) Hindus and others from West Bengal.

The migration histories of the majority of contemporary residents in the Sundarbans are, by contrast, rooted in violence. They are there as a consequence of having fled from somewhere else. In the 1930s, a large group of people migrated from Midnapore, another district of present-day West Bengal. They turned to the Sundarbans after a devastating flood destroyed their homes and lands. An even larger portion of those who live on Bali today, and on the other inhabited islands, settled there because their forefathers were political refugees from East Bengal. In the wake of Hindu-Muslim riots in 1946 in Noakhali and Tippera, areas in the south of East Bengal, two million people fled to West Bengal (Chatterji 2007). The following year, during the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, countless others moved in one of the largest mass exoduses in human history (Alexander; Chatterji and Jalais 2015). Another group of Bangladeshis migrated in the 1960s and 1970s before, during and after the war for Bangladesh’s independence in 1971 (ibid). Joya Chatterji (2007) estimates that a total of 3.9 million people came from East Bengal, renamed East Pakistan, to modern day West Bengal between the years 1946

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<sup>11</sup> Khitij Vishaal is a scholar and painter who runs a small museum out of his home in Canning. He has not published his writings. This knowledge is from my personal communications with him. Kanai Lal Sarkar is also a scholar of the Sundarbans, a resident of a neighbouring island and works for the Tagore Society of Rural Development. He has published his writings in Bengali but not this particular history of Bali Island.

to 1970 (ibid: 111-112). Most of the newcomers were Hindus who had been living in the southern part of East Bengal, which included Khulna and Jessore, north Barisal, south Faridpur and Dacca (Chatterji 2007: 108). Some of these Hindus were upper caste, but the majority belonged to Scheduled Castes—*Namasudras*, *Pods*, *Rajbongshis*, and *Jalia Kaibartas*—and were peasants, labourers and fishermen (ibid). At the same time, many Indian Muslims went to East Bengal (later East Pakistan and Bangladesh) and their abandoned lands were taken up by opposite influxes of refugees.

Faced with limited settlement options, some refugees came to the forested islands of the Sundarbans, cleared the jungle [*jongol ketey*], and made a home for themselves in a fast-expanding frontier (Danda 2007; Richards and Flint 1990; Chatterjee-Sarkar 2013) without too many restrictions or laws governing land acquisition. Along the processes of land reclamation initiated by colonial administrators (see Chatterjee- Sarkar 2013), these men and women looking for a refuge, would transform the area into one of the most densely populated forests in the world.

### ***The Society: Hierarchy in a Forest?***

Today 40,000 people live on Bali Island. Difference was indexed by the use of the term *shomaj*, a word that means community but also connotes a migration history. People identified themselves as belonging to one of four different communities: *Dholeypuri*, *Baaspuri*, *Baraipuri*, and *Midnapori*. All of these refer not to caste groups, but to places in present-day Bangladesh or West Bengal. The majority of people in my neighbourhood of Bali No. 9 also had official government caste certificates designating them as members of the *Poundra Kshatriya* and *Namasudra* sub-castes, two of the many hundreds of Scheduled Caste (SC) communities (equivalent to Dalits, formerly known as untouchables). Despite being categorised in this homogenizing way, they are hugely heterogenous in terms of socio-economic status and level of education. Some of the biggest landowners in the village, with large brick homes in the island's interior, are *Poundra Kshatriya*. However, the majority are poor and landless, with mud homes on the edges of the river, and personal histories of political and ecological dispossession.

India is a country in which caste and tribe largely continue to be the basis, and markers, of inequality. *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste and Inequality in India* (2018) argues that Scheduled Caste (SC) and Schedule Tribe (ST) communities face multiple “conjugated” forms of oppression, and that capitalist modernity has served to entrench

rather than eradicate differences between communities. My findings in the Sundarbans depart from the national narrative in *Ground Down by Growth* in two ways. First, caste and class diverge rather than map onto each other in the Sundarbans (Jalais 2010). This is largely due to the mixed migration histories of the region, and reinforced by the particular, fascinating history of upward social mobility of the *Poundra Kshatriyas*. Barman (2014), who has written one of the only histories of the *Poundras*, traces their social mobility from the 1920s when, through a social movement they began demanding *Kshatriya* or high caste status. The movement's initial demands were denied by census officers. In 1933 the Government of Bengal published a list of 76 "Depressed Classes," in which they were included. After a relentless struggle by social activists, the *Poundras* were eventually granted higher status by the Government of India in 1956 and became known as *Poundra Kshatriya* (Barman 2014:128–30). The fusion of Scheduled Caste and *kshatriya* or higher caste identity has created a mixed identity among the *Poundras*. This ambivalence has been heightened, in the post-colonial context, by linking government benefits to lower caste status, and thereby incentivizing it. The second finding that departs from Shah and Lerche et. al (2018) is that global capitalism—specifically the Chinese demand for mud crabs—has disproportionately benefitted some of the poorest and lowest caste groups, albeit with an accompanying backlash from the local elite (Chapter 4).

In contrast to the heterogeneity of the *Poundra Kshatriyas* and most of the other SC/ST communities on Bali, there were two communities that were materially and socially marginalised. One of these was the Scheduled Caste *Daas* community. The traditional occupation of the *Daas* community was to skin dead cows and goats, work with leather as cobblers [*moochis*], and carry the wooden chariot [*palki*] in which Bengali women are married. At the time of my fieldwork in 2018, most *Daas* families had left Bali, driven out by natural disaster. A decade ago, there were about 20 *Daas* households by the river's edge, but Cyclone Aila in 2009, completely demolished their homes. After camping in the local school for many months, several households abandoned the island entirely for the streets and slums in Kolkata. In this sense, the *Daas* community is the only SC community in the Sundarbans that faces the forms of "conjugated oppression" that Shah and Lerche et. al (2018) observe in other parts of India.

The other, much larger group that was systematically disenfranchised on Bali were the Muslims, in fact in West Bengal the worst off are not SC/ST but Muslims (see Booroah, Sabherwal and Diwakar 2015; Sachar Committee Report 2006). The ordinary, everyday social and political marginalization of West Bengali Muslims has been

documented in the recent scholarship of Fernande Pool (2016) and Alexandra Stadlen (2018). On Bali Island a major contributing factor to their marginalization was that SC and ST communities had obtained government caste certificates, entitling them to several government welfare schemes, whereas the Muslim community was unable to access even basic government assistance. Across Bali's over 250 Muslim households, social indicators from schooling to land ownership to healthcare were very low. Many Muslim households on Bali Island and across the wider Sundarbans do the jungle, although my base in Bali No. 9—described in detail in the next section—was entirely Hindu.

With the *Daas* and Muslims as important caveats, Jalais' (2010) argument that caste is not an important marker of identity for Sundarbans residents holds true. The differences that were most salient to Jalais were between village folk [*gramerlok*] and upper-class city folk [*bhadrolok*]. She also notes that one of the major ways difference was created in the Sundarbans was in relation to one's livelihood, particularly between those who are "landowners" and those who are "forest workers" (ibid: 45-59). While in agreement with Jalais' analysis, my findings from the Sundarbans offer another crucial marker of difference: this is on the basis of certain qualia with which people were endowed. Courage<sup>12</sup> [*shabaus*] was among the most important of these qualities. The Sundarbans forests are dangerous. Venturing into a forest of tigers evokes extraordinary amounts of fear. Some had the courage to do the jungle while others, even those who were landless and in need, chose not to do the jungle out of fear [*bhoij*]. Even the choice of different kinds of forest work followed a clear hierarchy: honey collecting—which required walking on the forest floor—required the greatest amount of courage, followed by crab collecting, then fishing.

On the wider subcontinent, difference has largely been conceived of in relation to caste and tribe and their correlation with class. In the Sundarbans, both material and social difference bypasses gross socioeconomic categories and emerges from more historically contextualised and even individual-level variations in human qualia (see Kockelman 2016; Chumley and Harkness 2013).

### ***The Field Site: Two Sundarbans, Twenty Minutes Apart***

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<sup>12</sup> The Conclusion to the thesis returns to the importance of courage in relation to those who do the jungle.

When I began fieldwork, my first point of entry was through a conservation NGO known amongst village residents as the “Green Club.” After two months, I established a second base in a neighbourhood twenty minutes away called Mondal Pada. Most visitors to the Sundarbans, who stay an average of one or two nights, only experience Green Club. Mondal Pada, and all the neighbourhoods and villages beyond, remain invisible or are often misconstrued entirely.

Green Club is located in the neighbourhood called Jamunaar Ghat [the bank of the river Jamuna] named after a jetty or *ghat* where public ferries and, more recently, tourist boats dock. A hundred metres from this jetty is the Green Club compound. It overlooks the Bidya River. About 900 meters away, across the river, the mangrove forests begin. From the river’s edge, standing on the embankment on Bali, one can only see a green wall of short mangroves.



*Figure 5 The view from Bali No. 9. Across the wall of mangroves are the maze of unending tidal creeks.*

When I was trying to find a base for my fieldwork in the Sundarbans, all roads led inexorably to a man named Shomit Mondol. Shomit da wears many hats. The easiest way to describe him is with a series of terms that mean the same thing in different ways: he was the local patron, a gatekeeper, a broker, a fixer, a mediator and one of the village “big men”. Local politicians and the elected village heads [*pradhans*] deferred to him. But there was something unusual about him. Unlike most village patrons in South Asia, he was not

involved in party politics. The source of his power was his relationships with the Forest Department, conservation NGOs, and eco-tourism industry. A large part of the Green Club compound sprawled across what used to be Shomit da's father's land. It housed the Anti-Poaching Society of India (APSI) office, a conservation organisation for which Shomit da was the Field Officer; a kindergarten funded by APSI; the house of a well-known Indian birdwatcher; and the Goran "Eco-Resort" owned by a company called Devali. Devali also owns a fleet of luxury cruise ships, but their main business is in commercial shipping vessels which, like the cruise ships, operate both within and beyond the waterways hugging the Sundarbans. This confluence of conservation, tourism, and industry made Shomit da an important figure for the Forest Department, with whom he often worked and collaborated (Chapter 1).

He was the most powerful man in the village and for several neighbouring villages. Everyone went to Shomit da for everything. When I asked people why they didn't go instead to their local politicians, the reply was that in the Sundarbans "the business" [*byapsa*] of conservation and tourism wielded more power. Every visitor to the Sundarbans - especially the "VIP" visitors like media correspondents, philanthropists, scientists, journalists, and politicians—are sent to Green Club to be received by Shomit Mondol. I was no exception. He was charismatic, a "son of the soil" and a "local stakeholder," revered and lauded by most outsiders, and feared and despised by many Sundarbans residents.

From the base and network of Green Club, I met and had the opportunity to interview several kinds of people: Forest Department officials; members of WWF who used Green Club as their base; numerous NGO and government workers interested in generating "alternative livelihoods"; tourists and tour operators; and international film and radio crews from National Geographic and National Public Radio. Between the months of December to February, the tourist seasons, I met middle-class Indians and Western tourists interested in showing their children mangroves and tigers. What was initially a base of convenience and my first point of entry emerged, over the course of fieldwork, as a vital access point into the conservation movement and its allies and provided insight into the associated processes of enclosure and disclosure experienced by the village (Kockelman 2016).



*Figure 6. Tourist boats at Jamunaar Ghat in the month of December.*

Visitors arrive via a chartered boat to Jamunaar Ghat. If people were interested in taking a “village walk,” they were usually escorted to the left, down a brick road lined by the households of the two dozen people directly or indirectly employed by APSI or by the Goran Eco-Resort. These households, I had been told, were once extremely poor. Belinda Wright, the Delhi-based founder and director of APSI and daughter of the conservationist Ann Wright, recalled that on her first trip to set up the Field Office these “forest dependent” men and women wore rags and didn’t have enough to eat. In place of rags, many now sported shirts given out by Green Club that read “Save the Tiger.” Visitors led down this literal and narrative path could see for themselves how the alternative livelihoods promised by eco-tourism could wean people off their dependence on the forest. My first friends in the field were the employees at Green Club and their families, and I got to know these men and women very well. Their histories of dispossession and how they had indeed benefited hugely from Green Club. They were the first homes in which I conducted participant observation and explained my research. They reassured me that I had come to the right place since, as I was told by Kishan da, the lodge cook, “all the decisions of what should happen to the village people [*gramerlok*] are taken from here.” This statement stayed with me. But before long, I made some more friends.

Walking right from Green Club, rather than left, and hugging the river's edge, one passes three other tourist lodges before the brick road abruptly ends. A thinner mud road with a thicker mangrove canopy follows the top of an eroding embankment before leading to a settlement of men and women who do the jungle. Fishing nets hang in front of people's homes. Slender wooden boats known as *naukas* are docked by the river's edge. Woven baskets [*chakon*] with freshly caught crabs are off-loaded from the *naukas* where middlemen wait to buy them from men and women who have just spent up to ten days in the forest to collect them. This is Mondal Pada. Walking further along the river's edge, toward the village of Amlamethi, Satyanaryanpur, Mathurakhand, and finally Panchamukhani - the eroding eastern edge of the island where peoples' homes have been moved inland four or five times to escape the belly of the river [*nodir gorbhey*] - there was not a single household that had anything to do with tourism or conservation. People were either farmers [*chaash*] on small landholdings or, if they were landless, went into the jungle, migrated out for work, or did daily wage labour on the lands of others. Most people made a living by cobbling together a combination of livelihoods (see Scoones 2009; Bernstein 2010). These neighbourhoods, both in and beyond the boundaries of Bali No. 9, were where I conducted much of my fieldwork.

For those who lived near Jamunaar ghat, Mondal Pada had a bad reputation. It was infamous for its erstwhile *shikaaris* [hunters], greedy crab and honey collectors, and the many men who had died of tiger attacks whose ghosts [*bhut*] loomed over the neighbourhood. Their widows, I was told, were now having affairs with the neighbours. It was a neighbourhood where all kinds of illicit sexual affairs took place. Women lived with men without marrying them, and married women abandoned their husbands, eloped and ran away.





*Figure 7. The road leading into Mondal Pada hugging the river's edge.*

In Mondal Pada, I joined a household that was unconventional even by the neighbourhood's standards. I lived with Piyali, aged 30; Kamal da, a man in his late 60s; and Deb, Piyali's nephew. Piyali and Kamal da were an unmarried couple who lived together.<sup>13</sup> My choice to live with them was partly for pragmatic reasons. I wanted to be part of a household but also have the privacy of my own four walls. Most homes have only one or two rooms, and several members of the family live in each room together. Piyali's kitchen stood outside and separate from the main house and had partially collapsed during the previous monsoon. She would not have enough money for the next few years to rebuild it. I asked if I could build a small room where her kitchen had stood to live in for the next two years. One of four sisters, Piyali had already adopted me as a fifth sister and was thrilled to have me live next to her. With the help of neighbours, I

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<sup>13</sup> Chapter 6 explores this companionate arrangement in further detail.

had a small room constructed with mud walls and a hay roof, a private space that was still very much a part of Piyali's homestead.

In spite of the unconventional configuration, our household nevertheless functioned like any other family in the neighbourhood. Kamal da worked in the jungle, Deb went to school, and Piyali cooked, cleaned, maintained the homestead and passed her time in the neighbourhood. Piyali used to also go into the jungle to collect crabs, but the year before I began fieldwork she had become ill and stopped. When Kamal da was home the four of us ate together and spent evenings watching TV at our neighbours' home. Living with them, I got drawn into Piyali's family and extended kin [*attiyo sajjan*], her four sisters, their husbands, their several children, Deb's friends, our various neighbours, and the wider community of Mondal Pada and beyond.

I settled into a different rhythm of time: the cycles of the tide, agricultural seasons, and the fears and hopes around the monsoon. I attended *pujos* [religious ceremonies] and fairs, witnessed births and cremations. I learnt about how households were run, and how debt accumulated. I accompanied Kamal da and two others on their boat into the mangrove creeks for day trips of fishing for crabs. From the drama of conflict resolution meetings [*bichars*] in front of the assembled village (Chapter 6), to the mundanity of waiting at hospitals or at the village ration shop for quotas of subsidized rice, kerosene and sugar, I observed and participated in everyday life in the Sundarbans. After 15 months of fieldwork, I conducted a household survey of 104 homes, of which 68 had at least one family member who did the jungle at the time of fieldwork. I also collected several more extensive life and migration histories from men and women from all the different communities in the region.

From my separate bases at Green Club and Piyali's home, 20 minutes apart in the dry season and nearly cut-off from each other during the monsoons, I immersed myself in two worlds within the Sundarbans. In one, wildlife lovers boasted of tiger sightings and exchanged photographs. In the second, the forest was talked about as the abode of Bonbibí. Even invoking the tiger's name directly was considered bad luck. When a tiger killed someone the victim was referred to as "having fallen to the jungle" [*jongoley podaychey*] or "fallen at the mouth" [*mukhey podaychey*]. In the first, men from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) offered "alternative livelihood" possibilities through pisciculture and rearing chickens, ducks and goats. In the second, men and women ridiculed the free livestock they'd been given: "Do they think our households can run on chicken rearing [*murji chaas*]?...they are mad if they think this will stop us from going into

the jungle.” In the first world, visiting businessmen discussed the potential for jet skiing in the rivers to attract more tourists, while those who do the jungle complained of the constant patrols by Forest Department rangers charged with keeping them out of the prohibited core area [*nishaid elaka*]. In the first world, Shomit da told visitors that the fishers were going into the jungle and risking their lives out of greed. In the second, men and women discussed going into the jungle out of need or the “burning of the stomach” [*peter jala*]. While I was surrounded by mud crabs of all sizes in Mondal Pada, the only times I ate large crabs was in Green Club when Kishan da served me leftovers from meals made for tourists. The two worlds were imbued with different if not opposed meanings and values.

These two worlds are not, of course, separate at all. They interact, intermingle, collide, and are co-constituted. At times I can easily disentangle their interwoven threads and at other times they remain indistinguishable. This thesis is not an attempt to neaten out the contradictions or falsely separate the layers of intermingled meaning and their entwined roots. Instead, in the pages that follow, I have tried to faithfully reflect the entangled quality of life as it is lived and conceived in the Sundarbans.

While my primary base for fieldwork was Bali No. 9 and the surrounding villages along the river’s edge, there are other bases that inform aspects of this thesis. These are the village market on Bali Island; Canning, a small town midway between Kolkata and the Sundarbans; Kolkata, New Delhi, and London where several conservation NGOs, government offices, activist groups, export houses, and archives are located respectively; and the range offices and boats of the Forest Department itself.



*Figure 8. Rice fields flank the dirt roads leading into the interiors of the island.*

### ***The Village Market: Bali Haatkhola***

The main economic and social hub of the island is the village bazaar, *Bali Haatkhola*, one of two markets on the island. As one leaves the river behind and travels toward the centre of the island, roads and paths lined with numerous trees—coconut, palm, tamarind, mango—and agricultural fields—shocking green with paddy, fallow or submerged entirely—wind their way through different neighbourhoods. There are several routes from Mondal Pada or Green Club to the village centre and depending on the season getting to the bazaar might take 25 minutes on a cycle or, in the monsoon, up to three hours. The bazaar has several permanent shops selling clothes, stationary, mobiles, fertilizer, gold, the services of a “quack” doctor, dentist, tailor, xerox machine, and so and so forth. Because there is no grid electricity on the island, the village bazaar is run on generators and solar panels, and the majority of vegetable sellers and hawkers use kerosene lamps for illumination.

The bazaar is fairly quiet on most days but on Wednesdays and Fridays, the market days [*haatbaar*], it comes alive with vegetable sellers, fish vendors, stalls with fried snacks, and hawkers displaying everything from fishing nets to umbrellas to herbs to improve

women's fertility. People from several surrounding villages come to do their shopping and hang out at the tea stalls to pass their time, and exchange stories. Men congregate to play cards, and watch TV at the local offices of national political parties. The Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the CPIM or Left Front were the two main political parties with a presence on Bali. The Revolutionary Socialist Party's (RSP) once substantial presence had waned, and one could see inroads for the first time by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which, at the time, still didn't have an office but held continuous rallies and speeches<sup>14</sup> under the big banyan tree [*bod gaach*], the central meeting point in the bazaar. Spending time in the village bazaar was crucial to understanding the sociology of those who do the jungle vis-à-vis other strata of society such as farmers, shop keepers, and government workers. It was also a key site to understand the relationship of debt and credit and the ways that household economics intertwined with social relationships in the wider village.

The village bazaar is also the main gateway to leave Bali Island. From Mondal Pada or Green Club, located on the river's edge, one can wait for a daily public ferry from Jamunaar Ghat that takes you to the mainland in two to three hours. More conveniently, one could first walk to the village bazaar, and from there take a *motorvan*—a tractor-cum-three-wheeler—that takes one to the tip of the island closest to the mainland in one to three hours depending on the weather and road conditions. From the tip of Bali public ferries—meant to seat 12 people but crammed with 50 passengers and their livestock, cycles and now motorcycles—take you across for Rs. 1 [GBP 12 pence] to Gosaba and Gadkhali, which form part of the mainland. From Gosaba or Gadkhali one can take a two-hour bus to Canning.

From the Canning train station, one can travel to Kolkata which, defying all sense of proportion, is only 150 kilometres from Bali. The journey to the city on public transportation, with all the waiting and walking that is required, takes half a day in the dry season and a full day in the monsoon. This is half the travel time required a decade ago, when there were many more boat crossings where bridges have since been built.

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<sup>14</sup> I was in the field during the lead up to West Bengal Assembly Elections (Vidhan Sabha) in 2016 and was witness to several political party rallies, speeches and meetings in the village bazaar. This was the first time that the BJP had garnered such a strong presence on Sundarbans islands.





*Figure 9. Public ferries used to travel between Bali Island and the mainland and other neighbouring islands.*

### ***Canning: A peri-urban town***

Canning is a failed British port built to rival the ports of Kolkata and Singapore and named after Lord Canning, a former Governor General and Viceroy of British India. Located on the banks of the Matla River, the colonial administrators failed to heed the warnings of cyclones and storm surges endemic to the region (Bhattacharyya 2018), and the port failed due to a massive flood that led to colossal loss of lives and property (Mukhopadhyay 2016). Today it is the main node on the trainline between the Sundarbans and Kolkata.

Canning is also where the biggest fish landing centres are located. Middlemen transported crabs on boat ferries and buses to reach these centres, from where the catch is auctioned to buyers. From here, crabs were taken to warehouses primarily located in the Baghajatin neighbourhood in Kolkata. At these export houses crabs were sorted, weighed, and shipped in Styrofoam boxes to the airport where they would make their way to markets and homes in China and other South East Asian countries. I conducted interviews at each node in the supply chain of Sundarbans mud crabs, including with local middlemen on Bali, union workers and auctioneers [*adatdaars*] in Canning, and export house owners in Kolkata.

Canning was a crucial field site also because it is where several fishers' union meetings are held and where many of the leaders of these unions live (and run their own fish auctioneering stalls) (Chapter 5). In addition, it is the town which headquarters the Forest Department's Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (STR) overseen by the Field Director (FD) of the Sundarbans forest. This was an office I visited several times to conduct interviews and gather data from the Forest Department annual reports. It is also the town where smaller tour operators line the streets selling tour packages to cruise the forests. Their flyers, advertising boat safaris and tourist lodges, cater to middle class tourists while "high-end" tourists book chartered trips directly from Kolkata.



*Figure 10 The women's compartment on the train from Kolkata to Canning.*

### ***Kolkata, New Delhi and London***

I conducted several interviews in Kolkata and New Delhi where national activists, NGO offices, and the Forest Department are headquartered. These include the offices of WWF and APSI; the offices of the West Bengal Forest Department and the Sundarbans Development Board at Aranya Bhawan and Vikas Bhawan in Salt Lake, Kolkata; and the

offices of activist groups that work in solidarity with social movements across the country. I also attended the World Forum of Fisher People (WFFP), a social movement of small-scale fishers from across the world, in New Delhi. It included several representatives from union and activist groups in the Sundarbans, and from across India, which deepened my understandings of the politics of representation and allowed me to observe the narratives of the Sundarbans shared in international forums (Chapter 5).

In London, I spent several days in the archives at the British Library as well as those of the London Missionary Society at the SOAS Library. This supplemented archival work in Kolkata and has allowed me to locate the lives of the Sundarbans residents in a much wider and longer religious, economic and agrarian history of the Bengal Delta.



*Figure 11 Bali Island in relation to Gosaba, Canning and Kolkata which is only 150 kilometres away from Kolkata.*



### *Accessing the Forest Department*

Getting access to the Forest Department proved very difficult in the first year of my fieldwork. What limited access I had during this period came through my visits to the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (STR) office in Canning. While on a trip to review the annual reports of the Forest Department, the then-Deputy Field Director (DFD) of the STR requested me to conduct an English course for the tour guides, hired on a daily wage basis, who accompanied tourist safaris. The training was held at the Sajnekhali Range Office, one of the many Range Offices in the Sundarbans that also acts as a stop-off point for tourists. Through this training, I met “eco-guides”—as they are known by the Forest Department—from many other Sundarbans islands, which gave me an entry point to other islands in the region that I then visited. However, aside from conversations with the two rangers and a few support staff posted at Sajnekhali, I still had a very circumspect perspective on the work of patrolling the forests.

As luck would have it, this changed 13 months into fieldwork. Colonel Choudhary—an ex-army official and board member of both APSI and WWF—also works as a high-end tourist guide on one of the Devali cruise ships in its route between Kolkata and the Sundarbans. Like Shomit da, Col. Choudhary is a broker in the relationship between tourism and conservation that exists at Green Club. While scheduling a follow-up interview after our initial meeting, he mentioned off-hand that he was busy for a few days because the Devali cruise ship was hosting a biodiversity conservation conference. Through Col. Choudhary, I managed to get myself invited. It was both the strangest experience of my fieldwork and a turning point of sorts. The conference was attended by all the highest-ranking officials from the West Bengal Forest Department, and after months of futile attempts, I finally managed to meet and interview Mr. Pradeep Vyas, then Principal Chief Conservator of the Forests [PCCF] and head of the Forest Department of West Bengal. Mr. Vyas granted me official permission to visit the other Range Offices and patrol with forest rangers in the interiors of the jungle. This allowed me to understand the forest and the work of “protecting” it from the perspective of the Forest Department’s lowest rungs who mediate the relationship between the state and those who do the jungle (Chapter 3).

### ***A Note on Positionality***

Participant observation is one of the only methods through which we can produce knowledge from the inside, but which also attempts to make sense of and convey the world from the outside (Bloch 2017). Several chapters of this thesis try to make sense of the various actors, their logics and values in relation to the Sundarbans forests, while also offering implicit or explicit critiques of these groups. As my fieldwork progressed, and my critiques developed, I shared them with my interlocutors themselves. These dialogues and disagreements with the people with whom I conducted research form a part of this thesis. There are fundamentally different ways of valuing life, both human and non-human, represented throughout. Indeed, the continuous process of sharing my own findings, wrestling with others about their opinions and reactions, getting into exhausting arguments and at times arriving at moments of agreement formed a crucial part of my research methodology.

While I write about these groups as a researcher, with the luxury and privilege of critiquing from the outside, my engagement with individuals and issues was also at the level of a friend. For example, while I take issue with Shomit da's position on "greedy" crab collectors, and have entered into heated arguments with him about the same, I am simultaneously very close to his family—his wife and his two sons—one of whom I am currently assisting as he applies for a Master's degree in fine art. These are my own "intimate antagonisms" as a researcher with which I continue to grapple. At a broader level, my own upbringing plays a part in making me both sympathetic to but also critical of many of the actors in these pages. My mother had a career as a government bureaucrat in Rajasthan, where I grew up, and was then posted to Delhi, where we moved as a family when I was 14 years old. My father has worked in development NGOs his entire life, primarily in Rajasthan. I had access to these worlds, their immense contributions to society and their deep contradictions long before I embarked on fieldwork. While I issue several critiques of government and civil society in the chapters that follow, my own parents' lives vividly remind me that the individuals I write about are—or may be—deep and critical thinkers who are much more than the jobs they do, and the structures within which they have to do these jobs.

In addition, I wish to acknowledge upfront the work that I do alongside my academic writing. I continue to collaborate, as an activist and mediator, with NGO workers, activists, environmental lawyers, film makers, consultants, and Forest

Department officials who form a part of this thesis. Where possible their names, and the names of their organizations, have been anonymized. These are people who are engaged with the issues that influence the lives of those who do the jungle. Unlike researchers of protest movements and activists who end up choosing to study “attractive” movements with which they sympathize (Edelman 2001: 302 as cited in Kurik 2016), I was not aware of the various local social movements—and their links to national movements—that existed in the Sundarbans before I started fieldwork. This afforded me the critical distance to write about them in the ways that I do. Nevertheless, even as I learnt about the contradictions and problems with the Forest Department, activist groups, NGOs and unions, I also became acutely aware that these are the few organizations in the Sundarbans with the potential to affect the lives of those who do the jungle, the lives that are not grieved (Butler 2012) and which do not make it into the statistical registers of the dead (Fassin 2009; 2017). I commend their work, their courage, and their commitment to the ongoing struggles in the Sundarbans, even while stepping back—through the immense privilege of this PhD—to critique them. They are riddled with their own internal contradictions as I am with my own.

## PART IV: A Map of the Thesis

**Chapter 1** provides a backdrop to the various powerful entanglements that underlie the current conservation paradigm in the Sundarbans. We meet the senior-most bureaucrats of the Forest Department, and trace the webs of beliefs, relationships, and the structures of economic and discursive power that knit them together with eco-tourism companies, big industry, and well-funded international organisations promoting environmental protection and development. I also explore the particular ways in which these global forces converge at the local level. The second section of this chapter describes what doing the jungle entails and differentiates fishers' social and material conditions from erstwhile hunters [*shikaaris*]. I show how the policies and ideologies laid out in the first half of the chapter are experienced by the crab collectors themselves by creating a form of protection that ultimately endangers people's lives.

**Chapter 2** stands in contrast to ways in which the Forest Department and conservation laws govern the forest, and lies at the heart of the thesis. I detail the ways in which those who do the jungle relate to the forest through ritual performances, practices, and linguistic metaphors centred around their reverence of the forest deity Bonbibi. I explain the intricate set of moral observances or "rules of the jungle" [*jongoler niyam*] she preaches, and the ethical notions of sufficiency and excess they uphold. The *jongoler niyam* amount to an alternative form of governance that, drawing on older sources of sovereignty, shapes social, economic and political behaviour alongside the state and civil society. I also pay careful attention to who these rules [*niyams*] constrain, and how they are at times undermined or revised by contemporary forces and by the jungle-doers themselves.

From divine forms of governance which influence everyday behaviours and beliefs, **Chapter 3** moves to another crucial relationship through which fishers' daily lives are governed. This is the relationship between forest fishers and forest rangers. Unlike the commonly perceived relationship of hostility, the two groups are bound together by negotiated social ties that oscillate between friendship, mutual care, obligation and co-option. This chapter also reveals how rangers relate to their own work, and how mental health anxieties, the bureaucracy and technologies and campaigns for tiger conservation influence their attitudes toward forest protection.

**Chapter 4** introduces the impact of the global market on crab collecting, and the repercussions of crab collectors' relative prosperity. Through a joint campaign waged by the Forest Department and local conservationists, we see the accusations of greed levelled at the crab collectors. Through the defences of the accused, we learn why they chose to do the work they do, grounded in a complex articulation of values. We also learn who is not called greedy and what this reveals about the politics of accusations and the ongoing game of "crab antics" in the "catastrophically" submerging Sundarbans delta.

While conservationists and their allies call the crab collectors greedy, another coalition of unions and rights activists fight on behalf of the Sundarbans fishers and their right [*adbikar*] to the forest. **Chapter 5** explores how rights activists, while successful in their symbolic attempts at highlighting injustices against the fishers, do not represent the ways in which fishers themselves make a claim on or relate to the forest. I also draw out the internal fractures in this camp. Union leaders represent the fishers while also looking out for their own vested interests as middlemen in the fish and crab supply chains. Rights activists, newer entrants to the Sundarbans, distance themselves from the unions in response.

**Chapter 6** zooms in on household politics and gulfs in values and desires between men and their women. It describes the recent spate of wives abandoning their households and running away from the village. This phenomena of "escaping wives", placed alongside other relationships and romantic liaisons in my field site, speaks to two interrelated values that were of fundamental importance to the men and women of the Sundarbans at the time that I was conducting fieldwork. These are the value of the household [*shonghsbar*] and the value of love [*bhalobhasa*]. Here we learn about what women, as opposed to their men, want conserved in the household, and how these foundational values, and deeply entrenched patriarchies, relate to other facets of life including the choice of livelihood.

The **Conclusion** does not seek to summarize these six chapters, but instead returns to one of the central questions of the thesis: what does it mean to conserve life for those living in a forest of tigers? I argue that leading a life of acute risk, with its related requirements of fearlessness and courage, is indeed a life worth living. Doing the jungle offers the fishers a fuller life through its closeness to family, home, and village, even as it increases their proximity to death. This is often preferable to the depleted existence that other livelihoods offer, particularly the default option of migrating away from home. The calculus of those who do the jungle is laden with their particular value system, one that may not sit well with the liberal state intent on the mere preservation of life. This opens

up another key question: what might the implications of “divine and daily governance”; “notions of a sufficient life” and “intimate antagonisms” and “unlikely friendships” be for the practice of conserving life beyond the Sundarbans?

## Chapter 1

### Protection That Endangers: Current Conservation Practice in the Sundarbans

#### A Storm in a Teacup

Feeling nervous and over-prepared, I tried to be succinct: “Are there any solutions, any way at all of protecting the fishermen from tiger attacks?” I had come with many such questions for Mr. Sharma, the second most powerful bureaucrat in West Bengal’s Forest Department. My interview with him, wrangled after dozens of e-mails, scores of phone calls and three previous trips to his office in Kolkata, had only just begun. His several phones had rung several times, and I felt privileged to have 30 minutes of his time. As he began to answer my question, the door swung open and Mr. Vyas walked into the office. Mr. Vyas was *the* most powerful man in the Forest Department - the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF)- and the only person who was permitted to saunter into Mr. Sharma’s office unannounced.

Mr. Sharma introduced me to Mr. Vyas. Mr. Vyas, acknowledging me, said, “I know her, she is a hardworking girl...she is living without electricity with the villagers.” Mr. Vyas and I had met a few months earlier at a biodiversity conservation conference, to which I return later. Looking at me, he continued, “I must congratulate your parents. I have two sons and even though they are sons, I would never let them live in the Sundarbans.” I was used to such comments by men. The tone of admiration was always laced with disapproval and carried the implicit message that young unmarried women shouldn’t be living in rural Indian villages unaccompanied. At the same time, being an unmarried woman, especially one studying “culture” - albeit from a university in London - played to my advantage. Unlike the slogan-shouting activists, or the journalists who constantly harassed them for sound bites, I was relatively non-threatening.

Slumping into a seat next to me, and realizing he had interrupted an interview, Mr. Vyas took his phone out of his pocket, told Mr. Sharma to continue his meeting and said he would wait. This was an awkward moment for everyone. How could Mr. Sharma allow his superior to wait? This was my cue to leave. I closed my notebook and had begun

to say my “thank you’s” when a peon<sup>15</sup> walked in with three cups of tea and a plate of biscuits. The men insisted that I have my tea before leaving.

Mr. Sharma broke the silence first. “She was asking about solutions to deaths caused by tigers...I was giving her the case of Africa. As I was saying to you, in all these game parks in Africa they feed their big cats with meat from other prey, they give them goat, wild boar, buffalo...” and as a result, he reasoned, one didn’t hear of big cats attacking humans in Africa. Emphatically, he proclaimed that if the Sundarbans forest had a systematic program to “augment the prey-base,” that is artificially breed deer and boar and release them into the forest, it would automatically mitigate the attacks on the fishermen.

Mr. Vyas looked up from his phone. A little irritably, he said, “But it is common sense, you can stop human deaths if you stop the fishermen from going into the forest.” While he conceded that humans were easy prey for tigers, especially the old, injured and pregnant ones who found it hard to hunt, he wasn’t convinced by Mr. Sharma’s call to follow the African model. He protested, “This is intervening with nature...there is a reason why we have made the forest illegal to the fishermen.” The core area<sup>16</sup> was “sanctum sanctorum” for the tiger. Warming to his point, and speaking now rather aggressively, he continued: “The tiger is a wild animal.... we can’t treat it like we treat animals in the zoo. It is wrong of these fishermen to enter tiger territory, they go in out of greed<sup>17</sup>...we are giving them alternative livelihoods, but they still continue to go into the forest... why should they go there in the first place? If they didn’t go they wouldn’t get killed.” His proposed solution to deaths caused by the tiger was, simply, to fence off the forests to all the local inhabitants.

“But the fishermen...what about their work, their lives?” I spluttered, unable to control myself and rehashing the classic and clichéd conundrum between wildlife protection and poor people’s livelihoods. What ensued, long after the teacups were empty, was a rather heated conversation between the two of them, fuelled by intermittent questions from myself, on the politics of human and tiger lives in the Sundarbans.

The Introduction traced the history of the Forest Department in relation to the human-tiger relationship in the Sundarbans and how the tigers came to be the first and last priority of forest governance. This Chapter explains the alliances between the Forest Department, the conservation movement, the eco-tourism industry, and corporate

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<sup>15</sup> This is an actual job title in Indian government offices.

<sup>16</sup> Made into critical tiger habitat where no human activity is legally permitted.

<sup>17</sup> Chapter 4 of the thesis explores in detail the accusation of greedy crab collectors in the Sundarbans.



interests in contemporary Sundarbans. These alliances project a specific iconography and narrative of the Sundarbans that commodifies its natural assets while effacing its people, mirroring colonial representations of the region. I chart the “new appropriations of nature” (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones 2012) both materially and symbolically, and the valuations made by international lobbies, national governments, civil society, and companies that shape what is worth conserving about the Sundarbans forests in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I show how this abstract alliance is embodied, at the local level, in particular groups and specific individuals, creating a new elite in the village that articulates the same politics of life and values as its patrons.

Against this backdrop, I then illuminate how the current laws and policies of conservation are experienced by those who do the jungle. While the Forest Department blames Sundarbans fishers for risking their lives,<sup>18</sup> its practices themselves generate increased risk. The Forest Department along with other conservation NGOs have been unable to understand, address or even acknowledge the underlying issues that motivate “illegal fishing.” Instead they have created a repressive environment in which illegality has been incorporated (Andersson 2014), and where both the goals of contemporary conservation and the needs of the fishers go unfulfilled in the forest.

## **What is the Forest Department Conserving?**

There are 88 tigers (Tiger Census 2019) in the Sundarbans. Each year these tigers kill an average of 50 fishers, crab collectors and honey collectors, although in some years the death toll has been as high as 103 (Sanyal 2001). This is a pressing concern for the Forest Department and several pages of each Sundarbans Tiger Reserve Annual Report are devoted to the “management of the human-tiger conflict” (STR Annual Report 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010).

There is a long history of interventions introduced by successive Forest Department bureaucrats to negotiate this conflict. They read, at times, like science fiction. Sweet water ponds were dug in the forest after a link was made between tigers’ thirst for human blood and a brackish water diet (Hendrichs 1975; see Dutta 2011). Another senior bureaucrat, drawing on “local knowledge” that tigers only attacked fishers from behind, made it mandatory for fishers to wear masks on the back of their heads (see Rishi 1988). While the Forest Department has stopped enforcing this, leftover masks are sometimes

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<sup>18</sup> A theme I return to in more detail in Chapter 4 and the Conclusion.

given out during the honey collection season, and several times I saw collectors put them on in jest, mocking the masks and the ludicrousness of the Forest Department. A similar belief that tigers routinely attacked the necks of humans led some PCCF to give out fibreglass neck protectors and other armour. These can still be seen peeking out of shelves in Range Offices. In the past decade, a nylon fence has been erected through 50 kilometres of the forest periphery. This is to prevent the tiger from straying into inhabited villages. This makes it harder for fishers to enter the forest creeks and, as a result, fishers often cut boat-size holes in the fence. Somewhat more practically, a 2010 Forest Department annual report relates how “a herd of 75 captive bred medically fit spotted deer had been bred for release in the Sundarbans” with the goal, as championed by Mr. Sharma, of “augmenting the prey-base” (STR Annual Report 2010).

My favourite intervention was described to me by Mr. Pranabes Sanyal, a retired Forest Department senior official, whose own legacy was the introduction of “human dummies.” These dummies were dressed in fishers’ clothes, placed deep in the interiors of the forest, and delivered a 230-volt shock to any peckish tiger (Chowdhury and Sanyal 1985). The shock was too low to cause injury but substantial enough to condition the tigers to stay away. He emphasised to me that his intervention was borne out of his deep concern for the life of Sundarbans fishers. Speaking retrospectively, and perhaps with the freedom of a retiree, he reflected that the priorities of forestry in the Sundarbans were too skewed toward wildlife protection at the expense of human protection. According to Mr. Sanyal, who published an academic paper on his dummy programme, the experiment was successful but had been discontinued before it could have a lasting impact.

Mr. Vyas has left his own legacy in the Sundarbans. He described himself to me as a “wildlife lover” and a “deep ecologist,” someone who believes that humans should not in any way interfere with nature and wildlife. This stands in contrast to less stark separations between humans and nature, where, to borrow words from Mr. Sharma, “man was to be considered as part of the biosphere.” Mr. Vyas’s beliefs are well represented in his PhD thesis in wildlife science. Unsurprisingly, his dissertation proposes managing the human-tiger conflict through militarizing the forest. He writes, “The human killing by tigers is undoubtedly related to the availability of human beings as prey and hence can be minimized with strict law enforcement” (Vyas 2012: x). He calls for expanding surveillance to include “joint patrolling with BSF [Border Security Force] and SAP [Special Armed Police] battalions” on a regular basis (Vyas 2012: 53-54). He also mentions

the Forest Department camps that he helped set up in the Tiger Reserve, including the “floating check posts” established explicitly to prevent the illegal entry of people.

As PCCF, Mr. Vyas has followed through on the principles expressed in his thesis. During the biodiversity conference, where I had the opportunity to interview him over the course of an evening, he was most animated while discussing the Forest Department’s recent acquisition of drones and e-patrolling apps:

“I’m retiring soon and so I wanted to do something that would have a long-lasting influence...you see...we’ll send these [drones] out from our camps and then when we find some fishermen boats, we’ll send out our team to catch them. It’s much more efficient...instead of running here and there, and searching, you can just scan the area and wherever you find the boats, patrolling teams should go there...this saves fuel and saves time.”

Under Mr. Vyas, the Forest Department is pursuing an ever more sophisticated and exclusionary model of “fortress conservation” (see Brockington 2002) and now employs drones, e-patrolling apps, and speedboats alongside an archaic regime of fines and licences to militarise and regulate the forests (Duffy 2014; Lunstrum 2014). To be fair, Mr. Vyas’s own version of “deep ecology” also led him to champion a ban on timber logging that was put in place in the early 2000s. He has also undertaken some actions that are more friendly toward fishers, most notably a politically contentious proposal, just before his retirement, to reform the colonial licences that still govern entry to the forest.<sup>19</sup> His overarching ideology, however, is clear: the forest belongs to the tigers, and the Forest Department exists to protect them.

The full extent to which this principle has been internalized by the Forest Department becomes clear through a closer look at why, exactly, the Forest Department wants to keep fishers out of the forests. There are two main worries. Firstly, the Forest Department is genuinely concerned that, in the course of a tiger attacking a fisher, the tiger could be injured. Fishing boats are unarmed. While forest rangers patrol the creeks with rifles and tranquilizers, fishers most fearsome tool for self-defence is a *laathi*, or a wooden staff, which also serves to steer the boat, push it away from the shore, and gauge the depth of the river. While it is impossible to kill a tiger with a wooden staff, there is a somewhat plausible - if small - chance for potential injury. The second, more powerful fear is that the death of a fisherman might increase the enmity [*shatruta*] between the tiger

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<sup>19</sup> I elaborate on Boat Licence Certificate (BLC) of this chapter, and on the wider politics with fishers’ unions and rights surrounding the BLCs in Chapter 5.

and the people. In particular, when tigers stray into populated islands, which happened periodically, the Forest Department fears a “revenge killing.” This is true despite the fact that “revenge killings” have not taken place in the Sundarbans for over two decades.<sup>20</sup> The rationale for caring about human lives is to protect animal ones.

Despite individual and ideological differences among its staff, the Forest Department is united around an institutional mission that values tigers first. This was not the case until very recently. Its orientation to “protect” the Sundarbans and its megafauna is tied to the rise of the project of conservation in India, and the networks and organisations associated with this project.

### ***Biodiversity Conservation on a Cruise Ship***

One particular experience during my fieldwork made the usually amorphous alliances between the Forest Department and other groups more transparent and tangible. This was at the aforementioned biodiversity conservation conference. The conference was held over three days and two nights on a luxury cruise ship traveling through the Sundarbans. It was funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Japanese government’s foreign aid agency. It was attended by high-ranking bureaucrats from several states in India (Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Assam, Orissa and West Bengal) along with representatives of a number of local conservation NGOs. The only women on board were two Japanese women from the JICA office in Delhi, the wife of one West Bengal bureaucrat, and me. The cruise ship itself was owned by Devali, a company with multiple business interests—to which I return in a moment—including a fleet of luxury tourism yachts and the Goran “Eco-Resort” located in the Green Club compound on Bali Island.

By day, the attendees congregated in the conference hall to give presentations on the various ways the nation’s biodiversity could be preserved. This was mostly through the use of better technology to protect nature. I scribbled down notes from flashy PowerPoint decks on the “modernization of forest management” that promised “fast data retrieval” and “quick and interactive online analysis.” Through JICA funds, everything from planting trees (“e-plantations”) to patrolling (“e-patrolling”) to tracking the criminal

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<sup>20</sup> This neatly turns colonial and postcolonial logic on its head. It was also a matter of grave confusion for the elderly men in the Sundarbans who grew up being encouraged to slay tigers, often against their will, with cash bounties of Rs. 10 [GBP 10 pence] offered to kill tigers. These same men chuckled while narrating how now the state had decided that they could be sentenced for life to jail for attempting to hurt a tiger.

activity of poachers would be digitized to make the Forest Department more efficient. The keynote address was given by Mr. Vyas who appeared via speedboat on the second evening and introduced those gathered to his vision of conservation.

By night, the conference attendees drank whisky and exchanged stories of elephants and tigers from the various national parks they oversaw. There were lots of complaints about illegal fishing in the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans. No one seemed to realise that they were happily chomping on the catch of these very same fishers. All the while the cruise ship meandered through the core area, the “sanctum sanctorum” for the tiger from which all human activity was legally banned. Rather than “deep ecology”, this seemed to be a dual ecology where the Sundarbans was walled off from some people - the poor and those who lived alongside it - but paraded in front of others.

Bonbibi, the forest deity, also made an appearance on board. On the second evening, following the keynote address, the *Bonbibi pala* or theatrical retelling of the Bonbibi mythology was performed.<sup>21</sup> This was an abridged version, catering to tourists, of what in the village is a three-night long enactment [*jatra*] of her origin story. The actors had all been brought from Bali Island by Shomit da - the field officer of APSI - and the same actors performed the *Bonbibi pala* during the tourist season at the Goran Eco-Resort and other tourist lodges on Bali. The show was in Bangla, which made it hard for the visitors to understand, and was mostly ignored by the Bangla-speakers present, who had seen it many times before. At this gathering Bonbibi and her story were reduced to the realm of “folk culture,” introduced by some as a “relic” of bygone traditions and by others as “local superstitions” and seen as pure entertainment with no bearing on the issues at hand of modern conservation or forest governance. The beliefs of the actors, many of whom were also fishers and followed Bonbibi and the *jongoler niyam* (Chapter 2) remained hidden in plain sight.

Bonbibi’s influence on people’s relationship to the forest had no relevance to the group gathered because, in their eyes, the people of the Sundarbans had no legitimate claim on the forest. The consensus was that the purpose of the surrounding environment, and the *raison d’être* of everyone on the cruise ship, was to conserve India’s national pride: the tiger. The legitimacy of the state and the international community’s claim on the Sundarbans is underwritten by the idea that biodiversity is a national and international heritage. Since 1987, when the Sundarbans was declared a national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site, increasing international interest in the region has been accompanied

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<sup>21</sup> Chapter 2 details the enactment of Bonbibi’s story in the village and her origin story.

by funding from the central government, international conservation bodies such as the WWF, the World Bank, and international development agencies like JICA, with a well-defined interest in conserving the remaining wildcats of the world. The tiger of the Sundarbans is a cosmopolitan tiger (Jalais 2010) and needs to be saved as an intergenerational patrimony in need of public protection (Roige and Frigole 2010) for the future of humanity, not merely for the Sundarbans, West Bengal or India.

Mr. Vyas in his PowerPoint presentation explained the various initiatives undertaken to safeguard the tiger. In 2010, proposals to radio collar female tigers began involving researchers and scientists from the Wildlife Institute of India (CSS Project Tiger Report). This overlapped with the first phase of the tiger census operation, involving GPS readings for every pugmark sighting of the tiger. By 2016-2017, the annual tiger census was taking place through a camera trapping technique where cameras were placed in strategic locations to record and count tigers based on their distinct individual stripes. These efforts culminated on International Tiger Day in July 2019, when the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi declared the result of the Tiger Census announcing that “India is now officially one of the biggest and safest habitats of the Royal Bengal Tiger” (Big Cats India 2019). The tiger census is the vehicle through which the Sundarbans delta is broadcast to the state and the international community. In the contemporary context, the delta’s value and identity is disproportionately and curiously linked to just one of the inhabitants of the region: the tiger. This inhabitant has only recently come to afford such royal status, and less than six decades ago in the Sundarbans cash bounties of Rs. 10 [GBP 10 pence] used to be offered by colonial and state administrators to kill tigers.

The conference on the cruise ship was revealing not only in what was said about the tiger, but also what went unsaid. This was particularly true in regards to Devali. Devali brands itself as a model eco-tourism actor in the project of conserving the Sundarbans. Citing efforts by the WWF and the West Bengal Forest Department to wean people from their “forest-dependence”, its website states that it founded the Goran Eco-Resort to support local livelihoods. It appeals to us all to “come be a part of the revolution where tourism will lead to the tiger and forest conservation.” The Goran Eco-Resort on Bali Island did generate a few viable jobs in the village. With six men as full-time staff receiving a salary of Rs. 4,000 [GBP 40] per month, as well as ten to twelve women who worked on a part-time basis for Rs. 1,500 [GBP 15] per month, the lodge was helping support between 20 to 25 households. During a visit to the island, the CEO of Devali mentioned that the lodge was actually running losses to sustain this level of employment.

Most of those employed at the Goran Eco-Resort never did the jungle in the first place. Nevertheless, these households recounted the extreme poverty in all of their households. Employment at the Goran Eco-Resort, provided by Devali, though basic had given their homes a secure source of income. However, the number of households employed was miniscule for an island of 40,000 people, and in no way commensurate to the number of jungle-doers on Bali. The most important thing left unsaid, however, was the threat Devali's main business posed to the entire ecosystem.

Beyond its eco-tourism investments, Devali owns and operates barges and shipping vessels that move oil, coal, chemicals, fertilizer, fly ash and other commodities between Dhakha and Kolkata via the Sundarbans. Inland waterway transport, hugging the Sundarbans forest, poses a direct threat to the fragile ecosystem. The routine operations of these ships -vessels that discharge ballast water, bilge water, and wash their cargo—are highly polluting. A World Bank report states that “without any sort of environmental management in place, this increasing navigation and shipping are multiplying the risk of accidents/spills and regular pollution in Sundarbans” and risking environmental degradation (Bushra 2019: 61-62). The severity of the threat was underscored to me in an interview with a retired employee of the national Port Authority of India, who corroborated that these vessels were “time bombs waiting to explode.” These ships bypass the international pollution checks and safety standards for sea vessels by claiming to operate only in rivers and are therefore at high risk of capsizing. Many have. Accidents routinely take place such as an incident in 2014 when a tanker containing 350,000 litres of heavy furnace oil sank in the Sundarbans rivers and “a thick carpet of oil spread for 20 km up and downstream” (Bushra 2019: 61). The same World Bank report also notes that even when there are no accidents, the impact of ship-induced waves on the mangrove ecosystem creates a massive disturbance on the flow, alluvial banks and sedimentation of the rivers.

As in other parts of the world, the conservation movement, ecotourism industry and related corporate interests have closely allied themselves with the Forest Department in the Sundarbans. A growing body of literature interrogates the relationship between conservation and capitalism and, by extension, the politics of conservation that work within the logics of the market (Brockington and Duffy 2011; Fletcher 2010; West 2016). While eco-tourism is promoted as a green alternative to industrial development, several have offered a critique of this position (Duffy and Moore 2011), arguing that nature-based tourism actually allows “capitalism to identify, open and colonise new spaces in nature”

(Brockington and Duffy 2011: 10-11). On Bali Island, not only was eco-tourism promoted by a big industrial group, the same company's business interests directly threatened the ecosystem. While conservation stakeholders discuss and fund the latest technologies, from drones to e-patrolling apps, to protect the tiger and keep those who do the jungle out of the forest, industrial scale threats are left unspoken and unaddressed.<sup>22</sup>

***Destination East: "The Sundarbans would sell like crazy"***

The conference is not an isolated example of the confluence between big green and big business (Klein 2015; Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). Neither is the Forest Department the only state institution interested in bringing more business to the Sundarbans. Kate was a "VVIP guest" visiting the Sundarbans. A young American woman, she worked at a bespoke boutique travel agency in New York. She had come to participate in the Bengal Global Business Summit (BGBS), part of which involved a campaign by the West Bengal Ministry of Tourism to promote "Destination East" to over 100 tour operators from 30 countries. She was traveling along with 250 other "high-end" travel agents who had been invited to the Sundarbans for two days. The large group had been split up across various "eco-lodges" and other tourist accommodations on several Sundarbans islands. Kate and a few others had been assigned to Bali.

She told me a little about her travel agency and the kinds of holidays she planned for the "super rich." Her travel agency catered to elite clients for whom she helped design specially tailored tour packages and innovative holidays. I asked Kate how her visit had been. She replied with disappointment. There was no doubt that the Sundarbans were beautiful, but after two full days of sitting through a boat safari they hadn't seen a single tiger. In fact none of the other 40-50 boats of visiting high-end tour operators across the forested region had sighted one either. She said, "I was stoked but it's been a bit of a let-down. Don't get me wrong...it has great potential, but the only way I can sell this trip in New York is if they increase their tiger numbers." People in New York, she exclaimed, would pay a fortune to see tigers in the wild. "This is the stuff of movies you know...it is kinda otherworldly" that people live in such proximity to the tiger that it eats them. I nodded. In the way that she phrased it, it really did seem otherworldly. Handing me her

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<sup>22</sup> Chapter 4 develops this argument further. I show how far more existential environmental threats are being ignored while simultaneously imputing blame on "greedy crab collectors" in their fragile wooden *naukas* in a game of what I call "crab antics"



business card, she said that if she could guarantee a tiger sighting to her clients “the Sundarbans would sell like crazy.”

Amongst the fishers, there were all kinds of parallel speculations about the Forest Department’s efforts to increase the tiger population. Over tea in the village bazaar, a group of crab fishers pointed out to me that the number of tourist boats in the Sundarbans had multiplied and that all the tourists wanted to see was a tiger. They speculated that the Forest Department had started breeding tigers or importing them from China. Quoting the number of people who had died recently in the forests, they explained the dire consequences this had and the increased terror the fishers were experiencing. At the time, I remember dismissing these theories as far-fetched. After meeting Kate, I realised there was a real, and powerful, lobby for the Forest Department to do exactly what the fishers feared. Throughout my interactions with Kate and other travel agents, there was very little interest in understanding how tourism, or for that matter breeding more tigers, might impact the people living alongside the forests. Kate, like Mr. Vyas, reveals a passionate love for wildlife, coupled with an implicit understanding that nature is mainly valuable through its consumption by the urban middle-class (see Fletcher and Neves 2012; Vasan 2018; Jalais 2010). The consequences for local people are not part of the calculus of conservation. Local people had also developed variegated stakes in an increase in the tiger population. For example, there were other residents of the Sundarbans—a microscopic minority of tourist guides and tourist boat owners—who unlike their fisher relatives and neighbours also chased after “tiger sightings,” for now their livelihoods depended on being able to show tourists what they had paid a package to come and see, tigers in the wild, the stuff of movies.

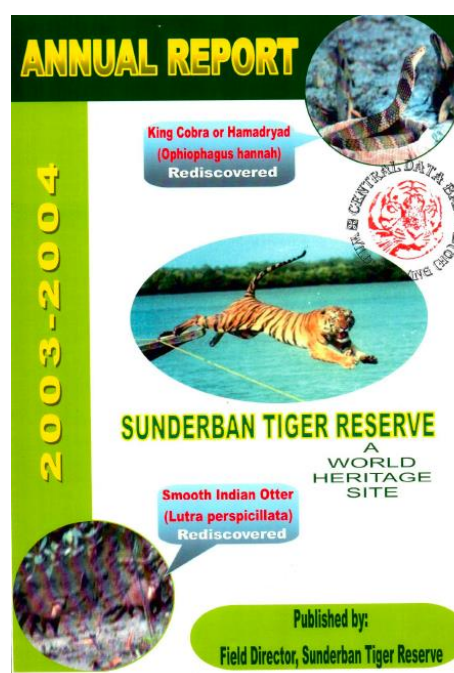
### *The Iconography of Protection*

Another example of the ideological alignment between eco-tourism, conservation and the Forest Department was their common representation of the Sundarbans as a pristine wilderness. This is strikingly apparent in the Forest Department’s Range Offices within the Sundarbans. These offices are the home for Forest Department staff, but some are also stop-off points for tourists. All these Range Offices have the same posters decorating their walls. The most common is of a tiger taking a leap into the river. Others depict the tiger gazing majestically into the camera with a bald eagle flying overhead, or with a spotted deer alongside. The entire Sajnekhali Range Office museum —the main

stop-off point for tourists in the tiger reserve—is dedicated to flora, fauna, and awards received for conservation and biodiversity protection. The tourism industry reproduces and reinforces this iconography. The brochure for one of the cruise ships that operates in the delta invites tourists to consume “the Sundarbans riverine nirvana” and experience “nature at its purest.” During my time in the field, representatives of National Geographic, Discovery Channel, Planet Earth and National Public Radio (USA) passed through Bali Island to create similar images and relay them internationally. Even where their documentation strayed from an exclusive focus on the tiger and portrayed human-nature conflict, the story of the Sundarbans still revolved around the tiger.

These images of flora and fauna are key to understanding how the Sundarbans are valued (Igoe 2017). The message they project is that of a wild, untouched jungle, home to animals, birds and snakes. It is a landscape without people (see Neumann 1998). The few people who do appear in the Sajnekhali Range Office’s museum are undertaking criminal activities. Men in beards and skull caps—clearly indicating that they are Muslim—are shown with a boat full of smuggled wood or cow hide, or in photographs with a slain tiger captioned as “revenge killing.” No media issued by the government or by tourism companies ever includes the photos or faces of average Sundarbans residents. From these images, one would never guess that the mangrove creeks are dotted with thousands of fishing boats and bordered by densely populated villages, not to mention the tourist boats, the Forest Department offices, and commercial shipping vessels.

*Figure 12 The Iconography of the Sundarbans in the Forest Department Annual Report.*



These are just the latest and glossiest images in a much longer history of narrative violence perpetrated against the Sundarbans' people. Annu Jalais (2010) points out that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century colonial records, people of the region made an appearance only after a long list of animals, trees, plants and insects. Colonial travelogues of the Sundarbans, less famous cousins of Joseph Conrad's (1899) *Heart of Darkness*, trafficked in similar tropes. A late 19<sup>th</sup> century American adventurer and sailor, who penned his voyages in a book titled "*The Strange Adventures of Captain Quinton*," offers this description: "It is probably the wildest place on earth, and swarms with wild boars, crocodiles, tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, buffaloes, wildcats, deer, monkeys, serpents and birds" (Quinton 1912: 192). The only mention of the "natives" is in regard to their entreaties to kill a certain cattle-killing tiger, culminating in a scene of utter bedlam with "natives" having surrounded the tiger, blowing horns, "waving tomtoms", and eventually spearing the tiger to death.

This colonial tableau has been inherited by more contemporary fiction on the region. Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*, perhaps the most famous cultural touchstone to the Sundarbans for many Western and urban Indian audiences has a final scene which eerily resembles the one described by Captain Quinton. In this scene, the novel's main characters Piya and Kanai witness Sundarbans villagers gather en masse around a trapped tiger and, to cheers, spear it to death (Ghosh 2004: 248-249). While the characters have a reflective dialogue that confronts the relative value placed on human versus animal lives in the region, it offers no alternative to Captain Quinton's imagery. Several novels in Bangla, by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Manoj Baru and most famously Shib Shankar Mitra in *Sundarbaner Arjan Sardar* (1988), also depict the Sundarbans through tales of intrepid urbanites who have often fantastical adventures with tigers, wild beasts, pirates and forest officials.

This visual discourse carries real consequences. For Mukhopadhyay (2016), the depiction of the region as a "natural wilderness" explains the influential view among many government bureaucrats and "nature lovers" alike that the "Sundarbans can be best developed if left to grow without hindrance (ibid: 42)." It is this development imperative that advertises the Sundarbans for consumption to visiting urban elite, and criminalizes local inhabitants as intruders, rendering them refugees of conservation (Jalais 2007; 2010). It is "premised on a (neo)colonial 'politics of invisibility' by which a land is first emptied of its local people, then readapted as *terra nullius*, and finally seen as a "sacred" wilderness, possessed by no one but virtually belonging to everyone by birth right" (Raimondi 2016:

121). If the Sundarbans belong to the sphere of nature and are a global birth right, then those who do the jungle are easily, even logically branded as criminals. In this way, the dominant iconography and cultural narratives around the Sundarbans perpetuate a form of dispossession through the projection of selective cultural images (West 2016).

### ***The Local Convergences of Global Conservation***

The alignment in ideology and values between the Forest Department, conservation movement, eco-tourism industry, and corporate interests come together at the local level, where several seemingly separate players are represented at the village through the same individual. This has allowed the (re)invention of a local elite that benefits from and espouses similar values as its sponsors.

My first point of entry into the Sundarbans was a compound known in the village as the Green Club. When I arrived, I was surprised to find out that Green Club also housed the field office of the Anti-Poaching Society of India (APSI), the Goran Eco-Resort run by Devali, the house of a well-known Indian bird-watcher, and was the base where members of WWF stayed during their trips to the region. Both physically, and through Shomit da's close relationship with all of these organizations, Green Club brought together the Forest Department, conservation, tourism, and big industry. How did all of these forces converge on a single individual?

Shomit da grew up on Bali Island. According to his own oft-repeated narrative, one he took great pride in narrating at length to outside visitors, journalists, conservationists and philanthropists is his story of becoming a conservationist from having been a poacher. The story is as follows<sup>23</sup>. In his early 20s, he would go for hunts with his uncle and other relatives. Hunting for deer [*boren shikaar*] was common for weddings, consumption and sale in the village. There was a particular day when his hunting group shot a deer while nursing a fawn. The sight of this baby deer with tears in its eyes made his own eyes water. That night he didn't feel like taking his share of the deer meat. He decided to stop going into the jungle for *shikaar*, [hunts] and began working at an electrician's shop in Canning.

One day, through serendipity, he was asked to install a light bulb in the Field Director's (FD) house. At that point in time the Field Director was Mr. Sharma, the same

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<sup>23</sup> The story narrated here is one that Shomit da has written about himself and is published in a magazine. I withhold the publication to protect his identity. It is also a story he has narrated to me and several others that I have re-produced.

bureaucrat from the opening vignette. This was the precise moment when the Forest Department was beginning to enforce “anti-poaching” laws more strictly and was reaching out to hunters—now called poachers—to persuade them to turn toward conservation instead. The Sundarbans has historically had one of the lowest incidences of tiger poaching in the country, but deer hunting [*boren shikaar*] was rampant. The Forest Department did not enforce the law, and in fact forest officials partook in the spoils of the kill, until the early 2000s under growing national and international pressure. In the course of their conversation, Mr. Sharma asked Shomit da to form a group to advocate this new idea of conservation in the village. Shomit da recalls that he didn’t even know the meaning of the word “conservation” at the time. Nonetheless, with Mr. Sharma’s encouragement, he registered a club with a group of men called the “Bali Green Club”

The following year, Belinda Wright, the founder of the national anti-poaching organization Anti-Poaching Society of India (APSI), visited the Sundarbans. APSI was founded with the “specific aim of assisting the enforcement authorities to combat wildlife crime” (Wright 2010: 90). Since its founding in 1994, it has been at the forefront of cataloguing and exposing many thousands of wildlife crimes across India and offering related training to government personnel. Mr. Sharma introduced Belinda to Shomit da and soon after, in the year 2001, decided to open a Field Office on Bali Island with Shomit da installed as the APSI Field Officer. In this capacity, Shomit da was at the forefront of organizing activities ranging from tree plantation drives, awareness drives via film screenings, a “Forestry Week,” healthcare camps and women’s self-help groups. In the first decade of APSI’s relationship with Bali Island, Shomit da rose to fame. He not only represented the Sundarbans at conferences and trainings all over the country, but also at several international conferences from Buenos Aires to Washington where he has received awards for his work and efforts on conservation. Conservation and development organizations all over the world were interested in “local stakeholders,” and as community participation became the “new tyranny” (Cooke and Kothari 2001) of neo-liberal development regimes, individuals such as Shomit da became spokesmen for entire villages, islands and, in his case, the Indian Sundarbans.

In the year 2012-13, Col. Choudhary—who worked with both WWF, APSI and Devali—brokered the partnership between Devali and Shomit da to set up the Goran Eco-Resort on his father’s land. At the time that I was in the field, the majority of APSI activities had waned, and Green Club was primarily regarded as a place where Shomit da ran a “tourism business” [*tourist byapsa*]. Today, he continues to support anti-trespassing

campaigns with the Forest Department (Chapter 4); supervises annual tree-planting drives; he is still the Field Director of APSI; he sits on the board of Devali; and has his own tourist boat which he rents out. He also works hard to liaise with tourists and government bodies interested in generating “alternative livelihoods” for “forest-dependent” communities.

### ***Land, Guns, and Conservation***

The typical transformation of the colonial “poacher turned conservationist”, especially those in Africa (see Anderson and Grove 1987; Mackenzie 1997), is of colonists who transitioned from the “Great White Hunter” into “the Great White Safari Guide and Photographer” (Beinart 1990: 173). While India has many such “penitent butchers,” (ibid) mostly belonging to the upper echelons of society, Shomit da’s story is different from that of colonial *shikaaris*. His story instead represents the fascinating overlap on Bali Island between being landed, owning a gun, deer hunting [*boren shikaar*], and contemporary eco-tourism.

Shomit da comes from a decidedly modest background, but his family was landed and therefore relatively well-off in the local hierarchy of the village. He is *Poundro Kshatriya* and his father was a refugee from Bangladesh who acquired land in the Sundarbans frontier. Property owners lived under the threat of raids from river bandits, pirates and dacoits [*dakaat*]. Landed families therefore all had licenced guns. It was these same men who went on *shikaars* [hunts] out for recreation, pleasure [*shauk*] or joy [*anando*]. What is crucial and often misunderstood is that these *shikaaris* from landed households were a very distinct set of individuals from those who, precisely because they were landless, did the jungle out of need [*aubhav*]. These *shikaaris* also differed in their religious beliefs from those who do the jungle. The erstwhile *shikaaris* of Bali Island do not worship Bonbibi but instead worship goddess Kali—the more powerful and more “violent cosmic deity” (Jalais 2010: 120) – who uncoincidentally has a shrine at Green Club.

There are six tourist lodges on Bali Island, a small number compared to neighbouring islands which have as many as 20 different guest houses. With the exception of one guest house, each of the lodges is managed by or on the land of someone who was once a deer hunter. Many are directly related to Shomit da. In the mid-2000s, all the erstwhile *shikaaris* of Bali Island, through their land and related identity as *shikaaris*, reinvented their livelihoods through conservation and tourism. The major beneficiaries

of this eco-alliance were the landowners on which the lodges were built, and new conservation elites like Shomit da. Duffy (2008) notes that eco-tourism and the “eco” in it are often seen as the “catch-call solution to the complex problems of reconciling the needs of the poor local communities with the creation and maintenance of protected areas” (ibid: 3). In practice, the veneer of community-based conservation that collaborates with “local stakeholders” rarely benefits the majority of the community but – as on Bali – ends up entrenching local hierarchies by creating new kinds of conservation elites (see Peluso and Watts 2001; Neumann 1997).



*Figure 13 Pink plots of land are current tourist lodge properties, who happened to be erstwhile owners of guns.*

The *shikaaris* reinvention did not, however, come without cost. In the Forest Department’s drive to stop poaching, someone had to take the fall. In many cases, the men who had accompanied the actual *shikaaris* - to row the boat, stand guard, skin and transport the carcass, and who also enjoyed the adventure and earned a portion of the meat - were framed with poaching cases. Several people who I met, who had spent time in jail, or are fighting court cases for poaching were not the individuals who owned guns and initiated *shikaars*, but rather the poorer, landless men who accompanied these gun owners.

The story projected by Shomit da to visitors and repeated by conservationists and Forest Department officials does not reflect the link between land ownership, gun

ownership, and success in the region's newest livelihoods, or the miscarriage of justice against the so-called "illegal hunters" [*chaura shikaaris*]. Instead, Shomit da and others I met in the Forest Department hold that poachers were and continue to be the same people who do the jungle. This more complex story, and its ties to historical and local village politics, took time to uncover. Most visitors never scratch below the surface, especially because of Shomit da's current stature. He was the local patron, the village big man, with the money, power and support of the Forest Department, APSI, his eco-tourism business, and Devali. Shomit da's well-packaged brand as the "poacher turned conservationist" conceals more complicated roots, and the specific web of institutional and political interests behind him. It overwrites entirely the very different values and politics of life expressed by those who actually do the jungle.

Amidst the entangled alliances of conservation, I now introduce the main protagonists of the thesis: those who do the jungle. Before exploring how current conservation practices endanger their lives and work in an already dangerous forest, I first describe what crab collecting and honey collecting entail.

## **"Doing the Jungle": Fishing, Crab Collecting, and Gathering Honey**

As mentioned, doing the jungle [*jongol kora*] includes fishing, crab collecting and gathering honey.<sup>24</sup> However, at the time of my fieldwork, crab collecting predominated.<sup>25</sup> This was because Sundarbans mud crabs were in high demand in China and were therefore the most lucrative commodity. Some crab collectors also went to collect honey during the annual honey collecting season. While crab collecting is done by both men and women, honey collecting [*mahanley*] is work that only men do.

Doing the jungle is closely intertwined with the lunar calendar. The *bhora kotaal* or spring tide occurs twice each lunar month. It is during the "spring tide"—during the new moon and full moon when the water levels are higher—that the crab collectors venture into the creeks. The fishing season lasts for nine months per year. For the remaining three months the forest is "closed," and entry is prohibited during what the

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<sup>24</sup> Two decades ago, Sundarbans residents were also permitted to cut dry wood to use as fuel for cooking in their homes. Wood cutting, along with the Forest Department's timber logging, was put end to in the early 2000s. Doing the jungle two decades ago would also include cutting dry fuel wood.

<sup>25</sup> There were a few households that caught fish instead of crabs. Fishing boats use a different set of equipment and nets, and the value chain of some fish is distinct from what is described for crabs in this thesis.



Forest Department designates as the “scientific” breeding season for fish and crabs. The majority of crab collectors respect this prohibition, primarily because of the risk from storms and cyclones. During this period some leave the Sundarbans to find seasonal work in other parts of Bengal, others work as daily wage labourers on other people’s paddy fields in the village, and some occasionally go into the forest.

There are two ways of collecting crabs. Collectors can go into the forest close to their homes and return to the village the same day. More commonly, crab collectors go on seven to ten day trips on a small wooden boat known as a *nauka* which allows them to traverse further afield into the unending maze of mangrove creeks. On average, they spend around half their time living on the boat during the fishing season. The rest of the time they are in the village, tending to their homes, cultivating vegetable patches around their homesteads [*bhite*], hanging out in the teashops of the village bazaar, playing cards, watching cockfights, doing wage labour on the land of others, and preparing for their next trip into the jungle. Crab collectors appreciate this flexibility. It allows them to pursue work but simultaneously be close to their family and the social rhythms of festivals and weddings.

Before setting off for longer trips into the mangrove creeks, crab collectors load the boat with all the rations needed to survive for a week in the jungle. This includes vegetables, cooking oil, spices, over 100 litres of drinking water in large plastic barrels, old *saris* stitched together to use as blankets [*kanthas*], a torch, a stick [*laathi*], and usually one spare cotton towel [*gamcha*]. Collectors take few personal belongings on their boat. They think of themselves as ascetics [*sadhus*], an aspect that I return to in detail in Chapter 2, and live frugally while in the jungle. The few possessions that they carry onto their boat are arranged with meticulous neatness since this small space will act as a home for three people for more than a week. The most important possession is their Boat License Certificate (BLC)—hired for Rs. 35,000-40,000 [GBP 350-400] from “big men” in the village or commission agents—which is wrapped in a polythene bag, and carefully tucked away on the topmost bamboo slat of the hood of the boat.

The boat [*nauka*] is the width of a single mattress and at most double that length, with tapered edges at the front and back like a large canoe. For shelter, a hood is created with bent bamboo covered with plastic, and it is under this that the three people fall asleep at night, sardine-style, the two on the sides with their heads alongside the feet of the person in the middle. It is always a squeeze. It is on this boat that they spend the day with a *don* and *chara* - line and bait of salted fish - hooking crabs. A forking branch with a net

in between, or *jalti*, is used to scoop up the crabs as the line is pulled back into the boat. Aside from the fact that the string is nylon, not cotton, technologies of crab collecting have not changed for generations. Under the wooden planks of the boat, on top of which the crab collectors sit, lies a hollow space where captured crabs are deposited and stored alive.



*Figure 14 Crab collecting with a line and bait.*

After an entire day of collecting crabs, several boats anchor together in the middle of a broader river creek to spend the night. In the evenings, crab collectors give each other suggestions and warnings, talking at length about the particular bark of a deer, a birdcall, footsteps in the jungle or sightings of fresh pugmarks. Conversations are rarely about village matters which are purposefully ignored on the river (Chapter 2). Cell phones, on the first few days when they still have charge, play Bengali tunes. With the smell of mustard oil in the air, the river turns into a community whose intimacy emerges from working together in a difficult terrain. Often neighbouring boats contain strangers, but it was thought that the jungle equalized differences, and even strangers are treated like kin. The jungle-doers repeatedly emphasized to me that there is no discrimination [*bhedbhav*] based on religion, caste or gender in the jungle.<sup>26</sup> Much like the rope that twines through

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<sup>26</sup> I found this to be true for religion and caste but gender roles, it seemed to me, remained the same on the boat and in the village. If there were three men on the boat, one of them would rotate to do the cooking, but if one of the collectors was a woman, she would do the cooking on all nights.

their boats, and that will hold them together through the night, the life of the jungle [*jongoler jeebon*] creates deep bonds. These bonds are between collectors, with other fishing boats, but also with forest rangers (Chapter 3). They imply a shared understanding of the sounds, smells and movements of animals, birds, spirits [*pret*], ghosts [*bhoot*], the tides of the river and the wind. Crab collectors understand each other well.

Many of the same individuals who work as crab collectors for nine months of the year also collect honey. Honey collecting is seasonal and happens during March and April when the flowers of the forests blossom. Groups of ten to 14 men, known as *maulis*, go into the mangrove forests for a period of two weeks to collect honey. Honey collecting is much more dangerous than crab collecting or fishing, where one can remain on the boat. Collecting honey involves walking the forest floor with its lurking tigers. The common saying goes that “searching for honey is like searching for the tiger” [*modbu kboja mainey bhag kboja*].

The English word risk, pronounced as “rix”, was constantly used to describe this work. Because it requires both immense bravery and a deep understanding of the forest, it is also thought to require greater courage [*shabaus*] than other forest work. Many who collect crabs will not have the requisite courage and will sit out the honey collection season. Because it is more dangerous, the rules of the jungle for honey collection are much stricter than they are for crab collecting or fishing.



Figure 15 Honey collectors measuring out honey to sell to the Forest Department.

In the case of crabs and fish, the catch is sold to middlemen known as *kehoti maliks* who take this catch to auctioneering centres in Canning, the closest town, or onward to export houses in Kolkata.<sup>27</sup> In the case of honey, *maulis* are required by law to sell the honey back to the Forest Department Cooperative, which then resells it to multinational companies such as Dabur. The rate at which the Forest Department buys the honey is below market price, leading many collectors to illegally sell their hard-earned honey on the “open market” [*kehullaey bikri*].

### ***Colonial Licences, Futile Fines, and “Stealing One’s Way Through”***

Where the first half of this chapter focused on the ideologies and alliances that underly conservation in the Sundarbans, I now turn to how conservation is experienced by those who do the jungle. Current conservation policies and practices generate tremendous hardship in an already dangerous forest and make the work of fishing even riskier.

The bluntest way in which the current conservation regime has sought to shape fishers’ use of the forest is through the Wildlife Protection Act’s (WLPA) divisions of core, buffer and sanctuary in 1972.<sup>28</sup> To enforce these divisions, the Forest Department deploys a number of tools of control and surveillance. The most important dates back to the year 1923 when, under British governance, a “Certificate of Registration and Measurement of Boats” was issued for boats cutting timber from the forest. These certificates required the exact length, width, and depth of the boat, and its wood-carrying capacity in *maunds*, which was the unit of measurement in British India. Despite the intervening century, and a ban on cutting wood, no administration has been able to update these Boat License Certificates (BLCs). Instead, they have been refashioned to act as permits for fishing and crab collecting.

There are major problems with this system. First, because the licenses have not been renewed in generations, no genuine fisher has a fishing license in his or her name. Most licenses are controlled by “big men.” This makes any attempt to reform the system politically contentious. Since 1923, the first attempt to reissue BLCs to genuine fishers was in 2017, but the issue was quickly politicised by BLC owners, many of whom are

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<sup>27</sup> In Chapter 4 we learn about the value chain of Sundarbans mud crabs in more detail.

<sup>28</sup> Discussed in the Introduction.

powerful individuals (Chapter 5). Everyone is aware of this blatant injustice but no one, especially the Forest Department, has the political will to change the status quo.

Those who do the jungle therefore must rent the BLCs for exorbitant sums of money – if they can. There is far less supply than demand: today, the number of active BLCs is 924. This leads as many as 140,000 fishers<sup>29</sup> (Ghosh 2017; see Chacraverti 2015) to go into the buffer area without a BLC. Many of these are fishers who come and go [*jawa asha*] from the jungle on a daily basis. They try to hide from patrol boats, but when they get caught they face the greatest harassment. Often their fishing nets or crab collecting lines are confiscated.

On Bali and neighbouring islands, it is a nine to fourteen hour boat journey to the buffer area where fishing is legally permitted. Not a single fisher on Bali Island went to the buffer area to fish. It was far away and the rivers that needed to be crossed were too treacherous for their fragile boats. Instead, thousands of people went into the jungle across from their homes into the Sajnekhali Wildlife Sanctuary and the core area to which they were legally prohibited from entering. This leads to the second, unofficial use of the BLCs. While fishing is legally prohibited in these areas, the informal rules permit BLC holders to fish there, although they are still subject to fines and frequent harassment. My attempts to find a single legal fisher soon became a joke in the village where I was based: “Give up trying to find them...we’ve told you so many times they don’t exist, we all go *chuuri korey* [illegally].” *Chuuri korey* literally means, “stealing one’s way through,” and the entire system of fishing is based on a public secret of trespassing. Illegality has been incorporated (Anderson 2014) rather systematically whereby there is a clear distinction, and widespread awareness among fishers and state officials alike, of what is in fact the formal law and the informal rule.

To see the BLC license-permit raj in practice, take the example of Prashanto and Dhiren. They were eight and eleven years old, respectively, when they went into the jungle with their fathers for the first time. They have been doing the jungle for as long as they can remember. They rent a BLC from a man who is a schoolteacher. From their homes on the river’s edge, the schoolteacher’s home is more than a two-hour walk inland. One afternoon after lunch at Dhiren’s home, he joked with Prashanto, “Do you think the

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<sup>29</sup> It is very hard to arrive at an exact number of fishing households, part time or full-time. Not only because ways of making a living keep changing, but also because there are many kinds of fishers in the region—those that fish on the banks of the river are different from those who do the jungle. The Forest Department Officials could not provide a concrete figure for the number of households that do the jungle on a regular basis. Chacraverti (2015) in his excellent monograph, estimates the number to 144,171 “active fishers” (ibid: 30). He arrives at this number from the Department of Sundarbans Affairs.

schoolteacher [*mastermoshoi*] has ever sat on a boat [*nauka*] in his life?” Prashanto, laughing, replies, “It is better he doesn’t as it might just drown with his weight.” Gesticulating with his hands, making semi-circular movements around his own belly, Prashanto enacts a fat, doddering schoolteacher trying to row a *nauka*. The two men began to laugh uproariously, but all too quickly this light moment passed and Dhiren’s eyes were filled with piercing rage. Much more seriously, Dhiren explains that this schoolteacher, who lives in a brick house, has one of the highest salaries in the village, will receive a lifelong pension, and has not one but two BLCs, one in his name and the other in the name of his wife. Dhiren says: “I’ll bet my life that this man, sitting on two *resties* [BLCs] can’t do a single day’s work in the jungle. If he does even a few hours in the jungle the skin on his face will turn like the skin on his feet....and we men over and above our broken homes [*bhangha baadi*] and the daily risks and a pension from nobody have to pay him Rs. 40,000 [GBP 400] every season. And then who does the Forest Department fine? Not him, but us. What law is this?” There’s a long silence, one that captures a very long injustice.

To rent a BLC is to take a first step into a vortex of debt. Crab collecting requires a large up-front investment. Credit is required for renting the BLC; buying food supplies for the boat known as the *chaal chalan*; stocking the bait or *chara*; renting the *nauka*, as often the boat doesn’t belong to the fishers either; and an allowance for the inevitable fines that need to be paid. All told, the cost of fishing amounts to Rs. 100,000 [GBP 1,000] for a season lasting nine months. Men like Dhiren and Prashanto live a hand-to-mouth existence. For households that usually run on Rs. 4,000-5,000 a month [GBP 40-50] this is too large an amount for any three fishers to have lying around idly at home. This money has to be borrowed in advance [*dadon*] and is usually done so from a middleman [*khoti maliks*] involved in the buying and re-selling of the catch. Often the BLC, too, is rented out via middlemen who act as brokers between BLC owners and fishers. When one rents a BLC from a middleman or takes a *dadon* from him, the implicit agreement is that the boat [*nauka*] has to sell the catch back to the same middleman no matter the market price. This increased monetization of commodity exchanges and social relationships represent a broader phenomenon of “neo-bondage” as documented in the work of Breman, Guerin and Prakash (2009). Dhiren and Prashanto, like hundreds of others on Bali and neighbouring islands, don’t have other sources of credit, and are trapped into these deeply exploitative loans.

In order to extricate oneself from the relationship of dependence with *khoti maliks* and commissions agents [*adatdars*] so as to be able to sell one’s catch more freely, gradually



crab collectors have begun to borrow from neighbours and village money lenders [also owners of big shops in the village]. The food supplies and bait are bought on a credit basis [*baaki*] from stores in the village bazaar. This amount is repaid at the end of the year when shops close their credit accounts [*haal katha*] and expect the repayment of all credit. This system of credit and repayment is not just limited to those who do the jungle, but applies to everyone—farmers, schoolteachers, health workers, daily wage labourers—in the village. The village credit system resembles a formal credit system in that those who are least financially secure are the least likely to get large amounts of credit. Because working in the jungle is seen as fairly unpredictable work—with the possibility of a great catch on the one hand, but ruin at the hands of a tiger, a storm, or the confiscation of one's BLC by a forest ranger on the other—financing fishing trips is often a challenge.

Beyond the BLC, the Forest Department deals with the thousands of daily trespassers by incorporating illegality into a revenue stream through an arcane system of fines. When one gets caught in the core area or sanctuary with a BLC, the ranger will levy a Compounding Offence Report. The first time one is caught the fine amount is Rs. 500 [GBP 5], the second time it is Rs. 300 [GBP 3] and the third time Rs. 1,150 [GBP 11.5]. If one is caught too many times, the BLC is confiscated. Once the BLC is confiscated the fisher has to go to the Range Office, usually an entire day's trip away from the village, to try to retrieve the license. Often the ranger will ask the individual to come back another day, forcing him or her to miss an entire fishing cycle. Whenever the BLC is returned another payment must be made to retrieve it.

These “compounding offence” fines are not only arbitrary, but once again hark back to the colonial period and make little logical sense today. The colonial laws understood compounding offences as a tax for the fuel wood that was taken from the forest. Today when the imperative of the Forest Department is for conservation rather than to generate revenue, it is unclear what purpose fines serve rather than to extort money from the poorest fishers. The fines are not bribes. They are paid later at the Range Office rather than to the ranger who catches the fishing boat. The Forest Department thinks of these fines as a deterrent to illegal fishing. However, both rangers and senior level bureaucrats acknowledge that the fine amounts, though not insignificant, are too small to prevent fishers from trespassing. At the same time, the revenue raised is not furthering the cause of conservation. This revenue was miniscule compared to the millions showered on the tiger by state, central government, and international organisations. In the words of the Deputy Field Director of the Forest Department,

“There is no shortage of funds in the Sundarbans. Thanks to this royal tiger whatever budget we send gets sanctioned by the central government.” Fines, like the BLCs, were merely a tool through which fishers could be stopped, harassed and extorted by the Forest Department. Illegality is acknowledged and both the fishers and the ecosystem continue to suffer.

### ***A Crab Ban***

Alongside the regime of illegality, with the BLCs at its centre, another strategy that the Forest Department uses to manage the crab collectors are blanket bans. This happened twice during my time in the field. The first, during the winter of 2017, was triggered by six jungle-doers having been killed by tigers over the span of the four preceding weeks. The Forest Department panicked. While all but one of these deaths occurred in the inviolate core area, and would therefore go unaccounted in official tallies, news of deaths spread fast. When local journalists get wind of them, senior bureaucrats have to face the wrath of activists from both sides – animal advocates angry about the violation of the core area, and human rights advocates protesting the loss of life.

In this context, and to demonstrate a response, the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve headquartered in Canning sent out a notification to all the Range Offices in January 2017 ordering a blanket ban on crab collecting. Since the months of December and January, leading up to the Chinese New Year, are the months when crabs command the highest prices (Chapter 4), the ban represented a devastating prospective blow to the crab collectors. This short period was the time when they could earn enough money to pay off debts, finance their fishing expenditures and save for the year ahead.

The consequences of the crab ban were the opposite of what was intended. Men and women continued to go into the forest but did so even more terrified of an encounter with the Forest Department. This heightened fear led them into ever more marginal creeks deeper in the jungle. “It is not the tiger that is killing us, it is the fear of being caught by the Forest Department that pushes us into the mouth of the tiger” said Mrinal da and many other crab collectors. He, like everyone else, was angered by the ban because “regardless of whether they give us the crab pass or not...I still have to feed the family somehow.” This ban was repeated in July.

The Forest Department’s decrees pushed the crab collectors into riskier behaviours. This outcome fits with the larger literature where bans that render something



illegal, but can't be fully enforced and do not address the underlying problems, create more harm (De Genova 2002; Andersson 2014; De Leon 2015; Goffman 2014). Deconstructing terms such as "legality" and "illegality" (De Genova 2002), research on the Mexico-US border and several other borders, captures an exactly analogous phenomenon. De Leon (2015) shows how changes to US border policy such as erecting fences and ramping up border security pushed migrants to attempt ever-more dangerous desert crossings, and sent migrant deaths skyrocketing while doing nothing to reduce the volume of migration itself. The economics of similar such bans are explored in "The Economics of Child Labor" by Kaushik Basu (1998), who shows that a partially enforceable ban on child labour can have unintended consequences that may worsen the labour conditions and kind of work undertaken by the very children the ban is trying to protect.

In the Sundarbans, the extended ban resulted in heightened fear, more risk and violence. After a month where the Forest Department refused to allow crab collecting, hundreds of fishers convened at the Sajnekhali Range Office in protest. Verbal fights broke out, windows were broken, and a ranger was injured. The crab ban was lifted under duress. The forest rangers attributed this dispute to opportunistic politicians stirring up the fishers. In contrast, the fishers viewed this altercation as resistance against the arbitrary injustice of the senior bureaucrats [*sahibs*] of the Forest Department. The Forest Department's own policies not only antagonized the crab collectors, they did so to such an extent that they sparked organised political solidarity and resistance.

## **Protection that Endangers:**

This chapter presented the ways in which the Forest Department, through its leaders and rhetoric, values the forest through the prism of the tiger. The Forest Department is not alone. Ideology and investment underpin the alliance between the Forest Department, conservation movement, eco-tourism industry, and corporate interests. This alliance projects a specific iconography and narrative of the Sundarbans that commodifies its natural assets while dispossessing its people through rhetoric and representation (West 2016). This abstract alliance is embodied, at the local level, in particular groups and individuals, and creates opportunities for local elites in the village to reinvent their livelihoods through eco-tourism and conservation.

I also showed the lived reality of this conservation regime from the perspective of those who do the jungle. Zones of illegality are arbitrarily policed through the BLC licenses, an accompanying regime of fines, and equally arbitrary crab bans. This creates an environment of fear and hostility, and mires the fishers in cycles of debt without actually addressing the underlying motivations for the fishers to do the jungle in the first place. These conservation practices also generate further risk.

This is a political choice. While conservation is the chief imperative in the Sundarbans, what and who are protected is partial and selective. The discourse of protection glosses an old form of exploitation and structural violence in the region (Sivaramakrishnan1995). Conservation and tourism dollars have merely replaced traditional timber revenue and introduced new configurations of allies. While these alliances pin blame and focus their efforts on combating impoverished fishers, the structures and politics that determine who or what is not conserved remain invisible and unchallenged. I now turn to a wholly different way to value the Sundarbans, and ask how those who do the jungle relate to the forest. Their ideas of what to conserve lie at the heart of my thesis.

## Chapter 2

### Rules of the Jungle: Steps Toward Forest Governance

**Jungle:** Etymology: From Sanskrit, *Jangala*

“Uncultivated waste; a wild, tangled mass. Also, a place of bewildering complexity or confusion; a place where the ‘law of the jungle’ prevails; a scene of ruthless competition, struggle, or exploitation; the luxuriant and often impenetrable growth of vegetation.”

-Oxford English Dictionary

“...it begins in the place where so many of the best and the oldest stories do: in the woods.”

-Paul Kingsnorth, *Aboreal*

Sandip da, a married man in his late fifties, has spent his entire adult life doing the jungle, he primarily collects crabs and honey. His father had eight *bhigas*<sup>30</sup> of land—a substantial amount in the context of the Sundarbans—and as a result Sandip da grew up in a farming [*chaashi*] household. Like practically every home in the Sundarbans, the household had weathered years of extreme poverty, and so he dropped out of school to help his father cultivate paddy. Years later, he insisted on marrying Asha boudhi, the daughter of a Bangladeshi refugee from the Baaspuri<sup>31</sup> community. Because she was not from his family’s Mednapuri community, his father disowned him and his love marriage. For two decades father and son did not speak to each other, and Sandip da received no inheritance. His father-in-law, landless and much poorer than his own father, came to the Sundarbans during the partition of India with nothing but the “clothes on his body” and survived by doing the jungle. It was with him, some 30 years ago, that Sandip da learned how to fish, collect crabs and gather honey. Everything he has been able to provide for his large family has been through working in the forest.

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<sup>30</sup> 2.6 acres

<sup>31</sup> Both Sandip da and Asha boudhi belong to two different Scheduled Caste (SCs) communities. He is *Namasudra* and she is from the *Poundro Khoitro* community.

Sandip da and Asha boudhi's one-room mud house is on the eastern edge of Bali Island, an area called "five mouths" or *panchamukhani* for the five different directions the river is thought to flow around the island. Their home is surrounded by paddy fields on two sides and in front by a heavily eroding embankment lined with a dozen wooden fishing boats that belong to Sandip da's neighbours. The home has few assets: a small TV hooked up to a solar panel, a radio that no longer works, a cell phone and a bicycle.

On one occasion, having had just returned from a week-long trip collecting crabs in the mangrove creeks, Sandip da spoke to me about his relationship to the forest. He said,

"It is strange [*atbhut*] but one doesn't think of the family, of your children or wife...there is a certain purity of mind with which you have to go into *Maa'r khomar* [the forest]. When we are in the jungle we become like renunciators [*sadhus*]. It is important to take only that which you need, for she forbids you to be greedy [*lobh korbey na*]. We must go empty handed into her jungle."

Asha boudi, while deftly removing a pot of rice from the mud stove and pouring off the excess water, added:

"I too have to live like an ascetic [*shonyasi*] when he goes into *Maa'r Khomar* [the forest]....If you had come to the house while your dada [referring to Sandip da] was collecting honey [*mahanley*] I wouldn't have given you a place to sit or offered anything for you to eat or drink....They have gone to beg [*bhikka khotte gachey*], and so, you see, we ourselves have to live like beggars [*bhikkhu motun*] at home. It is risky work [*rixser kaay*], and so we have to follow the rules to stay safe [*bechey rakhaar niyam*]. There are many rules of the jungle [*jongoler niyam*]....if I begin explaining them to you, night will fall [before I can finish]."

What was *Maa'r khomar*? It referred to the forest but was layered with implicit meaning. Who was the "she" that forbade Sandip da from being greedy? Why did the two of them—husband and wife—think of themselves as beggars going into the jungle "empty handed"? What exactly were these voluminous "rules to stay safe" in the jungle?

I first unravel the "rules of the jungle", an intricate set of observances followed by those who do the jungle and their households. Taken together, the "rules of the jungle" provide the ethical foundation for the jungle-doers to organise and coordinate their relationship to the forest commons. They stand in direct contrast to the values espoused by the conservation movement and its allies from Chapter 1 and enforced through the laws and governmentality of the Forest Department. If the Forest Department

“management” plans are predicated on patrolling the mangrove creeks for illegal fishing boats, with a regime of fines, licences and bans on livelihoods, there is another way in which the forest is governed. In order to understand this simultaneous form of governance, I introduce the deity, Bonbibi, that presides over the forest and is the source of the rules of the jungle or *jongoler niyam*. Her annual *pūjo*, a religious prayer ceremony, is celebrated by Hindus and Muslims alike, along with a theatrical public enactment of her origin story, known as a *jatra*, that takes place in the village bazaar. These gatherings educate the community about the *jongoler niyam*, but are also spaces in which people reflect on, interpret and re-interpret the rules [*niyams*]. They catalyse conversations in homes and in tea stalls about shared virtues and vices, reinforcing but also rewriting existing beliefs. The morals of Bonbibi’s stories are fluid, changing according to the times as well as one’s own position in life.

Alongside how *jongoler niyam* are renegotiated, I also pay attention to their inadequacies, and the inequalities they promote. The *jongoler niyam* like many moral injunctions are hard to follow and are often manipulated or ignored in inter-community conflicts between fishers. They give way to already existing jealousies, feuding, and internal politics, exacerbated, at times, in the face of increased competition due to the globalisation of the crab supply chain (Chapter 4) and new technologies of surveillance by the Forest Department (Chapter 3). Within the household, the *niyams* often serve to limit the freedom and behaviour of women (also Chapter 6).

While the *jongoler niyam* are by no means flawless, some of the main “rules” wield enormous influence in how the resources of the forest are used and managed by those who do the jungle themselves. I challenge their usual relegation to the realm of religion, culture or ethics, and argue that Bonbibi’s stories comprise steps toward governance. The values of those who do the jungle provide a vision of forest governance that, while replete with its own shortcomings, is a distinct alternative to coercive conservation laws.

## **Divine Governance: Ruling Over the Economic, Political and Social**

The relationship between religious beliefs and ecological ethics has been explored in scholarship re-visiting animism (Bird-David 1999; Ingold 2000), as well as in relation to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism (Grim and Tucker 2014). In the context of South Asia, several scholars have attempted to think through the connections between religion, ethics, and landscape (see Guha and Gadgil 1995; Gold 2002; Van Horn

2006). Writing about “ethics of nature”, Sivaramakrishnan notes that the “current moment in India seems filled with efforts to consider the looming question of how moral and ethical worlds are formed and change as people interact with or imagine the landscapes in which they live” (Sivaramakrishnan 2015: 1264). In several parts of the world, as in India, “contemporary struggles over nature conservation...[and] debates over inclusive and culturally sensitive economic and social developments are infused with ethical concerns” (ibid 1265). It is well known that particular landscapes in India are given divine associations (Kinsley 1988: 223), a phenomenon referred to by some as a “sacred geography” (Ecke 2012) or “geopiety” (Khanna 1995). *Adivasi* or indigenous communities living in close proximity to forests and rivers are said to have a “moral ecology” (Apfell-Marglin and Parajuli 2000: 311). In Nepal, Ben Campbell (2013) writes of an “environmental personhood.”

Other anthropologists of South Asia have pushed beyond the ethical potential of religious beliefs and, following a Hocartesian<sup>32</sup> way of thinking (Sahlins 2017), argued for the political potentiality of religious ethics and practices. This body of scholarship recognizes that deities, ghosts, jinns, spirits across South Asia govern peoples’ lives, and argues that theories of governance—or the power over life—isn’t restricted to the secular or bureaucratic state. Divine forms of contemporary governance have been taken up by Gold and Gujar (1989); Bhargupati Singh (2015) and Anand Taneja (2018), the latter two, though in distinct ways, draw on Carl Schmitt’s notion that the idea of the modern state comes from “secularized theological concepts” (Schmitt 1985: 36).

Taneja (2018) tells the story of working-class residents of Muslim and Dalit neighbourhoods in Delhi who come to the Mughal ruins of Firoz Shah Kotla to petition jinn-saints for justice in the face of state amnesia (ibid: 55). He analyses this practice in terms of the “political theology of Indo-Islamic Kingship” which he terms as a form of intimate sovereignty (ibid: 4). Singh defines the life-giving and death dealing power of Thakur Baba, a *devta* or god, as “a political theology of sovereignty as composed of relations of force and contract, at varying thresholds of life” (ibid: 55). Singh catalyses the concept of political theologies in relation to the various shrines, saints and gods in the landscape of Shahabad, Rajasthan where he conducts his research to move beyond the way in which this concept has been steeped in European political thought but also to surpass the dichotomy of the religious from the secular.

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<sup>32</sup> These scholars do not trace their own intellectual genealogy to Hocart.

Jonathan Parry's essay (1998), written as part of a centenary tribute to Marcel Mauss, explores the concept of the "sacral polity." Shah (2010), writing about the Mundas of Tapu village in Jharkand, defines the "sacral polity" as a situation in which the political, economic and religious are collapsed into a single conceptual realm. For the Mundas, the Indian State is an exploitative entity which they aggressively desire to keep at a distance. They find more "democratic" meaning in the *pahan* and *paenbharra*, parts of their indigenous system of governance which Shah argues constitutes a "sacral polity" that needs to be understood through a particular cosmology in which the secular and the sacred are indivisible. "The *parha* was imagined as an alternative, authentic, *adivasi* political vision" (Shah 2010: 56) that promoted egalitarianism, consensus in decision making, and mutual reciprocity and aid (ibid).

This chapter, and thesis, also argues for the inseparability of politics, economics, and religious ethics in defining one's relation to the surrounding ecology. However, unlike the Mundas of Jharkhand, fishers were not interested in rejecting the state. For example, every household availed of several state welfare schemes, and even cultivated social relationships [*byabohar*] with forest rangers that oscillated between strictness, but also friendship, conviviality, and mutual care (as I explore at length in Chapter 3). The fishers in the Sundarbans are constantly reconciling and negotiating different and overlapping modalities of governance, including the conservation laws and licensing regimes described in the previous chapter, everyday relationships with forest rangers, and the "rules of the jungle" laid down by Bonbibi.

My interests in how fishers reconcile different forms of governance is perhaps most closely aligned with the work of Laura Bear (2015). Writing about those who work as pilots, ship makers and bureaucrats on the Hooghly river and the port of Kolkata, she argues that "economic governance is rich with ethical meanings that both sustain and challenge the extraction of value from the river" (Bear 2015: 22). The productivity of the river, as well as the productivity of labour, are framed for bureaucrats, river workers and entrepreneurs through ritual mythologies and the worship of Ma Ganga, the goddess of the Ganges, and Lord Vishwakarma, the god of iron. For Bear, the mythology of popular Hinduism, and the ritual associations of the river, are as crucial a lens with which to understand austerity as sovereign debt, economic liberalization and speculative logics. In short, she argues that a new economics of governance would have to take into consideration the popular, religiously informed ethics of productivity (ibid: 17).

Following Bear, I explore the political implications of divine governance in a particular landscape, and also show how these divine forms of governance are altered, undermined and at times oppressive.



*Figure 16 Bonbibi, her brother Shah Jongoli, Dukhey the little boy whose life she saves on the right and Gazi the mediator on the far left.*

## **Rules of the Jungle**

The word *jongol* literally means the jungle, and in the context of the Sundarbans includes rivers and creeks interspersed among the tidal maze of sandbanks forested by many different kinds of mangrove trees. The word *niyam* in both Bengali and Hindi translates as “rules” and signifies more broadly “moral observances”. There are many rules of the jungle but their essence can be grasped through three related proscriptions. First, and most crucially, one was meant to practice restraint in the jungle, to enter and use its resources out of necessity rather than greed. Second, one was to go into the jungle as a mendicant [*bhikṣu*] or ascetic [*sadhu*] and practice frugality both in the jungle and at home. Finally, one ought to go into the jungle with a pure mind and full concentration.

***Restraint: “Take only what you need”***



The most important ethic around doing the jungle was to enter it only out of need, as opposed to greed [*lobh*.] Those who do the jungle had sophisticated notions of sufficiency and excess, as I explore in depth in Chapter 4. This moral code, embodied in an ethic of restraint, was expressed to me through a variety of stories and anecdotes. Each of them ended with the importance of “not being greedy.” For example, Sandip da shared this anecdote from the previous honey collecting season:

“A group will walk a path past a huge honeycomb and won’t see it...it is not like they are blind, but in the jungle, no one else will get that which is not yours. It will be yours if it is meant to be. So many times so many honeycombs are just walked past by people, why don’t they get it?...Because it is not for them to have, it is for someone else...I have seen this myself several times...this is *jongoler niyam*.”

Other honey collectors often told variations of the same story. These stories were narrated to convey that Bonbibī had her own logic about what one was intended to receive. No amount of competition or individual effort mattered. What one was entitled to was preordained. Bonbibī urged each individual and household to reflect on their own notions of deservingness, entitlement and sufficiency.<sup>33</sup>

A particular version of the story, which I heard several times in the course of fieldwork and that even little children could recite, centred on honeycombs thought to belong to the tiger demon Dokkhin Rai. In the Bonbibī mythology, Dhokhin Rai is the half-human half-tiger that she defeats to become the goddess of the forest. Dhokhin Rai’s honeycombs are meant to tempt you. They are unusually large, hang low from the trees, and are bursting with copious quantities of honey. These honeycombs are precisely those that one is supposed to leave untouched. If you tap their honey, it is believed that Rai in the form of a tiger will attack you.

Another related interpretation of these honeycombs is that they are tests of one’s greed. Bonbibī preaches against greed, and so something so big and easy to obtain ought to be left alone. Binayak Mistry, an elderly man, had spent his life doing the jungle and offered one of my favourite interpretations for the Dokkhin Rai myth. He corroborated that he had seen hundreds of accessible, unbelievably large honeycombs that perhaps did belong to the demon. However, the reason why he always left them was not out of fear of a tiger attack, but as a principle of sharing with other teams of collectors. Leaning in,

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<sup>33</sup> As we will see in Chapter 5, this is radically different from the liberal idea of equal rights to the forest for all Sundarbans residents reflected in the campaigns by forest rights activists.

with an introspective whisper, he said: “Other honey collectors left some for you and you left some for them... and this too was *jongoler niyam*.”

I liked Binayak Mistry’s interpretation because it was at once mystical and functionalist. He didn’t deny the possibility of the supernatural but was also aware that the jungle was indeed a commons that had to provide for everyone’s families and not just one’s own. It was as if Binayak Mistry had read Levi-Strauss’s *Mythologiques*, where myth was just a story, and simultaneously a story that gave one the means to conduct life. Conversations such as these highlighted the fact that those who do the jungle did not possess an ontology peculiar to the Sundarbans. They had their own myths, some they made sense of like anyone else in South Asia and the rest of the world, some remained undecipherable. Belief, scepticism, doubt and faith were the spectrums of thought and existence through which everyone’s lives undulated.

When I asked Kamal da, whose house I lived with, his thoughts about Sandip da and Binayak Mistry’s stories, he too related an episode from the previous year’s honey collection season that reflected the same ethic of restraint. His group had been extraordinarily lucky and had filled all of their plastic honey collection barrels to capacity in their first five days in the jungle. When collecting honey, men take supplies for at least two weeks as, ordinarily, tapping worthwhile quantities of honey takes three times what it had taken this particular group. On the sixth day they decided to line a basket with plastic and convert it into a makeshift receptacle. That night the *adiyal*—the person responsible for carrying the pot of honey on his shoulders—had a dream in which a “small dark figure” said to him, “Go back home, don’t be greedy [*lobh koro na*].” The *adiyal* didn’t reveal his dream to the rest of the group.

The next day the group went searching for honeycombs, venturing deeper and deeper into the forests. They couldn’t find a single one. Kamal da said, “It was strange [*atbhut*]...we had five days of so much honey and suddenly all day we searched and searched till our feet bled and we found nothing.” That evening, as they settled down on their boats to cook their evening meal, exhausted and demoralized, the *adiyal* shared his dream from the previous night with the rest of the group. Kamal da explained, “You see what happened...Ma Bonbibí was asking us to leave the jungle, we had got what we needed...what was the need to convert the basket? [into an extra receptacle]” On the seventh day, even though they still had rations to last them another week, they decided to return to the village. The harvest had been more than sufficient, nothing untoward had happened in the jungle, and there was no reason to want more than was required. Kamal

da was the first to explain to me at length what I would hear from several others: it was precisely the desire for more than you had previously conceived to be sufficient which was the definition of greed [*lobh*]. He said, “We knew within us [*bhitoray*] that we were being greedy staying on in the jungle.” According to him it was in exactly such moments, when one’s judgement lapsed, that accidents, such as a tiger attacks took place in the jungle. This logic of sufficiency translated to my research too. It was only after a few trips accompanying Kamal da into the forest creeks that I asked if I could take my camera with me on the boat. They had agreed. That evening after we returned to the village Kamal da asked if I had got the photographs I needed for my research. I said I had. I explained to him how I had been able to take hundreds of photographs on my digital camera. He politely but very curtly stated that now that I had acquired what I needed I shouldn’t take the camera out into the jungle again. There was even such a thing as sufficient data.

In a very different landscape—that of the Andes—Marisol de la Cadena (2015) argues that people who live in the mountains consider the mountains to be sentient beings. In order to take their relationship to their surrounding landscape seriously, de la Cadena argues that one has to abandon “modern” ways of thinking and being in the world and instead urges us to acknowledge a different ontological reality (see also De Castro 2014; 2015; Descola 2014; Escobar 2008; 2016; 2017). For residents of the Sundarbans, the jungle is imbued with not just sentient beings but very moral, social and political beings. However, those who consider the jungle with its ritual and ethical associations (see Bear 2015) are not by any means abandoning any “modern” ways of thought. There was simply no question of separating out the natural from the supernatural, the scientific from the mythological, the social from the political.

### ***Becoming Beggars***

If someone is in the forest for work and you happen to ask where they are, the reply will be, “They’ve gone to beg” [*bhikkha khotte gache*]. According to *jongoler niyam*, the act of leaving the village and entering the forest converts men and women into beggars [*bhikkhu*] and is accompanied by a commitment to frugality both in the household and while in the forest. This ritual transformation symbolically points to the fact that going into the jungle is an act of survival, begging for alms from Bonbibi. It emphasizes the fact that such work is done by those who are in need and have no alternatives, as is the case with a beggar.

The trope of a *bhikkhu* in the ascetic traditions of South Asia has included all kinds of renouncers including renouncer-kings, Hindu sages, Muslim *pirs*, Buddhist monks, and several gods. In popular South Asian mythology, forests are places where renouncers enter into the meditative self-disciplined state of *tapasya* as well as to attain *moksh*—freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth. Much of the discourse on world-renouncers in the Hindu tradition centres on the tension between householding and renunciation (see Das 2012; Dumont 1980; Doniger 1976; Burghart 1983; Pinch 1996). By definition, “renouncers are permanently removed from and unattached to family, caste, economy and polity” (Gold 1989: 772).

In the Sundarbans, the trope of asceticism is ubiquitous<sup>34</sup>, but its specific practice is a unique amalgamation that draws beyond mainstream Hinduism but is instead influenced by Vaisnavism and Bhakti traditions (both sects of Hinduism), Sufi Islam as well as Buddhism. The “ethos of egalitarianism” (Jalais 2010) in the forest is derived from Islam. Bonbibī is a Muslim goddess and her powers derive from Allah in Mecca. The powerful holy men in the region [*pirs* and *faqirs*], which we learn about in detail in a following section, whether meditating figures like Gazi or tiger-charmers, trace their roots to Sufi Islam that infiltrated the region from Persia in the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>35</sup> (Eaton 1996; Stewart 2004; 2019). In Buddhism,<sup>36</sup> a *bhikkhu* is a monk, and it is well known that Buddhist texts, ideas and persons travelled through the Indian Ocean and the Bengal Delta through several phases starting as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> Century (Blackburn 2015:239).

This hybrid tradition most obviously manifests itself in that the jungle-doers are not interested in permanent detachment from their family and village. Instead, their temporary asceticism is directed towards trying to be better householders. The whole purpose of going into the jungle is to provide for the family, one’s children, and the household [*shonghsbar*]. They are ascetics “of the world” and not renouncers who want to “leave the world” (Gold 1989).

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<sup>34</sup> The trope of asceticism appears in many other religious festivals in the region. Including the *Chadak pujo* performed for the god Shiva and his consort Parvati; in the *Manusa pujo* performed for the snake goddess Manusa. Vaishnavism has its own lure of asceticism and elderly men and women aspire to become renouncers and take pilgrimages to Vrindavan, the birthplace of Lord Krishna.

<sup>35</sup> See Introduction for my details on the history of the Bengal Delta

<sup>36</sup> One of the most well-known renouncer-kings is Prince Siddhartha, who renounced his life in the palace to live as a mendicant or “bhikkhu.”

### ***Practicing Humility in the Household (and Restraining Women Along the Way)***

Though physically separated, those who stay at home and those who go into the jungle were ritually conjoined in a similar ascetic practice. For those at home there was an intricate set of observances that ought to be followed. No special food was consumed. No chillies were eaten. If a visitor or beggar came to their home, they were not offered a mat to sit on, or provided any food or drink. No food was lent to neighbours during this period. This contrasted with the normal practice of showering generous hospitality on visitors and neighbours. Wives were furthermore not allowed to do any of their quotidian routines of self-care such as putting red vermillion [*shindur*] in the parting of their hair, combing and oiling their hair, clipping their nails, and washing their clothes or cooking during the day. They could only cook or bathe at night, or early in the morning before the sun rises. They could not stitch clothes or use a needle. They could not be seen roaming around the village's public spaces and especially not the village market. If their men have gone to collect honey, with its greater time on the forest floor and heightened exposure to tiger attacks, the wives adhered to even stricter practices. Like in many other parts of the world and in the Sundarbans too, following the rules granted a bountiful catch of fish, crabs or honey, while disrespecting them caused misfortune and hardship, even death.

Older women had detailed explanations for each of the actions and prohibitions. Visitors and neighbours were denied the usual hospitality since the husband had become a beggar, and so the household itself had to reflect the home of a renouncer. If women cooked during the day, it was believed that their husbands' eyes would suffer from the smoke their cooking created. If they used needles to stitch clothes, their husbands' feet would get pierced by sharp thorns from the forest floor, and so such detailed explanations followed each injunction.

Most younger women were unable to explain why they followed the *jongoler niyam*, other than that these were rules passed on to them from older generations to ensure their husbands' safety. Anita boudhi said matter-of-factly, "It is only proper that we endure hardships while our husbands have gone begging...they have gone to provide for the family [*shonghsbar*], so we have to follow the rules for their safeguarding [*bechey rakehaar niyam*]." Her father had also done the jungle and she recalled her mother following the rules very strictly. She said her mother had explained that it would look bad if the women enjoyed themselves in the relative comfort of the home, ate well and hung out in the village market, while the men suffered for them in the jungle.

The role of a wife is considered so important that, should her husband have an accident or die in the forest, it is attributed to his wife's failure to follow the *jongoler niyam*. I found this causal link disconcerting, but the wives I spoke with instead emphasised how their acts could mitigate the risks faced by their husbands. This echoes work by Signe Howell (2013), who writes that the Chewong community she studies eschew the conception of bad luck for sets of rules that, if followed or broken, lead to specific outcomes. Howell argues that this lends positive agency to the Chewong by allowing them to assert control over otherwise random occurrences. Similarly, the Sundarbans women do not emphasise the blame that accompanies a tiger attack, but the pride in a husband's safe return secured by their ascetic labour at home. Such taboos and injunctions in relations to gods, spirits and metapersons are not unique to the Sundarbans. There are striking resonances of similar restrictions on women elsewhere. A later section of this chapter returns to this gendered relation to the environment. These restriction on women are important to emphasize because they go against arguments from the Indian subcontinent, most famously put forward by Vandana Shiva (1988), that propose how women's relationship to nature rests on a primordial, physical and spiritual connection to it. Instead, I show how women feel rather ambivalent about these rules, as they desperately seek to uphold them, often break them on purpose and most commonly adapt them to suit their convenience.

### ***Concentration and Caution***

On my first foray into the jungle collecting crabs with Kamal da and two others, Mrinal da and Maloy da, I was struck by an unexpected transition. Whilst still on the bigger river next to the village we were chatting, joking, and listening to Bengali tunes from their mobile phones. As soon as we entered the forest creeks, narrower with dense foliage crowding either side, the mood switched. We all became quiet. This more concentrated mood continued for a few hours until we emerged back onto the broader river, where we ate our lunch and switched back to banter and jokes over background music. Landscapes have a force (e.g. Basso 1996; Allerton 2013; Gold and Gujar 2002; Leach and Fairhead 1996; Bennett 2010) especially those with tigers, crocodiles and deities and this force acted upon those who derived their livelihood from it.

Sandip da, with whom I started this chapter, explained the same moment of transition to me. As soon as he entered the mangrove creeks, he didn't think about his

family, children or wife both in order to become a renouncer [*shonyasi*] and to help him enter into a state of meditation [*sadbna*]. Doing the jungle is an act of meditation and requires one to be in deep concentration [*dhyaan*]. As in more usual Hindu traditions, women are thought of as generating desire and are a source of distraction from the self-discipline [*tapas*] of men and sages (Doniger 1982). Household worries around debt, land and marital affairs must also be left behind when entering the jungle. One must forget feuds, quarrels, and disagreements within the village, and avoid feelings of jealousy [*bingsha*] or anger [*krodh*].

I was told many times that one must treat the jungle as one would treat a place of worship or religious site [*tirth stha*]. One should only step on the forest floor after giving prayers to Bonbibi. The purity of the jungle also meant that nothing could be discarded on the forest floor. One did not spit, defecate or throw anything from the boat onto *Maa'r khamor*. Even the ash and soot from cooking was disposed only in the river, not in the forest. One had to be careful not to leave any personal traces. Not even nails or hair could be left in the jungle, and if anything had to be discarded, such as the butt of a *beedi* [cheap cigarettes], it was carefully wrapped in a leaf, and buried. Even if one had to defecate, it was done on a leaf, facing the direction of the tide, or in the river to avoid profaning the forest floor.

Mrinal da and Kamal da agreeing with Sandip da also offered more practical reasons for the state of concentration. They explained that if one's mind was occupied with householding [*shonghsar*], especially around debt and women, one risked losing concentration and falling prey to the many dangerous things [*bhoiyankar jinisb*] in the jungle. For them, entering an intensified state of concentration was a way of both paying Bonbibi respect and of being alert in the forest in which one ought to be mindful of several dangers. Kamal da and Mrinal da, were often less philosophical than Sandip da, they believed that entering the abode of Bonbibi did immediately transport one into a different mental-space but they were both acutely aware that this state of meditation and concentration was ultimately for their own safety. The fact that the jungle was the abode of Bonbibi had significance, it held weight for them, it influenced their thoughts and had an effect on their behaviour. It was also for the sake of their own safety that they followed the rules of the jungle. This is then not a situation in which Sundarbans residents are ontologically different but instead their reality is attuned to embodiments of fear in response to the real and mythical tigers and tiger-demons.

Kamal da and Mrinal da often compared their own boats to those of tourist boats. They believed that jungle-doers' meditative associations and practices toward the forest were the exact opposite of the typical tourist's engagement with the Sundarbans. In their opinion tourism was distinct from doing the jungle because while the former was out of pleasure [*shauke*] the latter was out of need [*aubhan*]. Those who do the jungle thought that tourists regarded the jungle as a place for entertainment, for joy and fun [*anando*]. They reminded me that they didn't go into the jungle for pleasure and in fact doing so, for recreational reasons, was considered inappropriate. The jungle was a place one took seriously, it was a dangerous place [*bhoiyankar jaiga*] and because one's survival depended on it, one respected its rules.



*Figure 17 Concentrating while collecting crabs in the creeks.*

### ***The “Common Storehouse” in Times of Need***

The myths and stories of Bonbibí were not merely things that people believed in, but also organized ways of living, everyday actions, behaviours and thought (see Levi Strauss 1978; Leenhardt 1979; MacIntyre 2007). The ethic of restraint preached by



Bonbibi, and reinforced by rituals around asceticism and meditation, allowed those who do the jungle to govern the forest commons.

Invoking the word “commons” brings to mind the classic formulation of “the tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968). This describes the externalities that accompany individuals following utility maximising behaviour which will, in the absence of regulation or a mechanism to coordinate their actions, deplete a common resource to the detriment of all. What is crucial for a sustainable commons are the existence of rules, and ways to enforce those rules, that limit individual access and use. These rules are often set by state regulation and to safeguard the commons through the creation of enclosures. In the tradition post Hardin—widely acknowledged as being a rather conservative and rational minded view of the individual (see de Angelis and Harvie 2014; Harvey 2011: 102)—the commons gave rise to Hobbesian figures in whom authority is invested. James Scott shows alternative forms of rule-making in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, describing the tactics of peasants in “pre-modern” Vietnam and Burma who self-organise without the intervention of the state. For Scott, and other anarchist thinkers like him such as Graeber (2004), most villages and neighbourhoods “function precisely because of the informal, transient networks of coordination that do not require formal organization” (Scott 2012: Xxii). Coming from a different tradition, Elinor Ostrom (1990) nonetheless proposes a related idea that individuals and communities could make their own rules to govern natural resource commons. What is often unclear is the basis—moral and ethical—for such forms of self-organizing to emerge.

In the Sundarbans, Bonbibi and her religious precepts provide the means to coordinate the management of the commons. The *jongoler niyam* motivate a reflection on sufficiency and excess, and the ways in which “*Maa’r khamor*” or the “common storehouse” might be respected. The word *khamor* literally translates as “granary” and *Maa’r khamor* refers to the “common storehouse of the mother.” In this formulation, the children are the fishers, and Bonbibi is their mother. She is often referred to as Mother Bonbibi [*Ma Bonbibi*]. Her forest is the shared resource where food is stored for future consumption. Her rules are followed with the hope and trust that individuals will share the resources of the forest with others. Sharing was not at all about charity or letting others have one’s left-overs. It was about leaving the biggest honeycombs for another group to tap or leaving the forest when one had obtained sufficient quantities of honey, fish, crabs (or in my case photographs). It was being mindful and considerate of the fact that others also derived a livelihood from the forest. While common belief in Bonbibi

allowed the jungle-doers to trust each other, the *jongoler niyam* provide the ethical rules limiting use-access through the basis of need so as to govern the forest commons. The next section describes who Bonbibi is and where she comes from. By locating Bonbibi historically my interest is to not to hark back to a romanticized pre-colonial past. It is instead to show the quotidian ways in which her force on everyday life continues to wield influence through *pujos*, plays [*jatra*] and recitations [*panchali*].

## **Bonbibi: Past and Present Forest Governance Through an Islamic Deity**

A leafy branch of a banana tree flanks each side of the shrine. Several red and peach hibiscus flowers are suspended from the branch by a thread sown through their pistils. A garland of leaves adorns the shrine. In the centre of this tableau is Bonbibi's idol. Next to her is the idol of her brother: Shah Jongoli. Beside him there is Gazi, a Muslim *pir* or holy man, who in the Bonbibi mythology acts as a mediator of conflicts. On the other side is a deer whose nose nuzzles the arm of Bonbibi, and at her feet is a much smaller idol of a young boy named Dukhey. The clay idols have been freshly made and painted for this year's Bonbibi *pujo* at the house of Gurupada da and Shamoli boudhi, a household that does the jungle.



Figure 18 The offering of *paish*—rice and jaggery—being distributed after the Bonbibi *pujo*

Near the shrine, women in brand new saris—with the price-tag stickers conspicuously displayed—hunch over a huge cauldron of *paiesh*, a rice-based dessert with copious amounts of jaggery. *Paiesh*, along with the fruits that are being cut, will be distributed as *proshad* or offerings at the end of the *pujo* to all the residents of the neighbourhood who come to attend it. Hovering children tug at the *pallus* of their mothers' saris, their large eyes seeking to win them a taste of the *paiesh* before it is offered to the public. The mood in the courtyard is festive. Amidst children playing, older women shouting orders at their daughters-in-law, and men sitting around chatting and smoking, Banshom Bayan recites the Bonbibi *journama* into a microphone. The speakers have been attached to a tree on the path outside the house. The sound system is a first for this household's Bonbibi *pujo*, an upgrade in the eyes of the residents. It has already been three hours since the event began. The *journama* is the booklet which narrates the story of Bonbibi's parents, her birth and how she came to reign over the Sundarbans forests. It is written in Bengali script but, as is the case in Arabic, Urdu, and the ancient Karosthi script,

the *journama* reads from right to left. The commonly available *journama* booklet, which many households have and which I myself bought from a vendor in our village bazaar, was written by the poet Munsī Mohammad Khater Saheb.<sup>37</sup> The earliest written text of the *journama* was written by poet Bayanuddin and printed in 1877, but several modifications and interpretations became available with the advent of printing in Bengal in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (Stewart 2019: 155).

The garlanded leaves around the Bonbibi shrine have a mark of red vermillion. Incense sticks and an oil lamp burn next to a conch shell. Offerings of fruit are neatly arranged in front of the clay idols. These accoutrements of ritual, the melody of the recitation [*panchali*], and the idol of Bonbibi itself all resemble those of a Hindu *pūjo*. At first glance Bonbibi could easily be mistaken for Saraswati or Lakshmi, deities in the Hindu pantheon. However, it is a well-known fact among all those who worship her that she is a Muslim, the daughter of Ibrahim Fakir and his second wife, Phool Bibi. As the mythology has it<sup>38</sup>, Ibrahim's first wife—Gulal bibi—couldn't conceive. Ibrahim takes advice from the daughter of Mohamed, Fatima, who says he will be blessed with progeny but with another wife. He takes permission from his first wife to remarry. She grants him the permission, but on the condition that Ibrahim grants her one future request, no matter what it is. Ibrahim quickly agrees. When his second wife is pregnant, his first wife, seething with envy, demands that Ibrahim abandon his second wife in the jungle. Distraught, but with no option but to make good on his promise, he leaves Phool Bibi in the forest in the tenth month of her pregnancy. Seeing this, Allah sends four deer to care for Phool Bibi. She gives birth to twins—a little girl, Bonbibi, and her brother, Shah Jongoli. Nervous about the prospect of providing for two children, Phool Bibi abandons the daughter and leaves the forest with her son. As she is walking away, the daughter convinces her brother to stay back in the jungle and let their mother reunite with their father. Allah bestows upon the two children of the forest the power to protect all those who enter their abode, “the land of eighteen tides” which is another name given to the Sundarbans.

Bonbibi's origin myth is accompanied by the story of Dukhey known as the *Dukhey Jatra*. Dhonai, whose name means “wealthy”, is a merchant who goes into the forest with seven boats to collect honey and wax. Just before his boats set off, he realizes he is one man short. He pleads with the widowed mother of his young nephew, Dukhey,

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<sup>37</sup> The full name in the original is *Bonbibi Journanama: Narayanir Jung or Dhona Dukhey Pala* (Stewart 2019: 123).

<sup>38</sup> This is my translation of the myth as I heard the *journama* being read out at various *pūjos*. Several variations exist.

whose name means “sadness,” to send her only son to collect wax and honey with him. He promises he will keep Dukhey safe and the young boy will return with the riches of the forest. Hesitant, the mother nonetheless agrees.

Dhonai soon enters the part of the forest presided over by Dokkhin Rai, the half-human, half-tiger demon [*roksbosh*], without seeking his permission.<sup>39</sup> Rai demands a human sacrifice in exchange for seven boatloads of honey and wax. Dhonai is torn. The promise he has made to keep his nephew safe weighs on him, but he also desires all the riches of the forest. Dhonai decides to abandon Dukhey.

Just before Dokkhin Rai can devour him, Dukhey calls on Bonbibi. The sister-brother duo—Bonbibi and Shah Jongoli—arrive on the scene and begin to fight Dokkhin Rai. Narayani, Rai’s mother, intervenes saying only a woman should fight a woman. As the battle ensues, Narayani proclaims Bonbibi to be her friend or *shoi*. The two arrive at an agreement and Bonbibi is proclaimed the protectress of the forest. As she is successful in saving Dukhey’s life, Dukhey is sent back to the village on the back of a crocodile. Once he arrives in the village, he retells the tale to his mother. Mother and son go from house to house collecting contributions for a Bonbibi *pūjo* and spread her fame as the saviour of those who venture into the jungle out of need while shunning those, like Dhonai, who are motivated by greed.

The mythology and modern-day worship of Bonbibi must be understood through the distinct religious history of the Bengal Delta, which sets it apart from the majority of mainland India. Eaton (1996) traces the web of influences on the region including Buddhists from Burma; pirates [*dakaat*] from the Arakanese coast<sup>40</sup>; Sufis after the Turkish conquest; Mughal rulers from the Bengal Sultanate; and several Indo-Islamic influences from mainland India. He says that “folk” religious beliefs were “strikingly porous and fluid, bounded by no clear conceptual frontiers [...] it was precisely the fluidity of folk Bengali cosmology that allowed Bengalis to interact creatively with exogenous ideas and agencies” (Eaton 1996: 134). Following these various cultural traditions and their

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<sup>39</sup> Jalais (2010) interprets Rai’s interest in eating Dukhey as having become accustomed to the taste of human blood. She says that Rai takes the form of a tiger to attack humans, disrupting the cordial relations between tigers and humans. I never heard this particular interpretation of the story myself, but include it as one among the several hundreds of different ways in which her origin myth was interpreting.

<sup>40</sup> It has been documented that from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Mog people, from present-day Myanmar’s Arakan coast, came to trade in current day Sundarbans and along with their interests in commerce, they are reputed to have looted and plundered the region. Known for their robbery and dacoity [*dakaati*] on land and sea, today the word ‘dacoit’ has made it into the English Oxford Dictionary and means “a Burmese or Indian member of a gang of armed robbers” and originates from their banditry activities in the delta. Current day Sundarbans residents continue to fear dacoits [*dakaats*] who are gangs of men who in their opinion cross over from Bangladesh, raid boats and their equipment and make a living from demanding ransom by taking fishers hostage.

amalgamation with other possible indigenous traditions catalysed the unique religious amalgamations in the region with deities such as Bonbibibi being one among a huge range of saints, sages, demons, and holy men (Eaton 1996; Korom 2006; see Stewart 2004; 2019).<sup>41</sup> For Michael Pearson, a scholar on the maritime history of the Indian Ocean, the delta was a “poly-focal contact zone” characterised by movement, connections and exchange with other littoral communities (Pearson 2006: 140). It has been argued (Mukherjee 2013; 2014) that littoral communities—where land meets sea, and salt meets sweet to form brackish water—are places that have much more in common with other littoral places in the world than with their inland neighbours. The Sundarbans is better understood through the accumulated, hybridised influence of people, cultures and trade across the Indian Ocean, rather than through the recent national boundaries that demarcate India, Bangladesh and Myanmar in 2019.

One relevant strand of this complicated inheritance is the role of *pirs*, such as Gazi in the Bonbibibi mythology and *pujo* tableau, in the region. Powerful and revered *pirs* like Mubarra Ghazi and Badi Ghazi Khan made their way into Bengali literature and epic poetry such as the *Ray-Mangala*, composed by Krishnaram Das in 1686 (Eaton 1996: 212). For many centuries, tigers were neither to be killed nor protected, but rather controlled through the powers and incantations of the *pirs* and *faqirs*. In 1898, colonial officer James Wise writes of a particularly charismatic *pir*, Zindah Ghazi, who was thought to protect woodcutters and boatmen and “believed to reside deep in the jungle, to ride about on tigers, and to keep them so subservient to his will that they dare not touch a human being without his express commands” (Wise 1898: 40 as cited in Eaton 1996: 209). Another British Officer, Francis Buchanan, notes that *pirs* had restrained the ferocity of tigers through their powers such that “these animals seldom attack man” (ibid). While W. W Hunter is dismissive of fakirs, from his writings we can glean the importance of these holy men in the clearing of the forest:

“All woodcutters are very superstitious, and believe in the existence of numbers of forest spirits. None of them will go into the forest to cut wood

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<sup>41</sup> Historians of religion such as Asim Roy (2014), Stewart (2004; 2019), Eaton (1996) volley between the appropriate terms used to describe the religious amalgamation in the Bengal Delta. Stewart (2001: 364) contends that there is a problem with labelling religious phenomena in the Sundarbans “syncretic” Hindu, Muslim or Buddhist traditions because this would imply that these theological structures existed. In fact it was Sufis, Sunnis, Shi’ias, Vaishnavs, Saivas and several such sects of different religions co-mingling. He argues that we need to reconceive the nature of the religious encounter that characterizes the region in the pre- and early colonial period (Stewart 2001: 364). In my field site, I came across several variations of hybrid Hindu-Muslim holy men: Satya Pir, Manik Pir, Satya Narayan, Gazi Khan, and Gazi Mia.

unless accompanied by a fakir, who is supposed to receive power from the presiding deity—whom he propitiates with offerings—over the tigers and other animals. Before commencing work in any allotment, the fakir assembles all the woodcutters of his party, clears a space at the edge of the forest, and erects a number of small tent-like huts, in which he places images of forest deities, to which offerings and sacrifices are made. When this has been done the allotment is considered free from tigers; and each woodcutter, before commencing work, makes an offering to the jungle deities, by which act he is supposed to have gained a right to their protection. In the event of any of the party being carried off by a tiger, the fakir decamps, and the woodcutters place flags at the most prominent corners of the allotment to warn off all others. Each fakir receives a share of all produce removed from the lot he patronizes, which is generally commuted for cash” (Hunter [1875] 1973: 72).

Many centuries before colonial administrators or current day forms of governance began to exert power over the forest, power lay with these *pirs* and *faqirs*. It was precisely through their powers, the chants and incantations [*mantras*] they knew which controlled tigers and through which agriculture was expanded in the region (Eaton 1996).



Figure 19 A painted scroll or pata from circa 1800 of Gazi Pir riding a tiger [British Museum]

The forest’s ethos of egalitarianism, derived from Sufi Islam, stands in contrast to the hierarchy in the Brahmanical traditions (Jalais 2010). In fact there is a debate over whether the demon is Hindu—an upper caste Brahmin landlord in the form of Dokkhin Rai—and “thus the Bonbibi story is seen by the villagers as the supremacy of Islam over Hinduism as far as the forest is concerned” (Jalais 2004:123). Residents of the Sundarbans say that the forests and rivers have no hierarchies of castes [*jati*] or religion [*dharma*].



Therefore, the ethos and worship of the forest doesn't discriminate based on religion or caste (Jalais 2010). As the goddess of woodcutters, honey collectors, and fishers, Bonbibi is clearly not an upper caste goddess. Her shrines stand on the edges of the village, hugging the river next to the homes of those who do the jungle. They are small and relatively modest. This is in contrast to the worship of Hindu goddesses such as Durga, Kali, Saraswati and Lakshmi, who were all brought into the lower Bengal delta by upper caste landlords [*zamindars*] much later than Bonbibi (Chatterjee-Sarkar 2010). While I was in the field, Durga and Saraswati were worshipped in the Sundarbans with lavish funds and fanfare during *pujos* in the centre of the village bazaar or in school building compounds organized by the local elite, the land-owners, shop keepers and politicians. These goddesses compared to Bonbibi or Ma Manusa—the snake goddess, are newer entrants into the religious landscape of lower Bengal.

This longer history of power in holy men and in deities such Bonbibi sheds light on the various ways in which the forest has been governed much before the processes of “statemaking” in colonial forestry (Sivaramakrishnan 1999). What is crucial is that these old forms of governance still exist. Bonbibi still wields immense power. *Pirs*, *faqirs* and *gazis* have their modern-day counterparts in “knowledgeable men” known as *guneens* and *bauleys* or tiger charmers (see Jalais 2010). While their influence is waning as their chants and powers are mocked at by Forest Officials, activists and Sundarbans residents alike, not all of Bonbibi's influence has waned, the next section turns to show how older forms of forest governance continue to reinvigorate everyday ethics, notions of good and bad, right and wrong and are crucial to how social relations and natural resources are governed.

### ***Debating Virtues and Vices***

Most people who live in the Sundarbans, and especially those who do the jungle, know Bonbibi's story well. With no electricity, no internet, and only very recent television and cell phone connectivity, people in the Sundarbans do not know where Mecca is, yet they still know that Bonbibi gets her blessing from there. Her story is spread in two main ways. In addition to the *joburnama*, read out during the *pujo*, there is an annual Bonbibi theatrical performance [*jatra*] that lasts three to four nights and re-enacts her entire life story.

With traveling actors and hired costumes, this form of “folk” theatre [*jatra*] was very much alive while I was in the field. It is part of the *panchali* tradition, in which “folk”



epics are recited and plays performed, which dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> century or earlier (Stewart 2019). Along with older mythologies, these celebrations included more contemporary dance-dramas, as well as night-long Bollywood styled “dance mayhems” [*dance bungamas*], and were one of the main sources of village entertainment.<sup>42</sup> *Jatras* were especially well attended by children, who often watched the night-long performance with rapt attention. More recently, Bonbibi’s story has been popularised in tourist lodges in the Sundarbans which offer an abridged, 20-minute version for visiting guests, performed also for the cultural entertainment in on the cruise ship in the previous chapter.

Bonbibi’s ubiquity among the jungle-doers has bearing on a fundamental question for both anthropology and political philosophy: where do ethics come from? Webb Keane (2017) considers various sources: reason, innate dispositions, the divine, and law. In the Sundarbans, like in so many other parts of the world, another answer is that ethics come from stories. The recitation of the *journama* and watching the *jatra* are the basis for ethical debates and contestations that play out in everyday life.

At the Bonbibi *pujo* at Gurupada da’s house, while women were busying themselves cooking, a group of men I was sitting with broke into a friendly debate around the figure of Dhonai, the merchant. An argument ensued as to whether Dhonai was greedy or simply desperate. Was he obliged to leave Dukhey because Dokkhin Rai, the demon of the forest, demanded it, or did he have a choice? Some of the men in the group thought that Dhonai epitomized greed, while others believed that he had been compelled to appease Rai. At the end of the story, Dhonai’s daughter is married to Dukhey, and this reconciliatory kinship alliance—forged by the mediator Gazi—was what the fishers found particularly meaningful. Soon enough the conversation moved onto the virtues of Gazi. The verdict as to whether Dhonai was greedy or desperate, it seemed to me, remained ambivalent.

Analogous conversations sprung up during *pujos* and the enactment of *jatras* and emerged in more casual conversations at homes and tea stalls in the village. Children

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<sup>42</sup> I sensed a shift in the kinds of *jatras* performed and the popularity of some over others. Addition to the older mythologies, there are several more contemporary *jatras* enacted out. While the Dukhey Jatra [Bonbibi’s mythology] was still performed, it was less frequent. The enacting out of Bonbibi’s story takes a huge caste, costumes and because the story is so long, it lasts multiple days. Other *jatras* are only a few hours long and with fewer actors. They are more economical and practical. The older generation complained that there was no interest in performing Bonbibi’s *jatra* for three-four continuous nights. The younger girls and boys, even though they came from jungle-doing families, were indeed much more excited to go watch other more contemporary theatre performances some with similarly fabulous demons, deities, princesses and warriors and other romantic-dramas with more Bollywood inspired singing and dancing. At the time I was in the field, the most popular of these was *Kiranmala*. However, an epic much older than even that of Bonbibi, the *Manusa Jatra*—that tells the story of the snake goddess Manusa—was still very popular and attracted young and old alike.

recounted these stories to one-another and played games impersonating their favourite characters. Later on, while doing household surveys, I found out that Hari da, one of the men present during the discussion at the *pūjo*, had memories of timber merchants not so different from the mythical Dhonai. Before timber logging was banned in the early 2000s, men like his father, landless and in need of work, were employed as wage labourers to cut trees and load logs onto the boats of merchants. The merchants, in turn, supplied these logs to colonial administrators for export for furniture, the building of homes, bridges, ships, as well as the laying of the Indian railways. He explained that these landlords and merchants lived elsewhere, “towards Kolkata,” but they had a supervisor who managed the conscripted labour. For him, Dhonai emblematised one of these supervisors and his first-hand experience of their greed and self-interest. Like Dhonai, the merchants didn’t care about the labourers who lived in poor conditions on the boat for several weeks at a stretch, worked for meagre wages, and often got mauled by tigers while cutting wood. Their interest was solely in amassing their own wealth.

Hari da’s reflections on the mythical character of Dhonai was one of many instances where people had both personally-inflected and more abstract conversations around the categories of greed, necessity, and the importance of mediation. We know ethics are not only a “dimension of action” but also “the subject of explicit and conscious deliberation” (Stafford 2013: 4; see also Lambek 2010; Mattingly 2012; Das 2012; Laidlaw 2013; 2014; Pandian & Ali 2010). Sundarbans residents openly reflected on notions of right and wrong, obligation and duty, good and bad. In doing so, they drew on the various personality traits, actions and inactions of the characters in Bonbibi’s legend, as well as several other legends—like that of the snake goddess Ma Manusa—connecting them to their own personal trajectories and that of others to make sense of their everyday actions and inactions. Local politics were often compared to the politic machinations between different gods and goddesses. Stories and legends from all over the world—from canonical Greek myths (see for example Vernant 2002; 2006) to those of Bonbibi in the coastal peripheries of the Bengal delta—provide the basis for asking central ethical questions, educating ourselves on shared virtues, and allowing us to reflect on how to arrive at moral decisions in life. As Paige West writes, “a tale some might have discounted as a ‘myth’ is actually a clear set of propositions that help people understand and be in the worlds they create and in the worlds that they are cast into” (West 2016: 127). The reading of the *joburnama* and the enactment of the Bonbibi *jatra*, provide a set of propositions concerning how best to act and why for people who live in the Sundarbans.



Figure 20 Watching the *Dukhey jatra* or Bonbibi's origin story enacted out in the village over three continuous nights.

## The Difficulty of Following Rules

The main tropes of the rules of the jungle, those in relation to greed, need, practicing restraint and entering the jungle with a pure mind [*pabitra mann*] provided some stability to both ethical deliberations and aspirations amongst those who do the jungle. At the same time, these rules were not easy to follow, and aspiration did not always translate into action. James Laidlaw (2013) writes about the conflicts in upholding values and ascetic ideals among Jain renunciators, ethics that were often “unliveable” for they were so stringent and therefore never entirely fulfilled. In response to Laidlaw, Veena Das renames this conundrum not so much as the tensions in the “moral will” as Laidlaw views them to be, but in what is in essence “the difficulty of reality” (Das 2014: 488).<sup>43</sup> Those who do the jungle aspired to follow the *jongoler niyam*, they emphasized to me the importance of these rules, but often they were confronted by the difficulties of their realities, of their own aspirations and the futures of their children, in a rapidly transforming jungle. Ethical life is constantly negotiated through other needs, desires and aspirations some that can be reconciled and others that constrict freedoms.

While this chapter has provided the significance of mythology and the enormous effect stories have on people's behaviours and ethics (e.g. Basso 1996), my interest is also

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<sup>43</sup> Das borrows the phrase from Cora Dimond (2003) article titled “The Difficulty of reality and the difficulty of philosophy”

in showing how *jongoler niyam* were undermined from within the fishing community, subverted by forces from without, and oppressive for others, particularly wives back at home while the men—the majority who did the jungle—were out in the forest.

Too often arguments made in relation to *adivasi* or indigenous communities who are thought to live in harmony with nature gloss over the contradictory relationships people within these communities have with their surrounding environment (Sivaramakrishnan 2015). This is something that Shah (2010) shows in relation to wild elephants that attacked *adivasi* villages at night. The discourses of indigenous activists trying to play up the harmony of *adivasi* with nature was instead a form of “eco-incarceration” that reified *adivasi* rootedness to the land, washing over their real concerns with regard to livelihoods (ibid). Sivaramakrishnan (2015) warns against tendencies to recreate idealized models of “traditional” Indian societies, as in the work of anthropologist and missionary Verrier Elwin who ascribes an innate “primitive ecological wisdom” to the indigenous (ibid: 1280). The same caution applies to non-indigenous communities, like the migrants of the Sundarbans, that are engaged in “traditional” livelihoods. Other registers of depicting life, such as novels and films based on fishing communities from undivided Bengal highlight the potential of rivers to dissolve differences of caste and religion, but they also show the corrosion of social relations, the frictions and tensions as a result of economic, ecological and social pressures<sup>44</sup> (see Pokrant, Reeves, McGuire 1998; Khan 2015).

What becomes clear is that the reality of past and contemporary relationships between nature and the communities living alongside them is complicated, ranging along a spectrum from reverence to destruction, and changes over time based on cultural, socio-economic, political and personal circumstances. In addition, as Fairhead and Leach’s (1996) retelling of “forest history read backwards” in various African landscapes reminds us, what is typecast as destructive or harmonious behaviour is also contingent on perspective, power, and knowledge (ibid: 237) and the usage of these words themselves warrant fine-grained and historically embedded understandings of the landscape than what current policy paradigms rely on.

One window into this dynamic was the new political, legal and economic forces reshaping fishing during my time in the field. These forces are changing relationships of mutuality amongst the fishers. Crab collectors told me that, in the past, small crabs were

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<sup>44</sup> Most famously, ‘A River Called Titash’ [*Titash Ekti Nodir Naam*] by Adwaita Mallabarman and ‘Boatman of the River Padma’ [*Padma Nadir Majhi*] by Manik Bandopadhyay. Both novels have been adapted into films by Ritwik Ghatak and Goutam Ghosh respectively.

almost always released back into the river, and I had seen Kamal da and Mrinal da do this on the boat. Crabs are priced according to their weight and so it was better to allow small crabs to grow before being sold. However, for other crab collectors I knew, this practice had changed with the advent of new supply chains tied to the Chinese market, creating a new class of middlemen and exporters who would buy any sized catch. The demand for crabs is so high that often baby crabs are now sold to export houses or directly to Chinese buyers who then put them in artificial brackish water chambers where they are artificially fattened and then sold off to retailers.

Madhu da, a neighbour, explained to me that he was conflicted about this. While he believed that small crabs should be released, in today's competitive market he felt that if he let them go someone else would catch and sell them. Newly globalised supply chains were challenging norms of cooperation that made the fishing community better-off overall and offering a new ethic of individual profit-maximisation. The "opening up of the Chinese market" has been accompanied by real economic benefits, but this has brought many unintended social and political consequences (as I explore in depth in Chapter 4), among them the erosion of some of the *jongoler niyam*.

The contemporary political and legal actions of the Forest Department described in Chapter 1 and those that I turn to in Chapter 3 have similarly collided with the rules of the jungle. For example, those who do the jungle have extremely strict etiquettes around respecting the territories of other boats. The forest and its creeks are an intricate maze that swells and shrivels with the tides. One boat tries not to intrude on another's territory so that each might have a productive day. When a passing boat sees another in a forest creek, the etiquette is to continue searching for an unoccupied creek.

Such an ethic is rapidly changing as swathes of the forest have been made inviolate. As a result of ever-shrinking forest space, norms of territorial respect are mixed with an increasing sense of competitiveness and anxiety around this competitiveness. Each boat has to pay back its advances [*dadon*] for having rented Boat Licences (BLCs) and for the food and rations. In the face of new pressures and the crucial benefits from cooperating with the forest rangers, many jungle-doers inform on other boats, putting other boats in trouble for their own benefits. Some of these ruptures and jealousies within the fishing community come out of already existing feuds in the village—around property, marital affairs, debt—while others emerge from new strategies of Forest Department

surveillance.<sup>45</sup> Even though one of the main “rules of the jungle” is to leave the affairs of the village and household behind while in the forest, with rising prices of boat licences (BLCs) and of food and bait rations, and an increased competition among fishers spurred on by China’s demand for mud crabs, this is often impossible to do.

For those individuals and households that were primarily fishing or collecting crabs, these “rules” remain a highly fluid moral system: ideas of right and wrong, greed and need, good and bad are neither shared nor static. Variations exist from island to island, and even from village to village. For most Sundarbans residents, the rules have always been debated and, according to ones’ viewpoint, eroded or adapted. Adaptations depend on personal life histories, local histories, and shifts in the wider socio-political context. As the *jongoler niyam* encounter the contemporary challenges of those who do the jungle, they are creatively adapted, and reinterpreted in turn, by men and women. Leniency is a part of the ethico-religious code and is an essential feature of religious institutions (Mayblin and Malara 2018: 2). Religious rituals and practices around *jongoler niyam*, both in the forest and at home, sustained themselves through their ability to accommodate, assimilate and incorporate change. They are elastic. If they were not, they would collapse under the weight of change (see Kloos and Beeker 2017; Mayblin and Malara 2018). This religious fluidity is a strength, but it is also what makes the “rules of the jungle” vulnerable to many kinds of manipulations.

Crucially though these *nyams* are not just being ruptured but also creatively adjusted to as fishers come to terms with the fact that the mangrove creeks will have to be shared and new strategies evolved. With regard to the sharing of creeks, Madhu da said that many boats have adopted a new norm and it was almost customary to have two boats collecting crabs in the same creek. While this was not ideal for either boat in terms of the quantity of catch, there was no alternative. Adjustments had to be made. Within given constraints, and following core principles around being considerate to the needs of others, the interpretation of the Bonbibi’s mythology was diverse, lived and negotiated.

The *jongoler niyam* were not only adapted by the crab collectors, but also manipulated by the local elite who were aware of them. The local conservation movement and lowest rungs of the Forest Department borrowed from Bonbibi’s gospel of greed to serve their own interests. They campaign against the work of crab collectors by labelling it an activity done out of greed. I explore this ethical battleground, and the fishers’

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<sup>45</sup> I explore the internal divisions within the fishing community, the relations between rangers and fishers, in depth in Chapter 3.

vehement and nuanced response to these accusations of greed, in depth in Chapter 4. The point here is that Bonbibi is not above the fray of local politics and is used, defended with and at times co-opted into the various intimate antagonisms that characterize relationships in the village and the forest.

### ***Women Overruled***

The gender politics of the *jongoler niyam* further call into question any straightforward characterisation of their progressivity. Perhaps these rules were the hardest for those who stayed back home in the village. As Asha boudhi, Sandip da's wife, proudly emphasized in the chapter's opening vignette, restraint and humility in the jungle had to also be practiced at home. While this economy of need and ritual practice of frugality is, in some senses, admirable, these same prohibitions deeply curtail the freedoms and movement of women. Drawing on the work of Signe Howell (2013) an earlier section provided a particular analysis of agency that wives had in the safeguarding of their husbands' well-being in the jungle. However, another possible interpretation of these rules was that they served to restrain wives while their men were in absentia. The prohibitions of *jongoler niyam* gave men the peace of mind that their wives were not having visitors, meeting people in the village bazaar, or in any way enjoying the potentially threatening company of others while they were away.

Revisiting Shah's (2010) work on "sacral polity" amongst the Mundas reveals a similar gendered aspect to their indigenous alternative polity. Their system includes designated communicators with the spirits who select the politically important role of mediators through a process that seems quite egalitarian on its face. However, we learn in a footnote that the mediators were always men, and Shah explains that she "had not heard of a woman" taking on the position "though in a reworking of the *pahan* and *paenbharra* system [the indigenous alternative polity], this disparity should be redressed" (2010: 205). As with the Mundas, *jongoler niyam* seems only partially, and selectively, democratic. Drawing on the work of other scholars of Jharkhand (Kelkar and Nathan 1991) working on Munda, Ho, Oraon, and Santhal communities, Leach and Green (1997) argue that there were "hierarchies in land and control over ecological processes even in these *adivasi* areas where distinctions of caste were absent" (ibid: 357-8). The accusations of witchcraft aimed at Munda women (Mullick 2000), and the processes which tied women's access to land to male kin (Kelkar and Nathan 1991 as cited in Leach and Green

1997), refute “ecofeminist notions of precolonial equity regarding [the] environment” (ibid: 358). Even in so-called “egalitarian” *adivasi* societies, or places such as the Sundarbans where caste is not a marker of identity, and the forest asserts an “ethos of egalitarianism” (Jalais 2010), gender relations are deeply unequal. While Bonbibibi is referred to as the mother and the jungle her common storehouse, a finer analysis at the level of the household complicates *jongoler niyam* from being any sort of “ecofeminist fable” (Leach 2007).

Women in the Sundarbans do not have an *a priori* relationship (cf Shiva 1988; Khanna 1995) to the forests (see Leach and Mearns 1996; Agarwal 1992), but neither are they just victims of a restraining set of household norms (Chapter 6) and forest rules. While the rules of the jungle were restrictive for women, it seemed as if women were changing the *niyams* according to the changing times too, making small adjustments to what was allowed and what was not. Anuradha, a married woman, used to have long phone conversations with her lover—a migrant in the Andamans—while her husband was away in the forest collecting crabs. These phone flirtations, lasting hours, never happened when her husband—Anil da—was at home. When I asked about the *jongoler niyam* and whether she thought she was breaking them, she said she wouldn’t have these chats while Anil da went honey collecting—which was more dangerous and therefore the rules more important, but that during crab collection it was “all right” [*cholbey*]. Even during the days Anil da was off crab collecting though, Anuradha followed most of the rules of the jungle but selectively broke a few. On one particular occasion she said exasperatedly, “How much are we women supposed to keep doing [*kato kei korbey mein de ra?*]...for how long are we to continue these [things] that people before us did...don’t you think things are different today?” Anuradha oscillated between following rules, praising them to me but also bitterly complaining about them.

A young bride, Mausami, whose father-in-law did the jungle, followed a similar logic in her approach to the ritual practices of asceticism. She didn’t follow these rules even though she pretended to performatively do so. When I asked her why, she said she didn’t really respect her father-in-law, and that he treated her badly. In contrast, if it had been her own husband or father, she claimed she would have followed the rules more religiously. As with Anuradha, Mausami created interpretative space for herself within the *niyams* to assert her agency. However, women’s assertion of their desires went beyond their relationship to the forest and was not always well-received by the men in the village, a theme I explore in much more detail in Chapter 6.



## Reconceiving Forest Sovereignty

This chapter has attempted to go beyond showing the relationship between religion and environmental ethics to explore the social and political implications of these ethical beliefs, that is, how they translate into a form of governing a forest commons, but also and as crucially, how they are altered, undermined and who these rules oppress.

Bonbibi, and her *jongoler niyam*, are a system of vernacular governance in the Sundarbans. She has not, to date, been seen in this way. She has been written about by anthropologists (Jalais 2004; 2010), folklorists (Chatterjee-Sarkar 2010), and historians of religion (Korom 2006; Uddin 2011; Stewart 2004; 2019). She has been popularized by novelists (Ghosh 2005; 2019), showcased to tourists, and has appeared in children's story books. However, she is usually relegated to the realm of culture, an analytical frame perhaps best summed up by the World Bank's acknowledgment of her as a "primitive" and "folk deity" (Bushra 2019: 68). Scholarship around her has focused almost exclusively on the admittedly fascinating religious syncretism she embodies. No one, especially those who have a stake in the governance of the region including the Forest Department, conservationists or forests rights activists, have seriously considered her territorial sovereignty over the jungle.

Viewing Bonbibi through a historical lens destabilises her as a merely cultural or religious figure. In the history of the delta, power—both economic and social—was concentrated in religious figures such as *pirs* and *faqirs* [holy men]. They, not the Forest Department, had power over the tigers. They, not colonial forestry, spread agriculture in the region (Eaton 1996). This source of power is still present and relevant today through the influence the Bonbibi *pujo*, *jatra*, and *jongoler niyam* exert over the ethics, behaviour and restrictions on those who do the jungle. Arturo Escobar (2017) urges us to think of a "pluriverse"—the idea of a world in which many worlds might exist simultaneously—and the accompanying need to find new tools and categories of thinking beyond the ones that created the current economic, political and ecological crisis. *Jongoler niyam*, even with all of its imperfections, might be one such tool.

Based on its ethic of self-limitation and mutual care, it provides the basis for those who do the jungle to turn away from competition as a means of organizing their work. Instead, it allows them to organize their labour in a way that provides for the protection of the forest and governs resource use. Repositioned from the perspective of the jungle-

doers, the forest carries not only its own vitality and deities, but an inextricably linked moral and social order that manages their relationship to and use of the commons. The knowledge systems and ethical practices of *jongoler niyam* are “cosmo-political” (see Sahlins 2017) in a way that expands the purview of forest governance in the Sundarbans, and more broadly urges us to revise our assumptions around where viable models of political institutions can be found. To reiterate, my interest in resurrecting Bonbibī, *pīrs* and *faqīrs* as a form of governance is not with the aim of returning to “traditional beliefs” unadulterated by colonialism, but to show the simultaneous and overlapping “divine and daily” ways in which the forest and the relationship to it is already being governed. This includes the legal landscape of the jungle (Chapter 1), the “rules of the jungle” described in this chapter and as crucially the everyday social relationships between the fishers and the rangers to which I turn to in the next chapter.

Putting the jungle-doers’ own ways of relating to the forest at the centre of conservation holds the potential to replace coercion with reverence, and exclusion with mutuality. Simultaneously, Bonbibī’s “cosmo-politics” is replete with its own internal fault lines. The rules of the jungle are not a static code of unimpeachable ethics, but are constantly renegotiated as landscapes, labour relations, and interpretations change. In their elasticity lies both their continuing relevance, and their vulnerability to the same power imbalances and manipulation that plague other forms of forest governance.

## Chapter 3

### An Unlikely Friendship: Social Relationships Between Rangers and Fishers

Kamal da was covered in mud up to his thighs. In one hand he held his tiffin box and tucked under the other arm was a blanket and a flashlight. He walked toward the three of us - Piyali, Deb and I - who were sitting down to lunch on our veranda. We were surprised to see him. When Kamal da, with the two others, Nirmal da and Mrinal da, set off into the jungle to collect crabs he was usually gone for anything from seven to 12 days. It had only been three days since the three had loaded the boat with supplies and left the village. Deb, six years old, thrilled to see him, darted toward Kamal da to give him a hug. Unkindly, and uncharacteristically, he was brushed aside. As Kamal da neared us he started speaking disjointedly. He looked shaken, but also embarrassed. It was clear that something was seriously wrong.

“It was like a small helicopter [*choto helicopter motun*]...we realized it had a camera on it, it was following us for really long, at some point it came very low, we got scared...Nirmal wanted to hit it with the stick [*laathi*], we told him not to, it came so close that if we wanted to hit it we could... I’d never seen anything like it before, and then some 30 minutes later a speedboat came to where we were...they [the rangers] said if we didn’t stop they would start throwing bombs at us. I asked why bombs, we aren’t doing anything wrong...They were saying it just like that I think as a joke [*hasbi mojaaker*], but we felt fear [*bhoij*]...I’d never seen anything like this. They took our resty [Boat License Certificate, or BLC], they said now our photos had been taken [*chobhi tula hoy gache*], we had to give up our resty...They make us feel so small but there’s nothing we can do...I got so angry but I know we shouldn’t be angry in the jungle, besides anger won’t help, they are stronger than us.”

Piyali could barely understand what Kamal da was talking about. He was really upset, mumbling under his breath, repeating details to himself and to us. She couldn’t understand what he meant by a “small helicopter” with an attached camera and was showing her impatience. I, on the other hand, immediately recalled the conservation conference on the cruise ship I had attended where Pradeep Vyas, the head of the West Bengal Forest Department who we met in Chapter 1, had proudly described a new

initiative to use drones as a “force multiplier” to patrol the forests. Kamal da wasn’t delirious, as Piyali di might have thought: his boat had been caught by a drone.

Piyali was livid with Kamal da. The BLC had been rented for the fishing season for Rs. 40,000 [GBP 400]. It was the month of January, the three-four week window around the Chinese New Year when the demand for crabs reached its annual high. Without the BLC, the boat would miss one, maybe even two fishing cycles at the most lucrative time of the year. Debts for the fishing trip - the license, the food, the supplies - had to be paid, and their home was in desperate need of a new roof after the battering received during the previous year’s monsoon. Having the BLC confiscated was devastating.

While I understood Piyali’s anger, her next line of questioning caught me off guard. She wanted to know which ranger had confiscated the BLC. She wanted a specific name, and his associations and connections. Once Kamal da told her the names of the rangers, she continued her questions with even more surprise: “So you didn’t just get it back...you didn’t just pay the fine [*juripana*], how did you let him [a particular ranger] take the ‘resty’ [BLC]?” Later I gathered from the two of them that one of the rangers on the speedboat was well known to Kamal da and Piyali. Their boat regularly fished in his patrol’s jurisdiction. Piyali couldn’t fathom how or why Kamal da had let this ranger, a man with whom they had a good relationship, confiscate the licence.

Kamal da explained to Piyali that all three of them—Nirmal da and Mrinal da included—had repeatedly pleaded with the rangers to let them go. The rangers explained that there was no point in reasoning with them because the images of their particular *nauka* had already been transmitted to officers and bosses [*sahibs*] at the Sajnekhali Range Office. In fact, the speedboat had been sent to intercept the *nauka* via the drone footage. The ranger who was Kamal da and Piyali’s acquaintance had specifically said that this time even he couldn’t let them off. He was aware that the timing was terrible for them, but he had to follow strict instructions from the Range Office to confiscate the BLC and bring it back to where his bosses watched and waited.

The next few days were rife with anxiety as Piyali and Kamal da bickered with each other unkindly. As I talked with them to make sense of what had happened, it occurred to me that, if not for the drone, the fishers might have talked themselves out of their predicament and the rangers, based on their relationship with the particular fishing boat, could have let them off. Upon further investigation, I realized that these two groups,

tied together by making a living in the same forest, have an intimate, albeit at times antagonistic, and fairly interdependent relationship.

The Forest Department, in large part because of its colonial inheritances, is arguably one of the most maligned bureaucracies in India, and my first impressions were of its dominance, evident through the surveillance, fear, and power its agents exercise. The conservation laws that rangers have to implement are not only a source of harassment but also generate more risk for an already dangerous livelihood by creating an atmosphere of fear (see Chapter 1). From both forest rights activists and forest fishers I heard a litany of complaints regarding the Forest Department. Such vilification is neither new nor unique to the West Bengal Forest Department in India. Yet days and nights spent in range offices patrolling with forest rangers revealed to me that the fisher-ranger relationship is not merely about dominance. This chapter lays out a spectrum of associational behaviours between the two groups and shows how in many instances the relationships that emerge between rangers and fishers cannot be reduced to one governed by hostility or mere bureaucracy. Rangers were strict, but they were also sympathetic. While the fishers were vulnerable to the rangers, the rangers were also dependent on and vulnerable to the fishers.

In charting the complex social ties that mediate the fisher-ranger relationship, first, we patrol the mangrove creeks together with forest guards and rangers who live inside Range Offices and floating check-posts within the forests. We find out who the rangers are, what their work entails and how they make meaning of the forest landscape in which they work. In doing so, I distinguish between two kinds of rangers: those who grew up in the Sundarbans, and those from other parts of rural Bengal who have landed a coveted government job, but unanimously despise their posting in a mangrove swamp.

I then show the importance of social relationships, something that was described to me by the repeated use of the word *byabohar*. *Byabohar* broadly means how people treat one another. If fishers knew certain rangers or if they had developed good social relationships with them, their treatment oscillated between strictness [*koda*], leniency [*chaad*], and mutual care [*khatirdaari*], a term that means hospitality but is captured more appropriately by a sense of mutual empathy toward one another.

Finally, I address the ways in which *byabohar* is ruptured. Internal fragmentation within the fishers based on jealousy and competition lead to complaints against rangers who are being lenient to other boats, or to informing on other fishers. New technologies of surveillance introduced while I was in the field are also changing *byabohar* by taking the

“man out of the state” (see Brown 1992) and putting new pressures on fishers and rangers alike.

## Intimate Antagonists: Revisiting State and Society Relations

Revisiting E.P Thompson’s (1975) work, Nancy Peluso notes that “the themes and findings of *Whigs and Hunters* link the violent realization of private property in eighteenth-century rural England with distressingly similar experiences in sites across the globe in the twenty-first century” (Peluso 2017: 312). Thompson and much before him the Charter of the Forests from 1217 help us realize that the contemporary forms of land grabbing, enclosure, and encroaching capitalist, state and corporate control “on land and resources are stories foretold – if different in their details – as are myriad subversive efforts” (Peluso 2017: 319-320; see also Fairhead, Leach, Scoones 2012). Domination and dispossession employed by the state and the “repertoires of resistance” of farmers and fishers has been the classic framework through which resource conflicts have been written about. Scholars world over have been inspired by the Subaltern Studies Collective<sup>46</sup> and later by James Scott’s (1985) “weapons of the weak” which opened up new insights into everyday forms of resistance.

While Chapter 1 provided the brush strokes of the history and contemporary contestation regarding conservation in the Sundarbans, my interest in this chapter is to go beyond the framework of dominance and the “repertoires of resistance,” (Peluso 1992) in relation to resources use. Instead, in line with scholarship that blurs the boundaries between state and society (Gupta 1995; Fuller and Benie 2001; Chatterjee 1997; Kaviraj 1984) and traces different modes of intimacy (Herzfeld 1993; 2005; Shah 2013; 2018; Bear 2015) I show the importance of social relationships [*byabohar*] among individuals who often belonged to very different socio-economic backgrounds but were bound by their separate obligations to work in an equally hostile landscape.

*Byabohar* only makes sense as a framework to resolve the conflict between farmer (or fisher) and forest officer within a particular kind of bureaucracy. Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind for most of us when we think of bureaucracies is form filling (Graeber 2015), paper trails (Hull 2012) or paperwork (Mathur 2015). Licences and fines in the Sundarbans had the power to generate affects (see Navaro-Yashin 2007; 2012) and uncertainty (see Kelly 2006) and more broadly governed the everyday relationships people

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<sup>46</sup> Key scholars are Ranajit Guha, David Hardiman, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyan Prakash and several others.

had with the state (Gupta and Sharma 2006; Tuckett 2018). Disaggregating bureaucracies (Gupta 1995) allows one to understand the encounters of people with different levels of the state. My specific interest is in how laws, translated into the seemingly rigid black and white of paperwork, in fact resolve into many shades of grey. Emma Tarlo (2000) who, in studying the files in a municipal Delhi office in a resettlement colony during the Emergency period, shows how the state imposes its own agendas and “paper truths” through its bureaucracy. Often clerks made up unofficial rules that were adhered to with more rigidity than the “official rules”, underscoring the immense gap between policies and the lived reality of “officially recognized irregularities.” This rings true in the Sundarbans where one of the grossest “officially recognized irregularities” is that thousands of fishing boats go into the legally “out of bounds” core and sanctuary areas of the forest every day according to a whole set of unofficial norms where illegality has been incorporated (Andersson 2014; see also Das and Poole 2004; Goffman 2014).<sup>47</sup>

Pushing Tarlo’s work further, a number of scholars have shown why laws are interpreted in certain ways by certain individuals, searching for the logic behind the enforcement of the “unofficial rules.” Anna Tuckett’s (2018) ethnography of migrants encountering the Italian immigration bureaucracy shows how migrants learn to navigate the distinction between the “real” rules and the “official” rules through insider knowledge. We also see how some immigration officials are more than willing to help migrants play the system while others, for a variety of reasons and rationales, are not. Andrew Mathews (2011), in his study of the Mexican Forestry Department in Oaxaca, shows how the relationship between forest officials and the indigenous community is grounded in complicity, collusion and the vulnerability and ignorance of forest officials themselves. For him, the power of forest officials was vulnerable power, always under scrutiny and subject to challenge.

Building on the work of Tarlo, Tuckett, and Mathews, I look for the rhyme and reason behind non-formal processes of bureaucratic activity, and the motivations that explain how low-level organs of the state act. Graeber, as part of a much broader analysis of bureaucracies, portrays them as “dead zones of imagination,” spaces where “interpretive labour” no longer works (Graeber 2015: 102). In contrast, I argue that the West Bengal Forest Department is full of interpretive, even creative labour.<sup>48</sup> I use the

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<sup>47</sup> As I describe in Chapter 1.

<sup>48</sup> Chapter 1 also shows the “creativity” among high ranking forest bureaucrats whose interventions have at turns been stupid, pseudoscientific, and violent. What can’t be denied is their sheer range, which is evidence of both a creative license and a divergence in opinion, antithesis of our usual notions of how bureaucracy conducts its business.

term “interpretive labour”, or what Josiah Heyman (1995) calls “thought-work”, to express the opposite of rule-following, and show the ways in which forest rangers often (not always) go out of their way to be sympathetic to trespassing fishers, and the ways in which the fishers themselves negotiate the space delineated by the unofficial rules. Moreover, I try to set out the logic of this unofficial space, exploring the complex rationalisations that both rangers and fishers use to justify their actions, including individual discretion, identity, personal bonds, networks of connections [*jog-a-jog*] and most importantly social relationships [*byabohar*]. In line with Bear and Mathur (2015) and Bear (2015) this chapter shows how “bureaucratic spaces are central sites for the forging of the personhood, affective life and sometimes the radical potential of contemporary citizens” (Arendt 1958; Hetherington 2011 as cited in Bear and Mathur 2015). The rangers and fishers live within an interpretative bureaucracy founded on the logic of social relationships.

Uday Chandra writing about *adivasis* in Jharkhand and their relationship to the state argues that the “two are isomorphic, and that subaltern resistance, whether violent or peaceful, is best understood as the negotiation, not negation, of modern state power” (2017: 223). Chandra notes that the antagonism between *adivasis* and the postcolonial state in India today is far more intimate than it is taken to be. Building on this analysis, my findings reveal that in the Sundarbans forest often the relationship between lower level state bureaucrats—the foot soldiers of protection—and the fishers is in fact not antagonistic at all, but verges on friendship and conviviality. This relationship is often misunderstood by well-meaning activists who in their attempts to fight for justice on behalf of the fishers reify the state (Gupta 1995: 394) and in doing so target the wrong functionaries of a hierarchical bureaucracy.

Recent scholarship, specifically in relation to the Forest Department and forest-dwellers in India, has reconceived the state as both a “giver” and a “taker”. Building on Georges Dumezil’s 1988 essay on the dual categories inherent in sovereignty, this view establishes an “ongoing, constitutive fluctuation between the Mitra and Varuna aspects of the state” (Singh 2015: 73).<sup>49</sup> Working within this give-and-take literature, and rangers conflicting loyalties to the job and to personal needs (see also Vasan 2000; 2002), I offer an explanation as to when and why the state gives, and when and why it takes. I locate this “give-and-take” dynamic within the lowest level interactions between the state and the people: the interactions between two kinds of forest rangers—those who grew up in

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<sup>49</sup> The book is titled *Mitra-Varuna: Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty*.



the Sundarbans and the majority from other parts of West Bengal—and the fishers. Here the model of interaction is not a form of stranger sociality, or some form of impersonal and irreconcilable distance, but instead is encapsulated by other modes of relatedness and mutual care. Crucially, however, neither the rangers nor the fishers think of themselves as functioning on a spectrum of give-and-take. To them the fluctuation between “mitra” and “varuna” is mediated through *byabohar*, or social relationships.

## Disaggregating the State: The Foot-Soldiers of Forest Protection

Before we meet the foot soldiers of forest protection, it is important to sketch out their place in the bureaucratic hierarchy of the Forest Department. The head of the West Bengal Forest Force is known as the *Principal Chief Conservator of Forests* (PCCF). Under him is the *Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests* (Ad. PCCF). Their offices in Salt Lake, Kolkata house approximately 100 support staff - personal secretaries, junior bureaucrats, research assistants, typewriters, clerks, peons and chauffeurs. These two men are responsible for the forests and wildlife in the entire state of West Bengal, which stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas in the north to Sundarbans in the south, a region spanning 88, 752 square kilometres with 21.3 percent of the state’s geographical area under forest cover,<sup>50</sup> with a total population of 90 million people.

The *Field Director* (FD) is in charge of the Sundarbans forests. The Sundarbans are officially known as the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (STR), a region with 4.5 million people, approximately the same as Norway. Alongside him is the *Additional Field Director* (AFD), and under him is the *Deputy Field Director* (DFD). The STR office is headquartered in Canning.

Below the Canning office are the five Range Offices, outposts located in the middle of jungle and a few in villages hugging the forest. The mangrove forest, as noted in the Introduction, is one of the most indivisible landscapes in the world. It is located in the midst of the world’s largest delta, formed by three rivers that defy containment and where the separation between river and sea, water and land, sweet and salty are in constant flux. Yet like all colonial projects of legibility and revenue extraction (Scott 1998), this delta and its forests have been parcelled into a series of intricate pieces, divisions, sub-divisions, and sub-sub divisions. Each of the five administrative Ranges has a physical

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<sup>50</sup> [http://www.westbengalforest.gov.in/forest\\_of\\_wb.php](http://www.westbengalforest.gov.in/forest_of_wb.php)

building, the Range Office, with attached living quarters for the rangers. Each Range is further subdivided into Forest Beats, which themselves are partitioned into Blocks and their constituent Compartments.

Each Range Office has its own human hierarchy. There is a Range Officer (RO) known colloquially as *Bodo Babu* - the “big boss” - who heads the Range. Under him is a Beat Officer (BO) known as the *Choto Babu*, the “small boss”. Under them are several Forest Guards or *Bono Shromiks*. In addition, each Range depending on its size and requirements has a few daily wage workers—boatmen, cleaners, cooks—hired on a contractual or casual basis through the Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) in neighbouring villages.

The distance between the hierarchical rungs within the Forest Department is immense. Sudipto Kaviraj describes a widening post-Independence chasm between a Weberian rationalist bureaucratic elite and personnel at lower levels, to which he ascribes the failed implementation of policies “reinterpreted beyond recognition” by those lower down in the bureaucracy (Kaviraj 1991 as cited in Fuller and Harriss 2000: 9). This chasm is evident to the naked eye and ear. While the PCCF, Ad. PCCF, FD, DFD and AFD speak English, and often learned Bengali after being posted to West Bengal from another state, all the men working at the Range Office level speak only Bengali. There are social differences even within individuals who work at the Range Offices. Range Officers and Beat Officers are recruited through the State Public Service Commission. These are highly coveted government jobs within the bureaucracy of the West Bengal Forest Department (WBFD) secured through a competitive exam. Upon being recruited into the WBFD, these lower level bureaucrats can be transferred to any posting in the various forests of West Bengal.

In contrast to the RO and BO, the majority of the Forest Guards grew up in poor villages in the Sundarbans. They all began their work with the Department as daily wage labourers doing odd jobs ranging from manually rowing boats loaded with officials and paperwork (in the days before motorized transport) to cleaning and cooking for officers. After years or decades of casual work, many of them were made permanent government employees in or around 1997 when the staffing policy was formalized. Despite radically different socio-economic and caste backgrounds within a single Range Office, working in a hostile landscape and in constrained circumstances forces these men—they are all men—to get along with one another and fishers even as their initial instincts are to project “us” versus “them” distinctions (Redfield 1955). In short, social and economic capital is

in much shorter supply at the bottom than the top of the hierarchy. As one descends down the rungs, one finds a steady decrease in office size, the average number of phones and computers, proficiency in English, level of education, caste background. Even the size of the laminated wildlife posters in each office steadily decrease.

### ***Patrolling the Creeks: Boredom, Madness and Social Alienation***

Forest rangers live on land-based or floating camps. Life on these camps is rather strange. Postings on a floating check-post are the lowest in the pecking order. A floating check-post is a large wooden boat that has been gutted from the inside to make room for bunk beds. The toilet consists of a hole opening onto the river. Water comes from plastic drums, and electricity is hooked up to solar panels. Rangers often described postings on floating camps as extended bouts of camping. These postings can last up to five years. Space, both to live but even to move around, is limited to a small deck on the top of the boat. This is not that different from life on a fishing boat with the exception that fishing boats go back to the village after seven to ten days in the forest creeks. Rangers live in their outposts throughout the year.

Space is also, unexpectedly, a luxury in the land-based camps. They are in the depths of an inhospitable mangrove jungle, enclosed – like prisoners, or perhaps tigers in a zoo - within a fenced cage topped with barbed wire. A young unmarried ranger, recently having been posted in Champta, a Range Office in the interiors of the forest, described the monsoon season—from June to September—as being “jailed in the jungle.” Range Offices and Beat Offices look like military barracks, painted in camo colours and equipped with rifles and walkie-talkies. Buildings are constructed many meters above the ground due to floods. Each camp is slightly different, with even the smallest variation affecting the wellbeing of the staff that inhabit it. For example, one camp had a badminton court where matches and even mini-tournaments were played on a regular basis. Other camps with less space made do with carrom<sup>51</sup> or cards-games in their free time. One or two camps had decent enough soil to have their own vegetable patch, an endowment not to be taken for granted in a saline delta. Range Offices located next to the Bangladesh border double up as bases for the Border Security Force (BSF) that patrol the India-Bangladesh border. The BSF staff have a different uniform and bigger rifles but the twin goals of national security and safeguarding the national animal neatly conjoin. Some

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<sup>51</sup> Carrom is a popular South Asian board game.

Range Offices had tourist watch towers overlooking the forests. In the evenings when the forest is closed to tourists, and during the nine months of the year when there are barely any outside visitors, these watchtowers are used as scenic hangout spots for the rangers. They sit there with their evening cups of tea, playing cards or reading the latest newspaper from the last trip to the mainland. Often one found the staff desperately attempting to catch some cell phone signal, waving their phones in the air, hoping to call their wives and children at home.



Figure 21 *Patrolling the forests.*

The responsibilities of rangers and patrol staff are twofold. As the men charged with “protecting” the forests, they spend anything from five-ten hours every day patrolling the jurisdiction of their particular Beat on motorized wooden boats known as *bhotbhotis*, named onomatopoeically after the loud, hacking coughs their engines ceaselessly emit. Once back at the camp, they spend hours filling fat, ruled registers with information regarding their patrols: offences encountered, the coordinates and timings of their excursions, the quantity of fuel spent, the rations used up at the camp, and so on and so forth. Each time a fishing boat is caught several intricate details are filled out regarding the offence and the offender [*aporadhi*]. Paperwork, files, registers, forms covered every surface of their offices. During my time in the field, higher-level bureaucrats were at the cusp of pushing e-governance reforms in which everything—

from patrols to the plantation of mangrove nurseries—would be monitored through the internet and “smart” technologies. However, when I visited the offices, paperwork was still one of the biggest responsibilities of the job. Even with e-patrolling apps that automatically tracked the rangers’ movements using GPS, the men came back to their office and recorded details in the usual notebooks.

The rangers shared a feeling that they had a difficult, and at times nightmarish, posting. After a few days in the camps I couldn’t help but feel claustrophobic myself. We spent hours and hours on a boat, with endless forested sandbanks on either side and no sign of life - human or animal. The sound of the *bhotbhoti* throbbed; the engine fumes stank; and the scorching heat beat down. There were some punctuations to this monotony. Every now and then the boatman [*majhi*] or ranger pointed out a bald eagle, spot an Irrawaddy dolphin, steer the boat toward a snoozing crocodile, or stop to photograph fresh pug marks. Every few hours we also came across a “trespassing” fishing boat, leading to an exchange—it could last for 15-20 minutes or as long as sharing a meal together for two hours—after which the boat was either fined or “let go.” But then the patrol carried on as before. After several days of the same drill, my initial excitement quickly waned.

The life of a Forest Ranger in the Sundarbans is characterized by deep loneliness. Forest rangers confirmed to me that the hardest aspect of their work was not the danger or the physical strain, which was light in comparison to their farming or migrant relatives. It was the fact that their job was truly boring. Much like the work of Fassin (2017) in which he shows the ordinary aspects of law enforcement in Paris are often characterized by inactivity, boredom, and eventless days and nights, forest rangers posted in faraway outposts in the middle of the forests felt both deeply bored and lonely. The main challenge and the unanimous concern for all rangers was their social isolation and their desperate desire for human contact.

At some of the camps, a ranger has no one to talk to except one other ranger for days at a stretch. Sometimes there is no cell phone signal. Some camps have a TV, but the cable connection is weak and in the long months of the monsoon disappears entirely. Often the only form of entertainment is to play cards [*taash kbela*]. The floating camps brought their own, dire litany of complaints. Rangers expressed how they had no space to use their legs to walk, going from patrol boat to floating camp, and feared that both their minds and bodies might atrophy. After a few days of patrolling myself, I wasn’t at all surprised how many of the men shared concerns about going insane. Manoranjan

Gayan, a Ranger in the Tetultola floating camp, said matter-of-factly: “I fear I will go mad [*pagal*] if I’m not transferred...it is hard not to lose one’s mental balance [*manoshik santulan*] here.” This sentiment was repeated to me by dozens of other rangers. They shared anecdotes of their counterparts who had begun to hallucinate, how in the months of the monsoons they felt so socially alienated that they began to talk to themselves, and how the turbulent waters made them so seasick that they lost their appetite to eat. Each Range Office had its own variation of a particular forest guard who had been posted on a floating camp for several years who now felt listless, depressed, unable to move or talk very much. Would they also become depressed like their colleagues? Rangers were genuinely worried they would go mad.



*Figure 22 A floating check-post. Rangers live on these boats for months and at times years till they are posted to another Range Office.*

At the centre of the rangers’ suffering was the sensed deprivation of missing out on family life and the rhythms of the household [*shonghshar*]. They missed not being able to be present for births, deaths, and watching their children grow up. One particular boatman narrated how he had lost his daughter while on duty. At the time there were no cell phones, and so he had only heard the news of his daughter’s death on the radio a day after her passing. By the time he returned to his village, a full day’s journey away, she had already been cremated. He had fresh tears in his eyes as he narrated this story, and stated that the fact that he was far away from his family and so cut off from their life and well-

being haunted him. There was no alternative though. This was his only means to make a living, and so he continues to work in a Range Office. Far from family and friends, pushed to the point of mental breakdown, the rangers also simultaneously acknowledged that they were lucky to have government jobs. While their work was neither easy nor meaningful, it was a job they were obliged to do to maintain their own households. Like the fishers, the logic of being a ranger was motivated by an attempt to provide for one's own *shonghsbar*<sup>52</sup>.

### ***Differences Within the Forest Rangers***

Over the course of my visits to various Range Offices and my interviews and patrols with rangers I noticed a palpable pattern that distinguished the men into two different kinds of rangers, with different value systems and meanings they invest in the forest landscape. This divide mapped onto those who had grown up in the Sundarbans, and those who had been posted to the Sundarbans from elsewhere in rural West Bengal.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, those who grew up in the Sundarbans talked about the forest in very similar terms to those used by fishers. Many of them have several close relatives who still do the jungle or did so until recently. They know what it means to work in the particular ecology of the mangrove forest.

The Forest Department staff from other parts of West Bengal, while grateful to have landed an aspirational *sarkari chakri* [government job], feel theirs is definitely the worst of these. They are posted in the middle of a mangrove swamp with tigers, sporadic cyclones, no TV, no holidays during festivals, and no family. In contrast to their local counterparts, they find the mangrove landscape entirely alien. Even for those who grew up in rural areas, and as close as 100 kilometres away, the stories and mythologies of the Sundarbans are so particular that these men have no knowledge of or sensibilities towards their work environment.

While the staff from outside the Sundarbans jumped to tell me the Latin name of the Hental tree - *phoenix paludosa* - the rangers from the Sundarbans explained how its leaves were once used to thatch village homes before being replaced by hay after paddy cultivation became common. If the former group contrasted the flowering and fruit-giving mangrove species, the latter explained how it was the *khalsi* flower that made the first and sweetest honey, blooming before any other flower in the forest. Forest Rangers

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<sup>52</sup> See Chapter 6 for the importance of family and household.

who grew up elsewhere knew little about the tides, winds or the workings of the river, all of which are quintessential ways of knowing, being and dwelling (Ingold 2000) in the Sundarbans. Often it was the fishers themselves who explained the many qualities of the forest not easily captured in charts and posters, its multi-layered histories and biology; the particular medicinal qualities of a tree; what differentiated venomous snakes from non-venomous ones; or the signs foreshadowing the inclement weather they sensed approaching. We know landscapes to be invested with meaning, memory, value (e.g. Gell 1995; Ingold 2000; Basso 1996) and potency (Allerton 2013) and the physical and symbolic interactions through which the distinct groups of rangers imbued meaning in their environment were wide ranging and palpably different.

The distinction between these two groups—rangers from the Sundarbans and those from elsewhere—also played out in relation to the religious beliefs of the region, especially their belief in Bonbibi. For those forest guards who grew up in the Sundarbans, faith in Bonbibi was much like that of the fishers. In my conversations with them, they tried at first to distance themselves from the villagers’ beliefs, but on further probing they quickly admitted that the forest was her abode. After all, they grew up partaking in the Bonbibi *pūjo* and watching the *Manusa jatra* and *Dukhey jatra* - theatrical performances that last several nights - in their villages (Chapter 2). They knew not only of the tigers that inhabit the forest, but also the tiger-demons that inhabit it. They also knew about Bonbibi’s powers, and the *jongoler niyam* that instructed one how to gain her protection in the jungle.

The rangers from elsewhere in West Bengal had a more fraught relationship to Bonbibi. They were desperate, at least initially, to create a distance between themselves and the village folk [*gramerlok*] and village beliefs [*gramer chinta bhavna*] and performed their scepticism more aggressively. Biplap Bhaumik, a ranger in Sajnekhali, made it clear that he was not from the Sundarbans and didn’t believe in Bonbibi within the first few minutes that I met him, pronouncing: “These are very very poor villagers, they are illiterate...you see, educated men and women [*podha lekha manush*, referring also to himself] don’t keep superstitions.” There was no doubt that Biplap da worshiped the goddess Durga, Saraswati and Lakshmi—who like other deities in the Hindu pantheon were worshipped by upper caste counterparts, but Bonbibi was too “folk,” worshipped by the poor and “uneducated” (see also Jalais 2010). Ashish, a ranger who grew up in Midnapur (another district of West Bengal) told me that it was the fishers’ blind faith in Bonbibi that was causing their deaths. As I listened to Ashish, I immediately recalled a story I had overheard



from Soumya Chakrovarty, the AFD based in Canning, during a field trip the previous month. “You know what happened in Pirkhali 3 [the name of a forest jurisdiction] the other day....the *guneens*<sup>53</sup> got off the boat to offer prayers and he was the first to be eaten by the tiger.” This was met by roaring laughter from the few rangers and conservationists present - Ashish among them. He was now repeating almost exactly the same anecdote to me. Like their upper caste superiors – and perhaps in part learned from them - these men wanted to project an “us” versus “them” contrast. In their attitude I sensed that Range Officers and Beat Officers believed that they belonged to a “great tradition” with their urbane rationality as government employees, and their levels of education, in comparison to the “little tradition” of the fisherfolk, their illiteracy and faith in obscure goddesses (Redfield 1955).

There were clues, however, that implied a more complicated story. Amidst the rifles, camouflage, and walkie-talkies, each Range Office has a Bonbibi temple. Each Forest Outpost I visited, regardless of whether it functioned as stop off points for tourists, or doubled up with the Border Security Force or simply housed the offices and homes of Forest Department staff, had fresh flowers, incense sticks and oil lamps lit in front of the Bonbibi idol.<sup>54</sup> In addition, each Range Office had its own annual Bonbibi *pūjo*. Just like the village *pūjos*, the *joburnama* (see Chapter 2) was read out and similar ritual offerings made to her idol. Other rangers from neighbouring camps are invited to attend these *pūjos*, special food is cooked and eaten communally by all the staff present. At the Range Offices, Bonbibi seemed much more than a tourist gimmick.

This tension resolved only after my initial days with the rangers had passed. Take, for example, a Netidhopani Range Officer, who during our first few conversations had repeatedly distinguished himself and his colleagues’ beliefs from that of “irrational” fishers. After having spent a few days together, when my formal interviews had clearly ended and I was simply hanging around, patrolling during the day and sharing meals in the evening, the same ranger decided to tell me a number of stories featuring the various spirits, deities and demons that resided in the forest. There no longer seemed to be a separation between himself and the fishers. Instead his stories contained a collective “we” referring to all those who spent long periods of time in the forest and who heard, saw and

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<sup>53</sup> Those who do the jungle were accompanied by knowledgeable men known as *guneens* or *bauleys* to offer customary chants, to ward off danger and invoke the protection of Bonbibi.

<sup>54</sup> In the village, the work of looking after shrines—be it of Bonbibi, or goddesses Kali, Ma Manusa, Sitla etc. was done by young girls and women. In the Range Office, it was men, for only men worked as rangers, and it was interesting to see how they took on the role of looking after the shrine as women would in the village

felt the strange things that happened there. Later, just before I was leaving the Range, he asked if I might consider purchasing and sending a new brass gong for the Bonbibi temple, voicing how crucial it was to keep offering the deity of the forest prayers, and that any offering would be a good blessing for my own work too. The scepticism in our formal interviews had disappeared, and Bonbibi had been reinstated as the deity of the forest. Other rangers wavered more indeterminately between devotion and doubt, aware of their own psychological need to have a protector, but also conscious of the many who, despite Bonbibi, were killed in a dangerous forest.



*Figure 23 A Bonbibi temple in a Range Office*

### ***Byabohar* or the Importance of Social Relationships**

My first impression from living in a neighbourhood of fishers was that doing the jungle was fearful work not simply because of the tiger but because of the forest rangers, who fined them, harassed them, and confiscated their licenses.<sup>55</sup> In fact, this was something I was made aware of even before I began fieldwork—resource-use was and continues to be predicated on violence—and there is no doubt that the Forest Department is more powerful than the fishers. Nevertheless, what fieldwork revealed, contrary to my assumptions, is that almost every household has some sort of a relationship with rangers, which varied in intimacy and mutual care, and this relationship

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<sup>55</sup> Chapter 4 elaborates not just fines and enclosures, but the moralizing discourse used by the conservation apparatus.

is predicated more on conviviality than fear. What surprised me, and what union leaders and activists continue to misunderstand, is that many rangers and fishers were actually friends.

Take for example Piyali's relation with forest rangers. Piyali uses the word *koshto*, meaning hardship, and *anando*, meaning joy, to describe the duality of doing the jungle. The joy of being a crab collector for her was that life on a *nauka* had a very strong sense of community. She described "the life of the jungle" or *jongoler jeebon* to be full of camaraderie between the various groups of fishers on different *naukas* and the rangers as well. Hesitating, she admits that this is changing, but remembers a time not too long ago when rangers and patrol staff chatted and smoked *beedis* with the men, and asked questions about the whereabouts of tigers. While they made small talk, and exchanged news about their children, they shared food too. "My vegetable preparations [*shobji*] were famous amongst the jungle-doers and the foresters", she says boastfully. On days when she was sick and couldn't go into the jungle, the rangers asked after her, saying they had come looking for her food.

When I shared with Piyali the complaints I heard from other fishing boats regarding the Forest Department, she was quick to counter these narratives. "They aren't all bad" she retorted, referring to my way of talking about all rangers as one homogenous category. In defending the Forest Department, she explained that both kinds of people—fishers and forest rangers—were only trying to make a living. They treated each other respectfully, and this respect was borne out of an understanding of each other's obligations in life. Some stories exceeded respectability, and it seemed as if some rangers were good friends of Piyali's. A particular ranger she knew called her sporadically to check in on her and see how she was getting on after her operation. I asked if he might have had a romantic interest in her. Piyali said, "No, it's just that he's lonely, stuck in the middle of nowhere, it's a way for him to pass time [*aimni time paaser junne*]." As Chapter 6 will describe "passing time" is its own kind of romance, but in this particular case Piyali was insistent in stating that they were good friends [*bhalo bbondhu*] and had been for years. She said that rangers were aware that she was poor, unmarried and unwell, and as a result there were many instances when they let her boat go out of pity and goodwill. Piyali, for her part, sometimes gave a few crabs to these men whose families were in far off places. She felt bad for the wives of rangers, imagining their sleepless nights worrying about faraway husbands who, while they had landed a government job, had the worst kind possible. In Piyali's view, most of the rangers were very sympathetic men.



Figure 24 Rangers and fishers sharing food and hanging out.

These were the months when I had simultaneously begun to attend meetings of forest rights activists, which centred on highlighting the misdemeanours of the Forest Department. The narratives in these meetings, given often not just by activists but fishers themselves, were so different from those of Piyali and others given to me in the village. On further probing, the sympathy of Piyali and others was rooted in an astute understanding of the fact that the orders came from above, from the *sahibs* or bosses, and that the rangers were only doing their jobs. She narrated the story of how five or six years ago the Forest Department proclaimed that those who do the jungle were forbidden to cut dry wood from the jungle for cooking and instead were instructed to buy gas stoves for their fishing expeditions. She said to me, “If we could afford gas stoves wouldn’t we have them in our homes before getting them for the *nauka* [boat]?” She had protested to the rangers about this law and told them how ridiculous it was. The rangers, especially those who are from the Sundarbans, don’t have gas stoves in their own homes and said in their defence that these were just orders from above. These rules, arbitrary fines, and arbitrary bans on crab collecting made her feel anger towards the Forest Department. However, she like others we meet in this chapter, did not fault the rangers that she interacted with, and instead directed her anger at the high-ranking bureaucrats who passed

these laws without any notion of peoples' lives and constraints (see Herzfeld 1993).

### ***Between Sympathy, “The Stick” and Mutual Obligation***

I asked Arnab da, another crab collector from Bali Island with whom I was very close during fieldwork, to explain to me the logic behind the relationship between forest rangers and fishers. In trying to answer my question, he gave a variety of examples that ended with: “At the end of the day, it is *byabohar*.” *Byabohar* refers to how two people treat one other based on their social rapport. It encompasses how they talk, if they are kind, respectful, trustworthy and acting logically. It is a social relationship that can be built over time according to an individual's personability.

The particular relationship a fisher has with a particular ranger or a set of rangers depends entirely on one's *byabohar*. Arnab da turned to an example to illustrate: “If you have a good relationship over time...they [rangers] aren't going to suddenly confiscate your nets and ask you to leave, imagine if I just asked you to leave my house today. You are not a stranger. I can't do that. Sometimes they'll say, 'Don't come next week, the bosses [*sahibs*] are coming on a tour,' and if we still don't listen to them then they will fine us.” For many like Arnab da, the relationship oscillated between getting a *danda*, or “the stick” referring to any kind of punishment, and *chaad*, literally meaning “to let go” or to “set free” and describing situations in which allowances or concessions are made. The key point here is that the two were not strangers to one another but knew each other's material and social obligations well.

Whether you got the *danda* or *chaad* depended on the rangers. Some rangers had family members themselves who were fishers, blurring the lines between fisher and ranger, state and society. Vasan (2002) in her analysis of forest guards in Himachal Pradesh notes that lower-level functionaries exist in a grey zone “torn between the demands of the state for which they work, and those of the society, in which they live and socialise” (ibid: 4126). In a similar vein the ranger and fisher relationship was fraught because of oscillating loyalties. If there were kinship relations, however distant, these could be a starting point for good *byabohar* but, Arnab da explained, this was not at all a guarantee for preferential treatment. The main ways of building *byabohar* was through personal bonds over years, friendships and good treatment of one another. Like all friendships, Arnab da and many others recounted how *byabohar* could be ruptured by a falling-out with a particular ranger.

Other aspects of *byabohar* were less mutualistic, and more dependent on individuals. Another crab collecting couple, Anjali and Manoj, explained to me that in this particular season their *nauka* goes fishing in Pirkhali 3 [a particular administrative block] because the current rangers posted in that jurisdiction was “not very strict” [*beshi koda*]. Manoj says, “If we get caught once, he won’t fine [us]. If we get caught twice he won’t fine [us]. The third time we get caught he writes on our *resty* [implying a fine on the BLC].” Manoj and Anjali’s choice of where to go fishing is based on their judgment around the strictness or leniency of the ranger, and the broad range of social connectedness (Gardner 2012) – and her personal disposition toward the rangers - that this implies.

### ***Khatirdari: Mutual Care or Mutual Bribery?***

*Byabohar* goes further than sociality and respectful treatment. There were several ways to purposefully improve one’s relationship with certain rangers. This could be done via *khatirdari* for the rangers, a term that means hospitality in Urdu and Bengali but implies to take care of, show concern for, and appease another. It is a sort of interested hospitality but a form of hospitality nonetheless. Nitesh kaku explained *khatirdari* to me through a variety of examples. Sometimes a fishing boat will ask if a particular Range Office is in need of anything from the village markets, such as a shaving blade or hair oil. At other times, as Piyali did, fishers will give gifts—fish, crabs or some prepared vegetables—to rangers. However, the best kinds of presents, a notch above Piyali’s *khatirdari*, are in the form of meat [*mangsho*], alcohol [*maudh*], or other items that rangers crave in the middle of the forest like fried snacks or betel nuts [*supari* and *paan*]. Nitesh kaku summed up: “Poor rangers, they also enjoy eating well. A little of bit of meat and alcohol makes them happy. They are just like us, we can’t imagine a meal without fish, like us they are not vegetarians [*niramish*] either, but where will they get *murgi* [chicken] in the jungle.”

When I discussed these favours with crab collectors and fishers, their motivations were twofold. First, they felt genuine sympathy for the rangers stuck in the middle of nowhere and totally devoid of the creature comforts and social bonds of home. In parallel, these small favours were the currency of exchange for unofficial permission to collect crabs in particular out-of-bounds parts of the forest. In many cases, fishers held both these motivations at once. In Nitesh kaku’s case, he made clear that such gifts were not offered by his boat out of altruism, but with the strategic intention to try to forge a

favourable relationship with rangers. In some cases when the *byabohar* is good, specific gifts are even solicited by the rangers. “I get calls all the time,” from rangers making requests for various items from the village, says Nitesh kaku. He then decides when and which rangers he would like to favour. Nitesh kaku, an older man who is himself the father of two middle aged crab collectors, feels he has tangible power over the rangers and choses, based on the rangers he likes, whom to show his interested hospitality to. Khatirdari here resonates with what Gupta (1995) notes in relation to the practice of bribe-giving which requires huge amount of performativity and insider knowledge.

For Piyali, Arnab da and Nitesh kaku, there is no bitterness around these gift exchanges. They know exactly what kinds of relationships of dependency they are entering into and do so willingly. Others, like Anjali and Manoj, find it impossible to sustain these “gift exchanges.” Anjali and Manoj are a couple who have been crab collecting for over 30 years. At the time that I met them they had a large debt due for their newly built brick home. Anjali’s take on *khatirdari* was very different: “How many times and how many rangers will we feed [*kato lok key khetey debo*]? We’ve never done it and we can’t afford to.... today we bring them one *murgi* [chicken], tomorrow what if they start asking for *kaashi* [goat, which is much more expensive and a luxury in the village]...how will we manage?” In their view, once you begin to “feed” the rangers—a word which also refers to bribing in South Asia—it is endless, and they don’t have the means to play such a game. The two feel disgruntled by the *khatirdari* of other fishers, and often complain to the rangers about other fishing boats, a theme I return to in the following section.

The exchange of small gifts involved in *khatirdari* has been typecast, in the context of South Asia, as a form of corruption. Parry (2000) writing about the “crisis of corruption” drawing from case studies at the Bhilla Steel Plant distinguishes between gifts, commissions and bribes. In the Sundarbans villages and in relation to government offices there were several different words for bribes too – these ranged from “bribe” [*ghoos*] pocket money [*haath karooh* or *cha paani karooh*]. These were usually in cash. Instead the forms of *khatirdaari* and giving gifts out of goodwill in the jungle were always in kind. One stark difference in the narrative of corruption as sketched out by Parry is that there is a sense that the “bribe” is traveling up the chain all the way to the topmost politicians with the one’s at the bottom taking small cuts if any. Parry shows, like Gupta (1995), how certain transactions can be seen as purely commercial while others are seen as friendly deeds done out of one’s good will. The “gifts” given to Forest Rangers were those given

for the consumption of the rangers and were primarily done out of goodwill and at times even out of friendship [*bhondutto*]. There is no doubt that such relations can very easily become asymmetrical and exploitative, and in the context of the obvious power imbalance between the Forest Department and the fishers, these relations have the potential to become extractive. However, because of the plight of rangers themselves, the relationship of dependency runs both ways. Fishers are often the only other human beings that they will meet for days. While the fishers depend on the rangers to carry on their work in the jungle, the rangers also depend on the fishers for their own sanity through conversations, stories, and material connections to the village and a lifestyle beyond the jungle. *Khatirdari* as practiced in the Sundarbans can't simply be characterized as bribery. It provides the interpretative space for two low-status groups, the fishers and rangers, to develop social rapport and sympathy for the other's obligations to *shonghsar* [family and household], and to reach arrangements for mutual survival (Das 2004 as cited in Singh 2015: 95-96).

***From the Rangers' Point of View: "We didn't make the laws, but it is our job to follow them"***

During my first patrols with forest rangers, I witnessed rangers shouting at the fishermen, fining them for their offences and even verbally threatening them. Some rangers took photos on their smart phones with a newly installed e-patrolling app capturing "offenders" [*aporadhi*]. Much of this reprimanding and photographing seemed as if it was being performed, both for me, and for the fishers too. It is in moments of doubt, when the limits of the state's power and the authority of the Forest Department become visible—such as when thousands of fishing boats are constantly breaking the law—that the desire to perform one's power is strongest (Mathews 2011). It was also the first time that rangers had an anthropologist, and moreover a woman, patrolling with them. The first few days many of them thought I was going to send reports to their superiors on whether they were doing their job or not. My first few patrols in each Range Office were an awkward experience for both parties. A few days in, as I ignored their files and paperwork but persistently questioned how many children they had, what they did during their free time, where they grew up, the performativity wore off, and the rangers began to share their opinions more openly. After our first few patrols, the majority of forest rangers acted more leniently, and generally with a sense of lethargy and matter-of-factness, toward the fishermen.



During later interviews, and informal chats over meals, my observation of this leniency was backed up by explanations and an awareness that there were few options for the majority of these fishers to provide for their families. While both kinds of rangers, those who grew up in the Sundarbans and those from outside, expressed empathy for the fishers, the former were more acutely aware of the lack of alternative options to provide for one's *shonghsbar* in the village.

At some Range Offices, genuine pity led to the creation of a new set of informal norms (cf Anders 2015; Hornberger 2008) to navigate “officially recognized irregularities”. As Kaushal da, the Range Officer in Haldibari in the interiors of the core area, explained to me: “They have no other way to feed their families, I try not to be too harsh to them... Unless they are committing an actual [*ashul*] offence, I usually let them be. We give them warnings sometimes, but this is just our job.” When I pushed him to explain how he decides who to fine and who to leave, and what he meant by an *actual* offence, he elaborated that there were the official rules - no fishing allowed in the core area - but there was no way to enforce them. However, there were other offences for which he did punish fishing boats. For example, manta rays [*chakon maach*] and sharks [*kamol*] were an endangered species, and fishing for them was an offence that could earn you a court case. If he encountered a fishing boat with a manta ray or shark, he was sure to fine its owners, and even confiscate the fishing equipment.

Other rangers, especially those in the furthest outposts, openly admitted that they survived thanks to the company and friendship of fishers. When we ran into trespassing fishers on our patrols, the conversations indicated knowledge of the personal lives of the fishers. They asked about earlier illnesses and children, and generally made small talk. During their endless patrols and lonely lives in secluded camps, fishermen were the only other human beings the rangers actually had a chance to chat with, share *beedis* [cheap cigarettes], and offer each other food. It was hard to be too strict on the fishers if they were also the only people you had a chance to share a meal with after days of eating alone. This was not just the case between Sundarbans fishers and Sundarbans residents who had become employees of the Forest Department but also Forest Rangers and Beat Officers from other parts of West Bengal, the majority who were higher caste and also with higher levels of education. But even among these men, there was no choice but to be on good terms with fishers for otherwise they feared they would go insane out of social isolation.

A few of the Beat Offices are located in villages, rather than in the middle of the jungle, and rangers posted there offered a separate justification for their leniency toward

the fishers: to do otherwise would be detrimental to their own well-being. “If I am too strict [*beshi koda*] then the villagers will attack [*gramer lok akromand korbey*]. They will rise up in arms against you, so you have to explain to them and be nice to them. This is the case especially when you work next to a locality. It’s different when you are in the jungle.” This fear also has historical roots, and a few decades ago hostilities between the rangers and villagers were extreme enough that rangers feared even setting foot in the village. Physical and verbal skirmishes were also the norm and it was not unheard of for fishers to physically assault rangers who treated them disrespectfully. This I was told happened precisely when there was no prior social relationship with the ranger.

In addition not all rangers are as sympathetic as Kaushal da. Some rangers, even those who belonged to the Sundarbans, *byabohar* was disregarded when they did their job. Abhijeet Kumar Mondol is one of them. He is the Forest Guard [*Choto Babu*] currently posted in the Sajnekhali office. He lives on Bali Island in the neighbouring village from where I was based in a large brick home with a beautiful courtyard. With a father who worked for the Forest Department, and after serving for 40 years there himself, he is visibly better off than his neighbours. The family has a set of speakers and generators that they rent out for weddings and *pujos*, and he also has a boat which he first rented to the Forest Department and has now repurposed for tourism. He is very grateful for his job and feels lucky to work close to where his family lives.

I asked him to explain the relationship he has with fishers from his neighbourhood, and how he dealt with them in the forest while on duty. His response didn’t consider *byabohar*. He said that the ritual of wearing the uniform transformed him. “I can’t tell you why this happens myself but as soon as I change into my *khakhi poshaak* [the uniform], I change completely as a person too. When I have my machine [rifle] in hand and that uniform on, I won’t even spare my parents [Ma Baba] if I were to see them. My entire face, my expressions, my mood changes. Then there is no one who is my close kin [*amaar apon log*].” There were others like Abhijeet da, at times drawn from the group of rangers who came from outside the Sundarbans and others like him who lived amongst the fishers, who were unsympathetic or notoriously unkind to the fishers, and had reputations for meting out harsh punishments. On Bali there were specific names of rangers that I came to know who—for personal reasons, and perhaps reasons of personality—did not treat fishers with respect. Others were known for their sexual misconduct with women fishers. Abhijeet da was one such ranger who, in their view, had a bad way of treating people [*kharaap byabohar*]

### *Internal Splinterings: Jealousy in a Pure Forest*

In my conversations with one of the rangers whom I got to know well, Manoranjan Gayan, he revealed another, even stricter limit on his lenience. If he let off a boat without fining it, another boat might inform on him to his boss. Rangers not only face accusations of shirking their duty, but also of favouritism and self-interest. Manoranjan Gayan worried a lot about this and said that the fishers had a lot of jealousy [*bingsha*] and infighting among themselves. It is this insight into the divisions within the fishers that I turn to in this section.

When I asked Kamal da if he complained about other boats he immediately replied in the affirmative. He gave me a concrete example of some simmering discontent in our own neighbourhood:

“This Nilanjan babu [ranger] at Dobanki [a forest beat] he never writes on Tarun’s resty [fines him]. They have a good relationship [*bhalo sampark*] with one another. Tarun will get caught five-ten times but he won’t get fined. Whereas we, we’ll get fined....so the next time some of them [referring to people he goes fishing with] go to pay the fine [*juripana*], they will let them know, they will say ‘so and so boat doesn’t get written [fined] by so and so *babu* [ranger].”

Tarun da, the beneficiary of this preferential treatment, came from a poor household himself and fished with two other men who were also poor and landless. I also knew that Tarun da was struggling to pay his own debts the year that I was in the field. It was good for Tarun’s boat that they were being allowed to fish without a fine, I reasoned. Why didn’t everyone, Kamal da included, just keep quiet? A large part of the answer related to prior tensions in the village. These hostilities ran the gamut from extramarital affairs that inspired festering interpersonal jealousies to inequitable land ownership, and at times started from trivial issues like cattle grazing in someone else’s fields or the felling of a tree on someone else’s land. Fishers, like Anjali and Manoj, might also harbour resentment against other fishers’ *khatirdari*, or boats with BLCs might inform on “unlicensed boats” [*beypaasi naukas*] who hadn’t bothered to rent the licences and were trying their luck with rangers they knew well. These pre-existing feuds and disgruntlements played out in the jungle. Taking village problems into the jungle was against the *jongoler niyam*. In fact, these tensions were the reason why there was such an emphasis on forgetting the village, households, financial and marital discord while in the jungle (Chapter 2). While this was something the fishers sought to respect, the fishers’

*byabohar* with other fishers inevitably created enmities and alliances that played out in the forest creeks.

I wondered if this infighting was a direct result of the increasing competition for crabs. The fishers agreed that, with volatile crab prices and narrow windows when prices surge, an increased sense of infighting among fishers was inevitable. They also cited pressures from the shrinking space to fish, referring to the past when there wasn't such a large core area [*nishaid elka*]. Interestingly, though, most villagers didn't shift the full blame to structural forces such as Chinese demand, Forest Department policies, or the increasingly competitive market for crabs. They said such infighting with the fishing community had always been there. Any complaint against another fishing boat always accompanied with it an older story of an unresolved tension related to matters of debt, property or women. There had always been jealousy [*bingsha*] in the village and as hard as people tried, it inevitably corrupted social relationships in the pure [*pabitra*] jungle.

Even though it was fair to suggest that internal jealousies always existed, there was no denying that they were heightened and fuelled by patrolling and new forms of surveillance. Fishers often had to rat out other fishing boats because this information was solicited by rangers. Often rangers asked a boat that they had already caught to point them in the direction, or even guide them toward, the specific creeks where they might find other boats. The fishers in question either have the option to protect other fishing boats or to comply. Kamal da elucidated this dynamic for me with the following example:

Imagine that the ranger *babu* has caught us. The *babus* asks if there are more in the creeks. We know that there are five other *naukas* [boats] inside a creek close by... I try to save the other *naukas* and say 'no, there aren't'. I tell the *babus* to go in the other direction. Later the *babu* catches them anyways when that same *babu* sees us he says 'why did you lie?... we asked the others and they said you had all been fishing together.'

There are many situations in the forest where the fishers are stuck in this prisoners' dilemma. In these moments, both telling the truth and concealing it can get them into trouble, depending on the actions of their fellow fishers. The fishers resolve this dilemma both without and in line with the logic of *byabohar*. On the one hand, fear of the rangers, and the Forest Department's increased surveillance, can turn boat against boat. These coercive displays of power have little to do with *byabohar*. At other times, fishers will give away the location of other boats to show cooperativeness to the ranger. This earns that particular boat brownie points and the chance to curry favour in the future. This kind of

reasoning shows how the internal splintering between fishers can become another bargaining chip in the game of *byabohar* and *khatirdari*.



Figure 25 Fining a "trespassing" fishing boat.

## Rupturing *Byabohar*

### *Co-option*

In recent years the Forest Department has made a systematic attempt to employ men at its lowest rungs from fishing neighbourhoods and households. This is usually through the Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) which, as explained previously, are an attempt to include local communities in forest management and provide “alternative livelihoods” to wean fishers from being “forest dependent.” Some of this daily wage- or short-term contracted labour is in the form of cooking and cleaning Range Offices, while other jobs are in the form of a boatman [*majhi*] who then has to go patrolling with the rangers. This creates a new kind of complicity between fishers and rangers, where erstwhile fishers are being actively co-opted into policing their own friends and family members.

Often those fishers who were openly critical about the Forest Department, could voice their grievances in social movements (Chapter 5) because of their intimacy with rangers. Sandip da, who we met in Chapter 2 and will meet again in Chapter 5, is a crab

collector who is very vocal in his resistance of the Forest Department. At his home I asked him if he felt nervous about being so openly critical of the Forest Department. He said that he didn't feel scared. He had a good relationship with the forest rangers and in fact, over the past decade, he had worked as an "informer" [his own word] for the Forest Department. He explained that he did small things like call the forest ranger if an animal needed rescuing or removal from the village, or if he came across a boat of villagers illegally cutting trees. Sandip da explained to me that being an "informer" allowed him to fish in peace. I asked if this wasn't in direct opposition to his testimony against the Forest Department. He demurred. To him, the two roles—helping the Forest Department, and fighting against them—didn't contradict one another. The local rangers on patrol whom he helped couldn't be held accountable for the laws he detested, which were made by people from "above." His fight was against the *sahibs* [higher level officials]. Such self-reflexivity, the astute disaggregation of the hierarchies of power, but also the reconciled contradictory identities of resistor and informer wasn't uncommon amidst Sundarbans crab collectors..

The most extreme case I encountered of this blurring of the lines was the case of Sanjay. For 12 years Sanjay had been a crab collector, and his parents still collect crabs in the forest. They have no land and so this is their only means of subsisting. The first time I had met Sanjay was at his home when his parents happened to be in the jungle on a fishing trip.

A year into fieldwork, after I had managed to get permission to patrol with the rangers, I arrived at the Tetultola floating camp only to be met by Sanjay. He recognized me immediately and recalled our long conversation at his home, right opposite the camp, from the previous year. I asked what he was doing here. After receiving a brick house from the JFMC, he had been asked to work as a boatman at the floating camp. In hushed tones, with the Beat Officer only a few meters away, he said, "I don't have an option anymore, I work for the Forest Department now, we have to stop the fishermen from fishing in this part of the jungle, these are the laws."

"What happens when you come across your parents while patrolling?" I asked.

He replied, "It's embarrassing for me. The ranger lets my parents off without fining them. What can I do... usually I have no choice. We come across people from my village, from my neighbourhood and there's nothing I can do. This is my new job. That is theirs." This resembles what Shah (2018) describes as the absorption of local villagers in the Central Reserve Police Forces in countering the Maoists, such that through these

recruitment policies they end up policing their own brothers and sisters.

Interested in following up with Sanjay, I arranged to meet him at his house a few months after our encounter on the floating camp. Now that he worked for the Forest Department, I noticed a change in his own way of making sense of fishing. Sanjay's positionality seemed more conflicted than before. Although he comes from a family that has relied on the forest for generations, he had imbibed some of the Forest Department's paternalistic narratives. He said that since he has started working at the floating camp, he too is trying to convince his parents to stop doing the jungle. "They [the Forest Department] say that we do this [work in the jungle] out of greed and that we must stop taking such risks." This was in sharp contrast to our conversations a year before in which he had explained that it was necessity, and desperation, that drove his household to do the jungle.

I asked Sanjay what his parents thought of his work with the Forest Department and he explained that they were pleased for him. They had to continue doing the jungle as there were still debts to be repaid but were glad that Sanjay had found the opportunity to do something else. There is no denying that in a region without jobs, and for those who don't want to migrate out, the Forest Department is one of the only stable employers for many young men like Sanjay. Employment, however, had come with a deep sense of self-doubt. The Forest Department's "official speak" had become part of Sanjay's way of talking about the work of doing the jungle. I sensed in his tone and disposition his own internal antagonisms in relation to his new job and that of his parents. Unlike Sandip da who reconciled being working for and against the Forest Department, for Sanjay these were two separate identities that he struggled to entirely reconcile with himself.

### ***New Laws and New Technologies***

Fishers universally complained that the Forest Department's regime of patrolling, fining, and harassment had increased over the past decade. This mapped onto new laws, the expansion of the core area, stricter accountability systems and new technologies for surveillance introduced by the Forest Department. The past decade in the Sundarbans has seen a steady increase of the "militarization of the green" (Duffy 2014; Lunstrum 2014). While the Sundarbans are packaged and sold to tourists as an "untouched wilderness", (Chapter 1) the reality is that they are governed like a military zone. Earlier, patrolling happened on a row boat [*nauka*], which were gradually replaced by the *bhotbhotis*.

Now the Forest Department has also acquired two and three cylinder motor boats, larger launch boats, and speed boats. Each Range Office is equipped with scores of rifles, double-barrelled guns, and pump-action shotguns. Achievements in the Annual Report read as follows: “the intensified Core Zone Patrolling has enhanced offence detection by over 40-50 percent and fishing & felling cases have dropped drastically” (STR Annual Report 2005-06). Annual reports boast of “special raids on forest criminals”, an increase in “mobile patrolling squads,” and their collaborations with the Border Security Force for more efficient law enforcement. Each report tallies the number of boats seized, the number of “criminal offences” encountered, and notes in the year 2005, the opening of a “crime cell” which will be the first step toward putting all “forest criminals” in a computerized database (STR Annual Report 2005-06).

As described in Chapter 1, the top echelons of the Forest Department have recently opened this new front in their surveillance of the forest. In 2016 each ranger was given a smart phone with an “e-patrolling” app. This automatically tracks their patrols and obliges them to upload photos of the “offenders” they encounter to a criminal database. The more elderly rangers were used to the “offence” notebooks and registers. Their new smart phones came with a plastic cover that hung around their necks. Carefully opening the waterproof pouch, rangers showed me the new app and complained about not being technologically savvy enough to operate it. Their main complaint, however, was that they were now being watched. Laughing, they said, “Now we can’t shirk-off from our patrols, there is no room for faking it anymore [*fanki diya jabein na*].” In addition to their own fear of being under constant surveillance, another consequence of these technologies—and there will be many—was the impact they had on social relationships. For rangers like Manoranjan Gayan, these “apps” made it even harder for him to be lenient to fishers. By taking away the agency and interpretative room for manoeuvre of the rangers, the e-patrolling app broke down *byabohar* by quite literally taking the “man out of the state.”

In addition to e-patrolling apps, the first UAV drones were purchased by the Department in 2017. The month that Kamal da was caught was the first year that they had been operationalized and were presumably still in their trial phase. Recall the opening vignette, where the drone and the speedboat caught the *nauka* Kamal da was on. The rangers, such as the acquaintances of Piyali and Kamal da, recognized that confiscating the BLC at this time of the year would spiral all three households into deep uncertainty and devastating debt. In another circumstance they might have taken the decision to let



the boat go with a fine, as was customarily done. In this case, context and custom were not something the drone and those operating it could factor in, and the rangers were obliged to do exactly what they were supposed to do. They confiscated the BLC.

Once Piyali's anger about the confiscation of the BLC had dissipated, she herself acknowledged that their ranger friend could do nothing. His hands were tied by his responsibility to his *sahibs* [bosses]. She used a phrase I had heard many other fishers use in relation to the rangers, she said, "they are just pawns [*gulaam*] in a game of *shatranj*" [an old form of chess]. Kamal da was angry for far longer than Piyali. The rangers had made him "feel so small." Kamal da perceives himself to be his own boss [*nijer malik*] and in subsequent chapters we see why he conceives of crab collecting as dignified work. In this encounter with the rangers his dignity and self-respect had been hurt. This injury took harder to recover from than even the financial losses. Despite their dejection, and Kamal da's humiliation [*apomaan*] both Piyali and Kamal da realized that the ranger was just doing his job. At the same time, both of them also said that somehow doing the jungle had become harder more recently. Piyali admitted, with an expression of deep perplexity and sadness, that the relationship of conviviality between fishers and rangers had changed in recent years. The drones and e-patrolling apps disallowed space for *byabohar* or any form of human negotiation. For all their algorithmic efficiency, these technologies take away the human empathy and embedded social relationships upon which even very unequal power relations are based in the Sundarbans.

These new alliances of tech start-up companies producing "e-patrolling" apps, others developing e-governance software, as well as the direct investment of surveillance companies often those that work in tandem with border patrols, and their partnerships with the Forest Department and conservation NGOs are some of the new actors in older appropriations of nature (see Fairhead, Leach, Scoones 2012). While the Forest Department projects unblemished forests and tourists can pick up glossy birdwatching guides cataloguing the various species of herons, egrets, kingfishers and storks, reading their annual reports one gets the sense that the forest is in fact a warzone. Such militarization is not unique to the Sundarbans (see Duffy 2014; Lunstrum 2014; 2018; Dunlap and Fairhead 2014) and calls to be questioned for it has far reaching consequences on both people, rangers and conservation itself (Duffy et. al 2019) because it ignores not just the wider political economy but also the compromised alliances through which a war on biodiversity is being waged (Duffy 2014).

## *Ideology and the Law*

Underlying all these technological investments was a clear message to every ranger in the Sundarbans—those from the region, or alien to it—that the Sundarbans belonged to the tiger. The pressure and support from the international community to protect the tiger sent a message that this was something that not only India but the whole world was invested in. From the military-grade investments in the war to save nature, to the immense resources to carry out a tiger census, to the kinds of visitors that frequented the jungle—biologists, wildlife specialists, zoologists, and those studying animal behaviour, filmmakers and photographers—it was clear that the reason the Sundarbans existed was for the tiger.

Abhijeet da, the ranger who noted the powerful influence of his uniform, said to me: “They are really taking every effort to save the tiger and so how can we slack on our jobs? We have to do as they say. This is not just doing our job, this is saving a national pride.” He concluded with a slogan popular in conservation meetings and Forest Department campaigns, “If we save the tiger, we will be saved [*bhagh baachbey, amra bachbo*].” Represented and perpetuated by the new technologies of conservation, the increased expenditure and the louder rhetorics of conservation has led to the shaping of subjectivities creating new forms of “environmentality” (Agrawal 2005) among Sundarbans forest officials too.

In this rising tide of technology and ideology, even sympathetic rangers have limited interpretative wriggle-room. Manoranjan Gayan captured the bureaucratic tension he felt between the law and his personal interpretation of its legitimacy: “We didn’t make these laws, we just have to follow what the bosses [*sahibs*] tell us to do, we just have to do our job, we have to fine them because it’s illegal.... but we also know there’s no work, how else will they feed their family? And so we let them go.” I pushed him, asking what was stopping the rangers from turning a blind eye to the fishers more often. Manoranjan Gayan replied that this was impossible to do because he was a government employee and ultimately had to do his duty as a forest guard. “I have to write it down in the register every day, if I don’t fine anybody what will I say I’ve been doing all day?” Many rangers like Manoranjan felt that they were in a bind, as their own government jobs were at stake if they acted too leniently.

Interestingly, this was a sentiment that the Field Director (FD), the Forest Official headquartered in Canning who oversaw the entire Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, expressed

himself. The FD, Mr. Prakash Mathur, had been posted in the Sundarbans for over ten years, and was both knowledgeable about the region and sympathetic toward the fishers. When I asked about the strict surveillance regimes in the forests, he said there was little that he could do about these laws: “I didn’t make these laws....change them and I’ll follow different ones. I am a government servant and I’m doing my job.” In fact, Mr. Mullick sounded almost like the activists whose campaigns were precisely against people like him. “Here human life has no worth,” he once said, expressing his sadness that so many men and women die without attracting the state’s attention. In the eyes of Manoranjan Gayan, the FD was the *sahib* telling him what to do, but the FD himself felt equally trapped. He too was in charge of overseeing the implementation of a set of laws that he hadn’t authored, and which he also admitted didn’t make sense. Manoranjan Gayan and the FD’s submission to the law shows the limits of the interpretative bureaucratic space in which *byabohar* flourishes.

## **Everyday, Intimate and Antagonistic Governance**

Peluso asks, “Is there a forest in the world that does not have a history of violence in its understorey?” (Peluso 2017: 312). Perhaps not. The relationship between rangers and fishers, both historically and today, is perceived to be characterised by hostility and violent conflict. Vociferous campaigns spearheaded by fishers’ unions and forests rights activists, as Chapter 5 will reveal, blame the forest rangers for harassing, extorting and oppressing the lives of fishers. My very own first impressions of the fishers-ranger relationship, and academic writing that pits the state against the people, was in line with campaigns that accused the more powerful Forest Department of governing the forests through a reign of terror.

While the Wildlife Protection Laws have rendered large swathes of the forest illegal and arcane licences and regimes of illegality generates further risks for fishers in their attempts to make a living in the forest as revealed in Chapter 1, this chapter shows that many of those who enforce these laws are in fact very sympathetic to the livelihood concerns of the fishers. Pitting the “reified” state against the people, belies the much more negotiated relationship between fishers and rangers that oscillates between sympathy, strictness, paternalism, accusation, co-option, mutual care and shared obligations to make a living in a hostile landscape. In other words, rangers and fishers have a relationship that inhabits different modes of intimacy. It is these informal rules, the deeper understanding

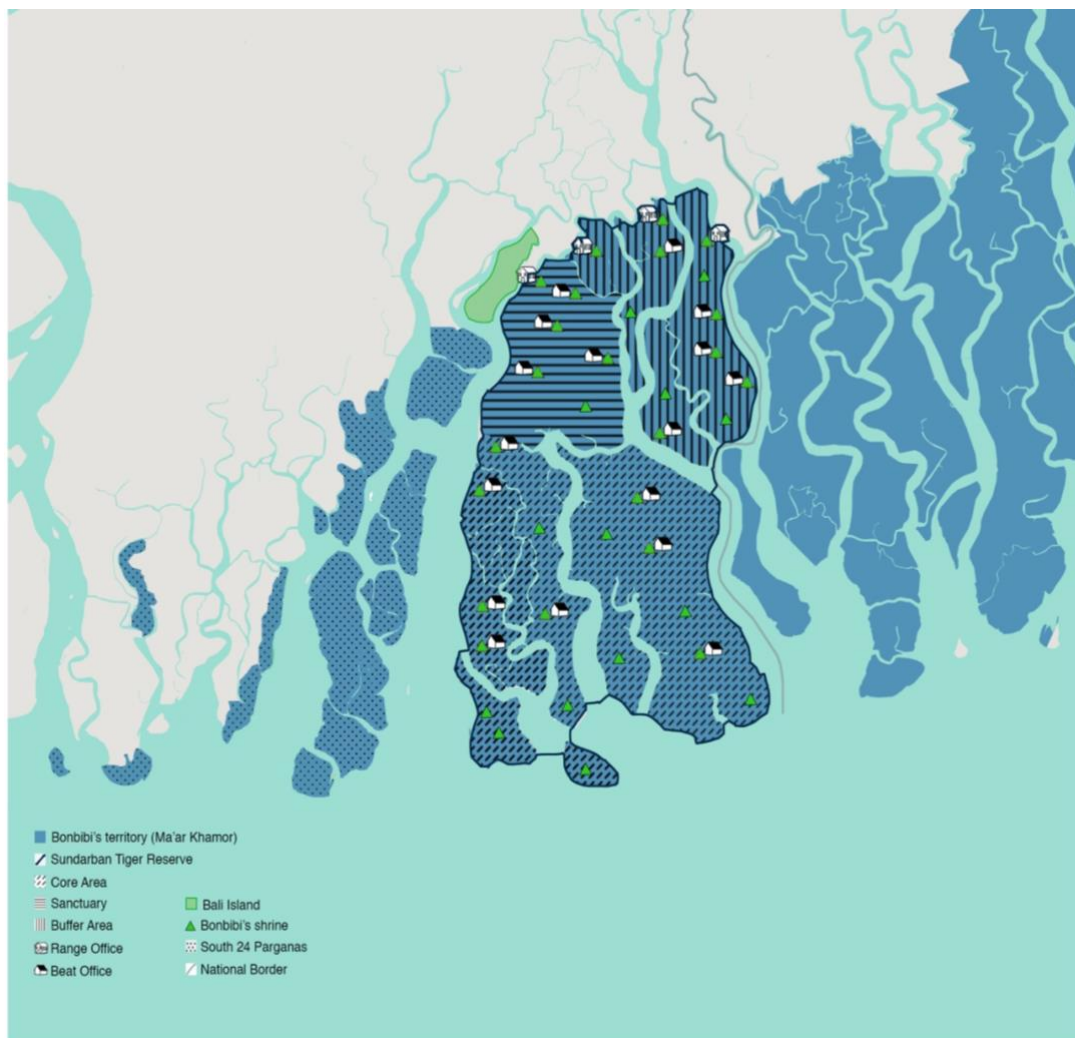
between fishers and rangers garnered from daily interactions over several years, with empathy on the one hand to fear and obligation on the other, that also comprises an integral part of forest governance.

Not only do rangers take pity on the fishers for the hardship of eking out a livelihood from the forest, but fishers take equal pity on rangers for being stuck, on a full time-basis, in a mangrove swamp away from family, good food, festivals, markets and any form of routine entertainment. Rangers and fishers enter into relationships of co-dependency that, despite their asymmetries and appearance of corruption and patronage, are based on social relationships that can't easily be typecast as either.

Rangers, some from the Sundarbans but many from elsewhere in West Bengal, live in cage-like military style barracks equipped with rifles, walkie-talkies, and new technologies of surveillance. What this outward appearance of power, both real and performed, conceals is that these individuals are so socially alienated that they depend on fishers for one of the most basic forms of survival: human contact and sociality. In exchange for a few hours of fishing without harassment, physical commodities such as crab and fish, or offerings of meat [*mangsho*], alcohol [*maudh*], fried snacks, *beedis* [cheap cigarettes] and *paan* [*betel leaves*] from the village were prized alongside less monetary needs such as just chatting, shooting the breeze, and sharing meals during endlessly lonely patrols. Rangers allowing fishers to “trespass” was often motivated by empathy and fining fishers and confiscating their equipment was often out of their obligations to follow the law and keeping their own government jobs. Those who “protect” the forest and others who do the jungle in the same forest rely on social relationships that form the backbone of conserving their own lives in what is, in very distinct ways, for each group one of the most challenging landscapes in which to make a living. While social relationships [*byabohar*] between the two are crucial, this chapter has also tried to show the forces, internal and external, that rupture this relationship and the real limits of *byabohar*.

In essence, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 taken together are all crucial components of everyday forms of divine and daily governance. My interest has been in mapping the various forms of power – ethico-religious, natural, supernatural, social, legal - that govern people's lives simultaneously and constitute that which is the political. Maps are overlaid with the value we invest in places. The map on the following page depicts the current governance of the Sundarbans. The largest area in blue is the region of the forest over which Bonbibí has territorial sovereignty. Innumerable little shrines are dotted throughout the forest, these are indicative and not at precise locations, and are also within

each Range Office. Simultaneously, the legal landscape of the core, buffer and sanctuary areas was superimposed on Bonbibi's territory in 1972 through the Wildlife Protection Act, and today this along with the macro-ideologies of conservation (Chapter 1) dictates the daily movements, fears and anxieties of the fishers. A third layer of buildings demarcates the various outposts of the Forest Department- the Range Offices and Beat Offices from where rangers patrol the creeks. As this chapter has shown the lowest rungs of bureaucracy are infused with interpretive labour making way for different modes of intimacy between fishers and rangers. The Sundarban residents' lives are governed by all three of these forces as well as local politics (harder to depict on maps!). The religious, supernatural, legal, and social are all inseparable and simultaneous overlapping forces that map onto and guide the lives of those who do the jungle. But what about economics? I turn to this aspect next.



*Figure 26 This map depicts Bonbibi's territory, the division of the forest through the WLP, as well as range offices in the interiors of the forest.*

## Chapter 4

### Crab Antics:

#### The Moral and Political Economy of Greed Accusations

“Crab antics is behaviour that resembles that of a number of crabs who, having been placed in a barrel, all try to climb out. But as one nears the top, the one below pulls him down in his own effort to climb. Only a particularly strong crab ever climbs out—the rest, in the long run, remain in the same place.”

-Peter J. Wilson, 1973: 53

In September 2016, a year into fieldwork, Shomit da had asked me to come along on one of his “conservation campaigns,” which was to travel island to island on a Forest Department boat “spreading awareness” around the urgent need to “save the forests.” The boat was a rundown wooden shell. A stove and sink next to the four-cylinder engine acted as a kitchen, and behind a flimsy partition there was a room with seven mattresses that served as our boat-dormitory for the next few nights. Besides me, there were six men on board: three Forest Department officials, a small-time local politician who was also the head of the Joint Forest Management Committees<sup>56</sup> (JFMC), Shomit da and the hired boatman. Shomit da was the campaign’s most vocal member and during the next few days he was wearing his conservationist hat as a field officer of the Anti-Poaching Society of India (APSI) but had been invited to participate on such a campaign by the Forest Department.

Our party’s mission was to meet with local fishers and “forest-dependent” communities so as to “spread awareness of protecting the tiger.” This kind of outreach was mandatory for the Forest Department, an attempt to remedy “fortress conservation” (Brockington 2002; West, Igoe and Brockington 2008) with a more inclusive approach focusing on “building awareness” through the JFMC. The mantra for these campaigns,

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<sup>56</sup> JFMCs are government initiatives that began in the 1990s to include forest-dependent communities in forest management. More in Chapter 5.

printed on shirts and caps worn by conservation NGO and tourist lodge staff – who happen to be the very same people – was punchy: “In saving the tiger, we save ourselves” [*bagh bachbey, aamra bachbo*].

Our campaign had been imposed from the top down, and the resulting campaign tactics were not very inclusive, or even participatory. We reached a village and waited around for a group of residents to assemble. Some were often shopkeepers or farmers who had little to do with the forest-work, people who just happened to be hanging around and could be coaxed into sitting down through the lure of tea, biscuits and something to fill the time. After a respectably sized group of at least 15-20 people had assembled, speeches were delivered. As tea was distributed, an attendance register circulated for people to sign their names or put their thumbprint. Without any further conversation, questions or discussion, our party then returned to our boat-dormitory and continued on the campaign trail. For four days we continued the same drill on different islands.

I recorded the speeches, but this was almost unnecessary since different iterations of the same message were repeated at every meeting. In the words of the Forest Official: “We don’t want you to risk your lives, crab collecting is converting your wives into widows...think about the future of your children. In order to do less hard work, you are going into the creeks for more money...this is killing you. We don’t want your families to suffer.” Emphasis was placed on the pain of widowed women and bereft children caused by tiger attacks. Shomit da reiterated and sharpened this point: “Don’t be greedy [*lobh kora na*], so many people are dying because of tiger attacks and yet you go deeper into the forest creeks, don’t you value your lives? [*jeeboner mullo naye*] Those of you who go out of greed want to collect the biggest crabs... if you can live off 4,000 rupees [GBP 40] a month why are you trying to make 20,000? [GBP 200].”

Case studies followed, citing the example of so-and-so in such-and-such a village who had died recently from a tiger attack. One of the canonical stories rehearsed not only during these meetings but also to outsiders, such as journalists and filmmakers who came in search of the “human-animal conflict”, was that of Shekhar. Shekhar had 11 *bhigas* of land, quite a lot in the Sundarbans context. Cultivating paddy on this land would have been more than sufficient to run a household. However, while Shekhar was in the jungle collecting crabs, a tiger attacked and killed him. The narrative was simple: Shekhar had no need to go into the jungle, but he went anyway out of greed, and had left behind a widowed wife and three children. Greed, ran the subtext, is ruining families. Each meeting invariably ended with the same message: entering the forest was greedy, and only by

limiting greed and avoiding crab collecting could people ultimately “save the forest, [and] save the tiger.”

During the course of fieldwork, I noticed that the greedy crab collector trope was not limited to the “conservation campaign” I shadowed but had a near universal acceptance among the higher organisational rungs of the conservation movement. It was so well publicized through campaigns of the Forest Department and local conservation NGOs, that it ceased to be local. Instead, big and small NGOs in Kolkata and Delhi, high level bureaucrats and government officers, tourists, journalists and researchers too—people I met either on their visit to Bali Island or in Kolkata—all had the same perception: deaths caused by attacking tigers were because of crab collectors’ greed.

I found these accusations of greed and moral profligacy fascinating and perplexing. How exactly did crab collectors become the subject of frequent public denunciations by local and not so local authorities for their supposed greed, and their reckless endangerment of the entire ecosystem? What are the political and economic processes that account for largely landless, lower caste, political and ecological refugees eking out a subsistence living to have undergone a radical moral makeover?

This chapter explores the basis of the accusation of greed, tracing how the narratives of global catastrophe and the disruptions in the commodity supply chain play out amidst pre-existing social hierarchies. In counterpoint, I explore the defences of the “accused”, and the rich moral distinctions crab collectors make themselves between greed [*lobh*], need [*aubhava*], desire [*chahida*] and habit [*snabbava*]. While there is no denying that crab collecting in a forest of tigers is dangerous work, I contextualize this accusation of undertaking risky work from the point of view of Sundarbans residents<sup>57</sup>. I then step back to show the political contours that shape the discourse of “greedy” crab collectors. Both the conservation movement and allied state actors have distorted the material and moral resources meant to combat grave environmental threats by scapegoating the politically disenfranchised: poor crab collectors. In this context, I question the productivity of catastrophic thinking, focused on the urgent need to “save the Sundarbans,” that, lacking political power, is deployed in a game of crab antics that fails to address the underlying environmental catastrophe while displacing the psychic burden of greed onto the poor.

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<sup>57</sup> A point to which I return in the Conclusion of the thesis.



## The Politics of Accusation

In trying to make sense of this paradoxical accusation, I am less interested in anthropological attempts to make normative arguments about greed (Oka and Kujit 2014) or to compare the relative greediness of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with that of earlier epochs (Sim: 2017). Instead, I explore what inter- and intra-community power relations and social structures create and contest this narrative. In line with scholars who show the mutually constitutive nature of values and norms (see Fassin 2014; Stafford 2013; Das 2012), this chapter makes visible the process and logic by which moral accusations arise in society and what purpose they serve. The social sciences have a long tradition of studying accusations, from feminist scholars investigating the relationship of women's liberation and capitalism (Federici 1998) to anthropologists attempting to understand witchcraft (Douglas [1970] 2010; Evans-Pritchard 1976); occult economies (Comaroff and Comaroff 2017) to the unfounded blame of unfettered consumerism leading to indebtedness (James 2014) or narratives that create a "politics of scarcity" in relation to resource use (Mehta et. al 2019). Accusations of various kinds represent a classic leitmotif which surface again and again in different guises. Perhaps this is because they stem from unequal worlds and the accompanying anxieties and instabilities that such worlds tend to perpetuate and, indeed, feed upon.

Greed is a deadly sin within the Western Christian tradition—and, further back in history, it becomes clear that philosophical and religious doctrines from Confucius in East Asia, the Upanishads and Bhagwat Gita in South Asia, and the elegiac poetry of Solon and Theognis in Old World Greece, have all elaborated complex attitudes towards greed starting from as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE (see Oka and Kujit 2014; Graeber 2011: 223-250). It is peculiar then that anthropologists have paid so little attention to the integral relationship between accusations of greed and the social, political and economic conditions in which those accusations emerge, who is accused, who does the accusing, and the specific temporalities of particular accusations. A.F Robertson's book *Greed: Gut Feelings, Growth and History* discusses the difficulties and challenges of studying and defining such a topic. Seeking an explanation for why the social sciences have so far neglected the topic, he points to the fact that greed is so visceral. He says the "scholarly mind resists" defining greed perhaps because it has so much to do with the "feeling" it generates (Robertson 2001: 13). He continues, "Anything academically interesting about

it has been translated into other palatable terms,” such as “self-interest, preferences, emotion, instinct” (ibid). Yet greed is none and all of those at the same time.

This chapter analyses the accusation of greed through what Veena Das has called a “descent into the ordinary” (Das 2007). It connects the ordinary to the global landscapes of international conservation and commodity value chains. By trying to understand accusations from “above”, “below” and the “middle” (see Mehta 2019 et. al), my interest is in drawing connections between broader political and economic struggles and my interlocutors’ most intimate moral and ethical dilemmas. The particular accusations I investigate in the Sundarbans emerge out of a complex amalgamation of the global, national and local, and reveal the power of the far away to morph ordinary notions of good and bad in unpredictable ways. In this sense my argument adds depth to the view that capitalism is not a singular force, but an assemblage of practices and processes, with very particular histories of violence and resistance (see Bear et. al 2015; Li 2011; Tsing 2005; 2013; Ong and Collier 2004). I trace the impact of global capitalism on the social realm of “ugly feelings” (Ngai 2007) and present the thought-worlds of both the “accusers” and “accused” as they redeploy highly local notions of “need”, “greed”, “sufficiency” and “desire.”

I also broaden my argument to address a second paradox, which is how the discourse of greed and consumption, such a key tool in global efforts to oppose and assign responsibility for climate change and ecological degradation has, in practice, backfired to indict the most vulnerable—and likely least implicated in such degradation—in the Sundarbans. While widespread environmental threats, and climate change in particular, have attracted enormous material and moral resources to conservation movements and allied stakeholders, they have failed, in places like the Sundarbans, to accumulate any local political authority. In particular, the conservation movement has failed to confront the structural economic and political forces that have led to environmental degradation (see Barrios 2017) and the way that the marginalisation of hunter-gatherer communities like crab collectors has become normalized. Instead, these potential material and moral resources have been channelled along prevailing fault lines of power. This leads me to question whether “apocalyptic thinking” (Latour et. al 2018; Haraway et. al 2015; Tsing et. al 2017) which acknowledges the fact that we are living in a moment of catastrophe is, in fact, productive in places such as the Sundarbans. If so, for whom is it productive and how? In following the moral fallout of such thinking at the local level, I argue that environmental and state actors have distorted the discourse of greed in ecologically self-

defeating ways that screen the accusers from self-criticism and excuse their inability to take more politically bold actions. In looking first at the village, and then at the international conservation movement, the accusation of greed penetrates to the heart of hierarchy, inequality and power in these “catastrophic times” in the Sundarbans.

### **Global Catastrophe and Local Accusations: “Less work, more income—this is what’s killing you”**

The rate of sea level rise in the Sundarbans is higher than the global average (Hazra et. al 2002). However, as mentioned in the Introduction, floods, storms and cyclones were seen as normal amongst the people with whom I conducted fieldwork and have existed long before the global alarmism around climate change began. Climate change resilience was talked about only in the corridors of power in Kolkata and Delhi, it had no resonance for those who lived on the periphery of Sundarbans villages. In the neighbourhood where I was based, every monsoon from the time that they can remember came with its own fears, hopes and uncertainties.

Nevertheless, against this backdrop of rising sea levels and strengthening cyclones the Sundarbans delta is a poster child for catastrophe (see Tsing et al. 2017; Haraway et al. 2015). The creation of this image has allowed for the Sundarbans via the Sundarbans Development Board, a West Bengal Government body, to receive colossal amounts of funding from several international organizations such as WWF, the World Bank Group, International Water Association (IWA), German, Japanese, Swedish, American funding agencies for its coastlines, for biodiversity conservation, for climate change resilience and for “integrated approaches” to the management of the delta. The language on the World Bank’s website, which lists the various projects being funded in the Indian and Bangladesh Sundarbans landscapes, is one of urgency, “unless we act now, the priceless Sundarbans will disappear within a few generations.”<sup>58</sup> In addition to jarring infrastructural changes such as Dutch-style concrete embankments being built for more “resilient” coastlines, “acting now” takes the form of “conservation campaigns” with which this chapter began, and are meant to spread awareness so that the Sundarbans may be “saved.” One imagines that in such environmentally precarious times protecting the forests from “illegal” fishers

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<sup>58</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/07/02/a-resilient-future-for-bangladesh-sundarbans>

and crab collectors in their fragile wooden boats would be dwarfed by mobilizations and actions to counter the more significant forces of ecological destruction threatening the region. However, this is not the case. As the campaign rhetoric reveals, it is from the reckless greed of crab collectors that the area must primarily be saved.

On every island we visited, the main message to those assembled was that crab collecting was greedy, and that such greed was wrong because it was excessive and caused deaths. After a full day of proselytizing, and having left the corners of several villages duly strewn with our plastic teacups, the members of the campaign team retired to our boat dormitory. Here, during informal conversations and chats over meals as we traversed the rivers from one village to another, a second, unvoiced narrative emerged. This narrative dispensed with the public emphasis on the risks of crab collecting and instead focused on how much money the crab collectors were making. Of them all, Shomit da's accusations were the most damning. "Crab collecting is a form of stealing [*churi*]... They do two hours of work and make Rs. 1,000 [GBP 10]. Others work all day and make Rs. 250 [GBP 2.5, the minimum daily wage]. They are lazy. They are thieves [*chor*]. People die because of greed [*Manush lobbey morrey*]." In the same breath, without a pause, he asked me if the next time I left my field site I could buy him an iPhone since "every other village lad [*gramer cheley*] had this phone". The forest ranger looked at Shomit da's phone and concurred: "Yes this phone... you should get a better one. All these fishers and crab collectors have this phone now [*ja maach kangda dhorey unaar kachey o ache*]". Laltu da, the head of the JFMC, was particularly interested in dwelling on the market price for crabs, "Do you know how high the value [*daam*] of crabs is these days? Collecting crabs has got them into an addiction [*nesha*] of easy money." Shomit da concurred, "it is less work, more income" [*kom kaaj beshi taka*]. The informal discussions on the boat were about the high price of crabs interspersed with detailed stories of particular crab collecting households' new assets, new saris worn by the women, and their expenditures on religious festivals [*pujos*].

A subsequent section of this Chapter will show how such accusations of greed are revealing of larger political impotencies, that is, those that ought to be blamed have impunity and are unreachable, so others close at hand, like landless crab collectors become the scapegoats. At the level of the village though, there was an economics to this accusation. Crab collectors are accused of both being reckless, risky and greedy because of their relative prosperity, that is, relative to their own poverty from a few years ago. Crab collectors have always been poor, their homes have run on 4000 rupees a month, they have been available for daily-wage labour on the lands of others. With the increase

in crab prices, the implicit message underlying these accusations is that they should remain poor instead of aspiring to earn 20,000 rupees a month.

### ***The Economics of the Accusation: China's New Year is the Sundarbans's New Money***

The most proximate origins of the accusation of greed lie in the recent relative prosperity of crab collectors. This prosperity has itself followed from two major disruptions to the crab value chain, which I followed from crab collectors' fragile wooden boats to the cavernous export houses of Kolkata. The first disruptive moment occurred approximately seven years ago and is described by players across the value chain - middlemen, commission agents, wholesalers and exporters - as "the opening up of the Chinese market." Live mud crabs became an export commodity in 1997. However, as the frequency and quality of direct flight connections between India to China and other Southeast Asian countries improved, the export market in live mud crabs skyrocketed. A revealing window into China's ravenous appetite for crabs, and the influence this appetite wields over the contemporary market, is that crab prices in the Sundarbans fluctuate in sync with the Chinese festival calendar, peaking in the winter months in the lead up to the Chinese New Year.

The Bengal Delta has been linked to global supply chains for several centuries before the arrival of the British (Pearson 2003). The history of global commodities in the delta is one that began with merchants and traders from the Arab world, current day South East Asia, as well as French, Portuguese and the Dutch sea farers and explorers from as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century. However, the volume of trade expanded exponentially with the arrival of the East India Company to Bengal in 1690, when Calcutta was the main port in India (see Bose 1993). By the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, apart from the commodities peasants of the Bengal Delta were producing for their own consumption, they also grew commodities for the market: rice, opium, spices, cotton tobacco, *ganja*, betel nuts, mustard, sesame, ginger, turmeric, chillies, oilseeds and jute (Ali 2018: 15). These commodities were transported through ships and steamers and later through the railways. The major difference between commodities from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, to those of

the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century is that now highly perishable commodities too—like tiger prawn seeds<sup>59</sup> and mud crabs—can make these long-distance journeys on flights.



*Figure 27 Sorting, grading and weighing crabs before they are packed in Styrofoam boxes and shipped to China.*

Mohsin, the owner of an export house in the Baghajatin neighbourhood of Kolkata (where all the major export houses are headquartered) says in reference to the Chinese New Year: “These are the months people want to eat out the most, it’s a festive season in China, like our Durga *pūjo* [the Bengali New Year] ...you know... we go to *melas* and *pandals* [fairs], they go to restaurants, restaurants are full, buyers will pay whatever for crabs, especially female crabs with eggs, they love to eat those....the prices go up. It is a good time of the year for us.” In WhatsApp messages on his mobile, Mohsin points out conversations in Chinese characters with pride, evidence of past negotiations with Chinese buyers. The Chinese market had come to dominate the demand side of the crab value chain so much that Mohsin had learned Mandarin.

The second major disruption benefitting crab collectors occurred on the value chain’s supply side. Before the “Chinese market opened,” relatively low demand and poor

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<sup>59</sup> A few decades ago, several thousands of Sundarbans households were engaged in collecting prawn seeds [*bagda chingdi*] which were sold to suppliers who would put these seeds in hatcheries and export shrimp to the rest of the world (Jalais 2010; Danda 2007; Mukhopadhyay 2016).

flight connections had allowed three or four export houses to dominate the market. These companies exercised monopsony power, buying crabs from their various suppliers on a credit basis, and eventually paying a price depending on their profit margin and often incommensurate with the fair rate prevailing on global markets. However, the entry of one particular export house—Dolon International—upended this relationship. When I interviewed Rajiv Bose, the owner of Dolon International, he told me how he had introduced two major innovations. First, his company placed crab collection centres in several Sundarbans villages, cutting out middlemen. At the same time, they guaranteed payment upfront to collectors, in contrast to the prevailing practice of buying crabs on credit and later paying prices incommensurate with the market rate. Simultaneously the penetration of cell phones started to allow crab collectors to find out and look for better prices for their catch. Taken together, higher demand from China and more competitive relationships on the supply side redistributed market power and higher profits all the way down to the marginal crab collectors of the Sundarbans.

On average, and in the past five-seven years, crab collectors can now consistently earn more than low-paid workers, such as daily wage labourers. Moreover, during the high season they can approach or equal the salaries of the local elite, comprising government servants, shopkeepers, local politicians, and the conservation NGO and eco-tourism local elite staff.

In order to understand just how huge a jump in income crab collecting is vis-à-vis others on the island, the following is a sketch of how much other occupations earn per month. A government primary school teacher makes Rs. 18,000 [GBP 1,800]; their high school counterparts make Rs. 28,000 [GBP 2,800]. Large shopkeepers average an income of Rs. 20,000 [GBP 2,000], small shopkeepers make Rs. 4,000 [GBP 40]. Daily wage labour in the tourism industry (hired to work on boats, in tourist lodges and as guides) make about Rs. 4,000-5,000 [GBP 40-50]. The same goes for daily wage labour as field hands within the island. The majority of farmers are small landowners with less than three *bhigas* of land, and a single crop of paddy will yield an average of 30-40 bags of rice, earning them Rs. 30,000 [GBP 3,000] annually. This sum is before deducting the costs which include materials but also the hiring of other labour. Several factors play into paddy cultivation including which strand of rice the farmer is growing with some that have higher market prices than others, the soil type, the location of land as many have lower productivity because of the ingress of salt water. Some farmers with access to capital will rent water pumping machines for a second crop of rice fed by sweet water ponds.

Shomit da's salary from APSI is Rs. 20,000 [GBP 2000] a month. He has two other sources of income through his tourist boat and the rent he receives on the land leased out to Green Club.

A contemporary crab collector can earn around Rs. 6000 in an average month. However in November through January, in the lead up to the Chinese New Year, one quintal of crabs [100 kilograms] can sell for up to Rs. 90,000 – 120,000 [GBP 900-1200] and in the low season for Rs. 15,000-20,000 [GBP 150-200]. If one is lucky, a quintal of crabs can be caught in two weeks, and profits are split amongst three people. After netting out the sizeable upfront investments and costs incurred during crab collecting, and viewed in the context of the same households that otherwise ran on an average of Rs. 3000-4000 [GBP 30-40] per month, earning Rs. 15,000-20,000 rupees [GBP 150-200] in two weeks is a major return and surpasses the earnings of most other occupations on the island.

Unlike what Shah and Lerche et. al (2018) argue in relation to the majority of *adivasis* and *dalits* in India, who in spite of capitalist modernity remain at the bottom of Indian society, Sundarbans crab collectors have become significantly more prosperous than they used to be before the “opening up of the Chinese market.” This was a story where global capital did indeed trickle down all the way to the bottom of the pyramid. Their gains, however, are accompanied by an entanglement to the specific booms and busts of commodities, and so their prosperity is at best at the mercy of global capital and the vagaries of China's appetite.<sup>60</sup>

Crab collectors' new wealth underwrote a variety of previously impossible expenditures. For instance, collectors had almost all begun to save money to convert their mud huts into brick homes, and to replace hay roofs with materials that could better withstand the region's cyclones. Another common new category of spending was on private healthcare. Crab collectors that had either ignored serious illnesses or, when the illnesses became acute, called local “quack” doctors, were now able to afford treatment at private hospitals in Canning and Kolkata. There is a deep-seated and growing mistrust of government hospitals, a phenomenon not unique to West Bengal, and most poor people aspire to be treated by private providers despite attendant financial costs. Families also cited purchasing a range of new assets –solar panels, television sets, mobile phones, radios, saris – and made better investment in their children, by buying such things as new school uniforms and evening tuition (private extracurricular classes).

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<sup>60</sup> Crab collecting, as stated earlier, is both risky and unpredictable work while massive profits can be made in one week, there is also the possibility of having the boat seized, the BLC confiscated as was the case with Kamal da in the previous Chapter, or encountering a devastating storm or wild animal while in the jungle.



In more subtle ways, new spending has also allowed crab collectors to erode the patron-client relationships that define the political, social and economic links between local elite and poor in rural India (Gupta 2012; Corbridge et. al 2005; see Shah 2010). Most significantly, crab collectors have paid back some debts to reduce their dependency on “big men” as sources of credit. While elsewhere in South Asia the poor accuse the rich for not taking care of them due to their greed and self-interest (see Huang 2016: 26), in the Sundarbans the local elite felt insecure of the independence that the poor seemed to have gained thanks to their “new money.” This is readily visible in regard to annual *pujos*, religious festivals that are the most important neighbourhood events of the year, which were formerly funded and programmed by “big men”. Many crab collectors now self-finance their *pujos*, allowing them more autonomy in choosing performances and musicians.

Crab collectors have seen a definite but modest improvement in their material conditions, financial self-sufficiency, and cultural autonomy. However, this has not led to a concomitant change in their social position. Quite the opposite: the fact that these gains have been enjoyed by the poorest, low caste communities - those living on the literal and figurative periphery of some of the most peripheral islands – has provoked a reaction among the elite that has sharpened existing social divisions. The local elite’s reaction, and resentment, is largely delivered through a moralizing discourse around greed closely intertwined with their reckless risk.

### ***The Bio-moral Basis of the Accusation, or Who Calls Whom Greedy***

The social positions of the accusers and accused powerfully mediate the changing economics of crab collecting. Put simply, to fully understand the charge of greed levelled by the accusers, it is first necessary to know who they are. Who blames whom, and why?

We know from previous chapters that Shomit da was born and raised in the Sundarbans, and also belongs to the *Poundra Kshatriya* or lower caste community similar to that of the crab collectors. He comes from very modest backgrounds himself. Conservation work, however, has allowed him to travel the length and breadth of the country for conferences and trainings. He has his own tourist boat, helps runs a tourist lodge on land he owns, heads the local chapter of APSI and after many years of hard work has only recently been able to construct a four story house in Canning for his wife and children.

Voiced by Shomit da, the social and political overtones of his condemnation of the crab collectors come into focus. As a member of today's local elite, what he and the forest rangers abhor is how access to easy money has changed crab collectors' aspirations. Shomit da, who is concerned about upgrading his mobile phone, enrolling his children in English and computer courses, and who was keen to send his sons abroad to study, feels that it is unfounded for crab collectors to have the same aspirations as himself for upward mobility. His aspirations for himself and for his children were those that I entirely sympathized with and in fact they were not too different from those of most others on Bali Island: he like the others wanted to have access to healthcare, wanted his children to get ahead and wanted a secure home for the family. So what was the problem if poor crab collectors wanted the same for themselves?

In answering my question there seemed to be a double morality. He said, "But if they can live off 4000 rupees [GBP 40] a month why are they trying to make 20,000 [GBP 200]?" The sentiment is that crab collectors shouldn't aspire for more; instead, they should stay where they belong. Along with Shomit da, members of the Forest Department make similar accusations which reveals a sad irony that the Forest Department, infamous for its unrepentant extraction of resources since the colonial period, finds itself in a position to deny and morally indict the poorest citizens of the post-colony (see Sivaramakrishnan 1995; Gadgil and Guha 2012) for attempting to access infinitesimally small amounts of the same resources.

The policing of everyday economic, social and political struggle is not a new story in the Sundarbans. Today's crabs are yesterday's prawns, and at the time Annu Jalais (2010; 2017) did fieldwork in a neighbouring island of the region, it was prawns that commanded a premium on global markets. Pulling nets for prawn seeds along the riverbank was eventually banned for environmental reasons for the damage it did to mangrove biota and fish stocks (Jalais 2017: 137). Jalais points out that alongside this real collateral environmental damage, prawn-seed collecting was a livelihood that mostly benefitted poor women. The marginal social and economic independence this generated changed household and neighbourhood dynamics, creating a backlash that accompanied the environmental one.

While the environmentalists banned prawn seed collection, the significance of prawn as a revenue-earner was repeatedly emphasized by the fisheries department (Mukhopadhyay 2016). The export value of prawns went from Rs. 550 million [GBP 6.4 million] in 1987-88 to Rs. 3.54 billion [GBP 41 million] in 1995-96 (Nanda 2005 as cited

in Mukhopadhyay 2016: 120). The numbers only increased with the years ahead. Subsequently with new forms of prawn rearing, through hatcheries and artificial chambers, it stopped being a lucrative source of livelihood for the Sundarbans women. Nevertheless, prawns like crab today are an extremely important source of foreign exchange for the government. In the year 2019, the value of mud crabs exported in India was GBP 106 million,<sup>61</sup> 40 percent of India's mud crab export is shipped out of Kolkata's air cargo facility. Similar to the case of prawns, while charges of greed are levied at crab collectors who do the work of collecting the crabs, mud crabs are an integral part of the revenue generated for the Indian fisheries department. No one seemed to be pointing at the colossal demand from China, Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia or the profits accrued by government and private export houses, or the several other middlemen that profit from the supply chain. The only ones blamed are the crab collectors themselves who, compared to all the other actors, have had the smallest amount of financial gains due to crab exports.

The contemporary charges against crab collectors are therefore part of a cycle of intertwined moral accusations and environmental policymaking aimed at policing the upwardly mobile poor. However, in the case of crabs there is no "scientific" study yet to prove the destruction caused by the collectors, and thus moral policing hinges on the paternalistic state preventing the poor from taking risks. Fascinatingly, this paternalism is only for select livelihoods. The annual work of honey collecting, carried out in the same forests, known to be much riskier than crab collecting, is not demonized by the Forest Department and conservationists. The honey collected is sold back to the Forest Department and does not have huge financial returns for the collectors. Only those forms of work that were both risky and made money were thought of as greedy. Honey collecting, which made no money compared to the crabs, and which was a "Non-Timber Forest Produce" (NTFP) owned by the Forest Department itself, was spared the accusatory label of being greedy work. Perhaps in the future if the Chinese develop a sweet tooth, and the Forest Department finds new markets for honey, a similar accusation might arise around Sundarbans honey.

These moral judgments reveal something profound about the accused as well as those that are doing the accusing. Accusations or "ugly feelings," as illustrated by Ngai (2005), allow us to pay keen attention to the role of gender, caste, class and other qualia (Chumley and Harkness 2013) where the same behaviour is considered in certain settings

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<sup>61</sup> <https://www.zauba.com/exportanalysis-mud+crab/unit-KGS-report.html>

to be courageous while in others thought of as reckless. The social and political reaction to women prawn seed collectors, and the moral injury directed against today's low caste and landless crab collectors, point to the bio-moral basis of these accusations (see Bear 2007). The nature of an accusation of greed attacks the individual, her personal morality and choices. It is a bio-moral accusation because it is against the body and soul and is a form of policing aspirations (see Skeggs 2005). Framing crab collecting as a consequence of rotten morality and poor choices shifts blame onto individuals and their bodies while delegitimizing any accusations against institutional or systemic forces (see Wacquant 2009; Skeggs 2005). In the case of the Sundarbans, greed is a weapon against the weak (see Robertson 2001), employed to reinforce established local hierarchies and wielded against the socially and politically vulnerable bodies of the accused.



*Figure 28 Crab middlemen weighing crabs in the village before taking them to Kolkata.*

## **The Defence of the Accused, or Notions of a Sufficient Life**

The “opening up of the Chinese market,” was in the words of Zigon (2007) a moment of “moral breakdown,” where implicit moral systems become explicit and can “shake one out of the everydayness of being moral” (Zigon 2007:133). Crab collecting

was making more money for collectors, and as a result collectors were facing highly public accusations of greed. As a result, they readily reflected aloud on their ethical motivations. In what I describe next, I reveal the power of accusations to destabilize as well as re-stabilize new constellations of personhood, but instead of becoming “environmental subjects” (Agrawal 2005: 165), crab collectors re-assert their notions of sufficiency and excess, greed and need and are acutely aware of the slippery slope between habit and desire. We see how even though crab collecting has allowed them relative wealth, from their initial positions of extreme poverty, their own emphasis is not on consumption, but on their notions of sufficiency. I explore the defences offered by the crab collectors themselves, and the moral categories of need [*aubhan*], habit [*snabhan*] and desire [*chabida*] through which they make sense of and justify their livelihood. In doing so, I query what it means to lead an immoral life, contrasting the constructed morality that polices what poor crab collectors “ought not to be doing” or do not “deserve” with the moral categories used by the crab collectors themselves.

### ***Need Versus Greed***

Just as the full import of the accusation of greed reflects on Shomit da and the Forest Officials, so does a full accounting of the crab collectors’ reaction to the charge speak to their own position within society. Greed is an age-old category in the Sundarbans (Chapter 2). Underlying the responses of most crab collectors was the ethico-religious code put forth by the forest goddess Bonbibi—*jongoler niyam* or the “rules of the jungle” that governs their relationship with the forest and rivers. To recall from Chapter 2, this is an intricate moral code followed by those who go into the forest to obtain a livelihood from it. Its main tenets are to take only what one needs from the forest in order to care for both the forest and other fishers who depend on it. It is precisely because of people’s reverence to the forest goddess Bonbibi that the accusation of greed is doubly hurtful to the crab collectors: it implies that they are breaking one of the foundational norms in relation to the forest.





*Figure 29 A group of three men will customarily spend 7-10 days living on these boats collecting crabs in the creeks.*

Two brothers, Pavan and Vikas, are representative in many ways of the archetypal crab collector. Their grandfather came to the Sundarbans as a young man, fleeing political violence in Bangladesh and seeking a new life. With no land, he made a living through fishing, crab collecting, honey collecting and wage labour for wealthy timber merchants licensed by the Forest Department back when the forest generated revenue and didn't have to be conserved. Pavan and Vikas da's father had likewise made a livelihood out of doing the jungle, and the brothers have been collecting crabs and fish for the past 25 and 15 years, respectively. This is the only work the two of them had ever known. Their collective household was also constantly plagued by illness. Much of the benefits from the recent crab commodity boom had been spent on medical care, although in the end of 2017 Vikas da had managed to save just enough to buy land for a house. At 37, he was going to be able to provide a separate space for his immediate family for the first time.

Pavan and Vikas da, even in the context of the island, can only be characterized as poor. Knowing the material poverty of their daily lives in intimate detail makes any accusation of greed ring hollow. However, Pavan da and Vikas da, who live close to Shomit da's Green Club, know him well and have heard his speeches several times. When I asked about Shomit da's rhetoric, Pavan da said:

“Shomit Mondol is crazy to think that we do the jungle out of greed [*lobh*]. I can’t go work in Kerala [a state in South India] like the others...I have three children here, I want to be with them. Shomit da says he will give us this work, that work, he gives us no work. He says he will give us chickens [for rearing], he hasn’t, said he would give us fish, he hasn’t, said he would give us gas [stoves], he hasn’t. They just talk. Everything I have is from my own hard work, not from his Club [referring to the NGO]...He’s always been a big talker. He runs a business and tells us we are being greedy? My kids’ books, school uniforms, food, medicines for my father: all of this depends on the jungle. Whatever I have today is because of the jungle...there is no other work here, what are we to do? The Forest Department won’t come and feed our families [*sbonghsbar*].”

For the sake of his children and parents Pavan da doesn’t want to migrate out of the Sundarbans to work. He feels that the NGO projects are nothing but false promises, and keenly observes the hypocrisy of the better-off, like Shomit da. He also emphasizes the lack of viable livelihood alternatives, a point to which he later returned explicitly: “You think if we had real alternatives we would still go into the tiger’s mouth [*bagher much*]...but there is no alternative [*anno uppay naye*]...so what should we do?” In Pavan da’s view, it is necessity that motivates him to be a crab collector. People like him are therefore both conscious of the moral boundaries of greed, and articulate about how their own material circumstances and motivations are grounded in a contrasting ethic, that of need.

The moral category of need emerged with even greater clarity in another part of my conversation with the two brothers. I was pushing the question of need versus greed by raising the story of the conservation campaign’s poster child, Shekhar: “Unlike you, he had 11 *bhigbas* of land...what was his motivation to go into the jungle?” To this, Pavan da explained to me that Shekhar’s case was different. He was never desperate. He didn’t need the income from crabs. He went into the jungle for *shaukh* [fancy, pleasure]. Vikas da chipped in: “It is not right to go into the jungle for joy [*anando*]. It is a serious place. The situation of the jungle is not good these days, many are falling [as tiger prey] and people who go casually like he went are not paying attention, if you go into the jungle you have to pay respect to the jungle [*shoran kottey hobey*], you have to believe in the jungle [*mantey hobey*]... when you don’t, this is when accidents happen.”

It was only much later in my time in the field, when I thought to ask how other crab collectors interpreted Shekhar’s death, that I understood that Shekhar’s case was an anomaly. Shekhar, the posterchild for greedy crab collectors, was not in fact a crab collector at all. The day that he was attacked by a tiger was his third time ever doing this work. Two other friends had asked him to come into the jungle as a kind of recreational

trip. He had not gone with the motivation of selling crabs to support his household since the land he owned was indeed more than sufficient. The crab collectors thought of his death, and his desire to go into the creeks of the jungle, through the lens of *shauk* or pleasure: Shekhar went to the jungle for fun. This was in direct contrast to the crab collectors' own motivations, their need, pushing them to venture into a place regarded as both sacred and dangerous.

Indeed, as Vikas da's quote suggests, the crab collectors regard Shekhar's attitude of insouciance toward the jungle as actually causing his death. Shekhar violated the rules that crab collectors follow in the jungle, which are based on Bonbibi's injunctions. The accusation of greed levelled at them is not just incorrect according to crab collectors but deeply hurtful because it is precisely the moral boundaries of greed and need of which they are conscious. They articulate how their own material circumstances and motivations are grounded in a different ethic, that of need<sup>62</sup>. They also readily contrast their need with the motivation of *shauk* [fun or pleasure] and reject Shekhar's story as representative of their own moral relationship with crab collecting.

### ***Habit and Desire***

Through a conversation with Kaveri Mridha, we are introduced to another crucial category that negotiates the tension between sufficiency and excess, need and greed. This is the idea of *chahida* meaning "desire" or, more literally, "want".

Kaveri Mridha is in her late 50s, and for the past 20 years she has been collecting crabs for a living. In the method she uses, a large group of 15-20 people travel together, disembark from a large boat, and tie baited strings [*thopas*] to individual strips of tree bark. While the smaller *naukas* customarily stay in the jungle for seven-ten days (see Chapter 1), Kaveri di and others like her come and go on a daily basis, known as *jawa asha*. The boat rows across the river from the village to the forest and anchors at a particular creek. From here, men and women get off and venture into the tributary creeks on foot. They are racing against the clock, since once the tide comes in, the forest floor will re-submerge, and they will have to return to the boat and the village.

Each person has about 20 *thopas* and on any given day they go to between five and seven different fishing spots. After tying the *thopa* to one tree, Kaveri di moves on to

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<sup>62</sup> Refer to Chapter 5 for the ways in which the two brothers also feel a discomfort in making a claim on the forest through forest rights.



another, until the last string is tied and then she will return to the first one to see if a crab has taken the bait, then check the second hook, and so on. Her sari is hitched high and she is covered in mud up to her thighs. Maintaining one's balance in wet mud, which in certain places pulls like quicksand, is a struggle. The forest floor is dense and Kaveri di must watch her feet but simultaneously also look ahead, carving her path through thick shrubbery, avoiding being scratched or, worse, having bigger branches trip her up and knock her to the forest floor.

Meanwhile, throughout, one is supposed to be vigilant about lurking tigers that are known to attack from behind. While all crab collecting is dangerous work, using a *don* – or the line and bait technique, described in the Chapter 1 - is safer than collecting crabs through the *thopa*. For the former one remains on the boat, and only ventures out into the forest to get firewood for cooking. For the *thopa*, in contrast, one has to get off the boat, spread out from the group, and penetrate into interior creeks.

Going in such a large group implies that one can't afford the expenses and investments required to go with a team of three. This form of crab collecting, in contrast to going on a three-person wooden boat, is for the poorest of the poor. Even among crab collectors, they are at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Kaveri di has no alternative to this form of livelihood. She wishes she could do something else. However, she has no land, no son, and a husband who had a bad fall more than a decade ago on a construction site and cannot perform wage labour. In addition, both her father and her uncle were killed by tiger attacks. Speaking about the dangers of the jungle, the constant fear of being caught by the Forest Department, and the lack of alternatives, brought tears to her eyes:

“The forester [Forest Rangers] tells me I have to find an alternative livelihood [*anno rojgar*], that I should do chicken rearing, goat rearing, duck rearing, that I should do this and that...that I am being greedy... but where shall I do all of this?... I have no land, and with some chicken rearing [*murghi chaas*] you think it is possible to make a living? I don't have anyone in my life--no son, no one to take care of me. I have no agriculture [*chaash baash*]. My household is dependent on crab and fish [*maach kangdar uporey shonghsbar choley*] What should I do? [*kee korbo ma*]. I really just don't like it, but I have no alternative. I feel so scared [*bhoiy*] but I have to do it. The situation of the jungle is making me scared but there is no alternative [*konno uppaay naiy*]...I do this out of need [*aubhar*], out of the burning of my stomach [*peter jala*]....how can this be called greed?”

Like Pavan and Vikas da, Kaveri di locates her motivations for crab collecting in her material poverty and lack of viable alternatives. Kaveri di also had clear definitions of what it meant to do the jungle out of greed:

“If you are living well [*bhalobbabbhey thakcho*] and the household is running [*shonghsar cholchey*] and if you didn’t do the jungle, and still you could carry on fine....but you still insisted on [crab collecting] then this is greed [*lobb*].”

I asked if she thought there were other crab collectors who were going into the jungle out of greed. She said the majority that she knew went out of need and desperation, not out of greed. “I know people who started doing it out of hunger but now the needs are met and yet they continue.” She says there is a thin line between what starts out as need but becomes a habit [*swabbhav*]. For those people for whom the times of desperation were over but still continued to do the jungle were doing so not out of greed but habit [*swabbhav*]. For Kaveri di, there was a moral continuum connecting need and habit:

“If you started when your children were little you don’t have to continue once your sons become older and start earning.... But it was hard to break out of habit. If I had a son, who was earning and could provide for the family, then do you think I would be going into the jungle?”<sup>63</sup>

Kaveri di established a range of morally sufficient justifications for doing the jungle. If one has a son who is earning, or if someone in the family has a government job, or if they own land to cultivate paddy, then these individuals already have a sufficient life and collecting crabs would be greedy. She also emphasizes that the relative morality of someone’s decision to do the jungle is not static. Their action may be justified at a particular moment, but when their economic circumstances change, and if their action has calcified into habit, the same action may become morally suspect. For Kaveri di, the morality of actions thus needs to be re-evaluated over time. She claims that the forest goddess Bonbibi encouraged the re-evaluations of notions of need, greed and excess. Bonbibi espoused an ethic of self-limitation that had to be set by oneself and reflect one’s own circumstances.

Our conversation so far had already cast doubt on whether there was any clear litmus test for need and greed, and the next part of our conversation complicated these categories even further. I wanted Kaveri di to give me more specific examples of her

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<sup>63</sup> Chapter 5 explores cases in which people stop doing the jungle once there is no more need.

definition of sufficiency. I told her that I had been living with a household which often wanted to catch as many crabs as they could, and this was because one of the members – Piyali – was unwell and her healthcare costs were exorbitant. Was this also greed? Kaveri di immediately replied: “This is need, not greed, one’s healthcare [*manusher swasth*], children’s education [*cheley mer shikha*] and to be able to provide food is all need [*aubhan*].” What about saving to buy land if one was landless, was that greedy? “That is not greed, it is desire [*chahida*], but there is a very thin line between greed and desire.” I asked her to explain the difference between the two.

“If I can wear a Rs. 500 [GBP 5] sari but I see someone else wearing a Rs. 5,000 [GBP 50] sari and I want that then that is greed. Say on a day I have caught five kilos of crab. I feel fine, it is not much but it will do. But then someone else I see on another boat has caught 25 kilos and then suddenly I have a desire to catch more... This is wrong. This is greed. If something was sufficient before, before you saw somebody else has more ... than you should think of that as good... If I have a hay roof, tomorrow I will want an alabaster roof and then I will want a brick house [*packa baadi*] and then I will want solar light... this is desire [*chahida*]... In my situation I am going out of the burning of the stomach this is not greed... but tomorrow if I start wanting better saris then it is out of greed.”

“Is it so bad to want better saris?” I countered. She smiled. Taking my hand in hers, she replied with a contemplative tone, “No, it is not so bad”. Once in a while it was acceptable. “But there is no end to desire... which is why I said some desires are okay, some are out of greed and besides... our opportunities for work aren’t increasing but only desire is increasing” [*rojgar baadcheyna chahida baadchey*].

Kaveri di introduces a third moral category of *chahida*, or desire. For Kaveri di, some desires are acceptable. A secure home, good health, money to be able to send one’s children to school, having enough food and a sturdy roof over one’s head are all part of a sufficient life. Desiring these things is a legitimate emotion born out of need and justifies action. Other desires fall in the category of greed because they are not necessary, but excessive. These include more expensive saris and bigger boats. Still other desires, if unexamined, can easily lead to greed. Wanting a bigger catch than is necessary, particularly when measuring one’s own wealth against others, is such a desire. Kaveri di recognizes that the feeling of wealth is relative to what we already have and what we see our neighbours have, and warns that constantly revising and self-reflecting on the idea of “need” is important because it is a slippery slope toward greed.

It is clear that crab collectors have strongly felt definitions of dignified work. In addition, they also have their specific notions of sufficiency and excess, and moral reflections on what it means to do a livelihood out of greed versus need. Ram Guha (2006) in his book titled "*How Much Should a Person Consume?*" provides an analysis of what it means "to forge a more peaceful and sustainable relationship between humans and other species" with which we share the earth. These are a set of themes that loom large in today's ecological crisis. For Sundarbans residents like Kaveri di and the others in this thesis, there is a clear notion of how much is enough. Similarly, Henrietta Moore (2015; 2019) is interested in the diverse ways in which prosperity is inhibited or enabled and how ideas of well-being go beyond material desires but are embedded in projects of rooting and belonging. For Kaveri di, Pavan da and Vikas da the ability to provide for their loved ones, be it ailing parents or school going children, and to be able to make a living while being next to their family members is one of the most important aspects of what it means to live well.

Their well-being is inhibited when their attempts to make a living are curtailed through the creation of physical enclosures as well as through a moralizing discourse accusing them of greed when in fact there is a clear notion of doing this livelihood out of need. Entangled as they are in political and moral economies, (Thompson 1971; Fassin 2005; 2009) accusations reveal how individual ethical action comes to be circumscribed, and at times even encapsulated, by more pervasive social forces. In these contexts it is striking how often the most marginalized like Pavan da, Vikas da, Kaveri di and others seem forced to bear the psychic burden of society's self-admitted ills, wrestling with deep ethical quandaries involving infinitesimally small slivers of humanity's resource base while attracting vastly disproportionate interest. Focusing on the economic and political realities of the accused and the accusers sheds light on how ethical discourses inevitably emerge from everyday power differentials.

Individuals' emotions, moral precepts, larger value systems are mutually constitutive. These knowledge politics or differences in value are important because they are intertwined with, and emerge from, the political economy (Leach 2015). Putting a value or value-judgments on things, people, certain behaviours or work are mediated by interactions, social relationships and the politics of class. Notions of greed, need and desire come out of local ethico-religious notions, but these local categories become weapons that are co-opted by particular actors to entrench certain pre-existing divisions and inequalities in society. Values can undergo a process of disclosure and enclosure

(Kockelman 2016) with the forces of enclosure being multi-valent. The polyvalent and unstable definition of greed within the community reveals the constructed nature of such accusations, and points toward the social, political and bio-moral basis of these labels to understand why, when and how the weakest come to take on such moral opprobrium.



*Figure 30 Crab collecting in a larger group.*

## **The Environmental Politics of the Accusation, or Who is Not Called Greedy?**

Because of the predominance enjoyed by the conservation movement and Forest Department in representing the Sundarbans externally, the greedy crab collector trope had a near universal acceptance among all kinds of outsiders. It was so well publicized beyond the grassroots level that it ceased to be local. This section argues that the conservation movement's embrace of artisanal crab collectors as the chief environmental

scapegoat in the Sundarbans is deeply political. Crab collectors are targeted because it is within the political power of environmentalists to constrain them, at least to some extent. In the short term and at the local level, the moral and financial energies are being invested in accusations that impute negative characteristics to the weakest and most defenceless.

This becomes apparent when one considers how the environmental footprint of the crab collectors measures up against other, far more egregious anthropogenic threats facing the Sundarbans. Fishing trawlers abound in the sea around the Sundarbans delta and are often caught trespassing in the national park. For decades, large container ships transporting highly toxic fly ash have travelled through the Sundarbans from Kolkata to Dhaka. Over the past two decades, thousands of motorized tourist boats - including a luxury cruise ships- have proliferated to allow city-dwellers to consume “untouched” and “pristine” nature (e.g. Jalais 2007; Vasan 2018). Since 2017, with investment from the Indian government, Bangladesh has begun building a 320-megawatt coal power plant in Rampal in a part of the Bangladeshi Sundarbans. Another mega project, to interlink major Indian rivers, recently passed in the Riverways Act of 2017. If executed, it will curtail the fresh water flow of many of the rivers that feed the Sundarbans and guarantee widespread ecological damage. The Marine Fisheries Regulation and Management (MFRM) Bill in India keeps undergoing amendments which favour mechanized fishing over artisanal fishers. Above all, the sea continues to rise (Hazra et. al 2002; Ghosh 2017; Harms 2015).

All of these are grave threats to conservation. This is a fact that everybody, including the conservationists and higher-ranking Forest Department officials, acknowledges. In interviews at conservation NGOs’ with headquarters in Kolkata and Delhi, the heads of these organizations never denied the environmental gravity of any of these issues to me. One of the most visible and least addressed issue was the container ships transporting materials from the port of Kolkata to Dhakha, some of which are owned by companies that promote “eco-tourism” (Chapter 1). So when, for example, I asked why there hadn’t been campaigns against decrepit vessels carrying toxic materials, which even a World Bank report cites as being one of the biggest threats, the answer was revealing: they had tried, but failed. Belinda Wright, the founder and head of APSI, explained in her Delhi office that in 2001, APSI filed a writ petition in the High Court of Calcutta vs. Union of India, State of West Bengal & Inland Waterways Authority, to protect the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve from two threats. The first was large-scale prawn seed collection and the second was the proposed international shipping lane through the delta. While prawn seed collection was banned, nothing came of the second one. Their

attempts to resist eventually hit a wall. When I asked employees of WWF about the container ships of fly ash, the reply was that nothing could be done because this was the decision of the West Bengal government.

Subsequent conversations with the Forest Department followed the same lines. The officials I spoke to also agreed on the severity of the issue, quoting the example of a near miss in July 2018 when a ship carrying 440 tonnes of heavy fuel oil near the Indian Sundarbans caught fire and nearly capsized. There have already been massive oil spills in the Bangladeshi Sundarbans. Nevertheless, they all evaded responsibility. The senior officials of the Forest Department pointed to the fact that trade and transport is the province of another government ministry and was not part of their mandate. They told me to go and ask my questions at some other department in some other building in some other city. Through collective shoulder shrugging, both civil society and the state write off the systemic environmental threats to the Sundarbans as either too powerful or too bureaucratic to fight against.

Nevertheless, our era of climate change has amplified the call for ever-more stringent biodiversity conservation (Balmford and Whitten 2003; Wilson 2016). This is attended by significant global and national funding to save the tiger and save the forest. If trawlers, container ships, tourist fleets, coal plants, mega-projects and climate change can't be stopped, the funds for conservation have to be diverted to something else. The crab collectors, with their wooden boats, wading in knee-deep mud, catching one crab at a time, become attractive targets precisely because of their physical, economic, and political vulnerability.

The entire conservation apparatus of the Sundarbans has therefore devoted itself to keeping these fishers out of the forest. As Chapter 1 describes, the Wildlife Protection Act of India (WLPA) provides the legal foundation to brand the crab collectors as trespassers and "thieves." This is enforced by large Forest Department investments in remarkably advanced surveillance, including field offices and staff with ammunitions, speedboats, drones, and e-patrolling apps (see Chapter 3). On the public relations front, visitors are told that illegal fishing in the region is a major challenge to biodiversity conservation, and efforts to stop the fishers feature prominently.

Strikingly, this substantial expenditure of manpower and treasure has been founded and expanded on the flimsiest scientific foundation. In my nearly two years living in the Sundarbans, not a single conservation or Forest Department representative cited any study quantifying the effect of the crab collectors on the Sundarbans environment, or

any evidence-based limit to its carrying capacity. This is not to say that a “scientific study” would necessarily create more legitimacy as “scientific expertise” and the notions of degradation and risk are themselves constructed and often disregard other ways of understanding, knowing and valuing landscapes (see Leach, Scoones and Thompson 2002).

Nevertheless, it is revealing that when asked directly about whether the crab collectors cause environmental damage, the answers verge on the ludicrous. A senior Forest Department official said, “in the event of a tiger attacking a fisherman, a tiger might get hurt”. If asked directly what other harm crab collectors cause, answers are usually vague such as “if the boat is in the creek, it can obstruct the tiger’s path.” Other officials simply re-state the law: “It is a core area, it is meant only for the tiger, crab collectors are breaking the law.” It was impossible to get a plausible, evidence-based account of the damage that crab collectors might be causing to the ecosystem.

A parallel narrative around scarcity and overpopulation was often expressed by scientists, climate change researchers, Forest Department officials, and conservationists, who used terms such as “carrying capacity”, “over-fishing”, “extinction” in relation to stocks of fish and crabs. These terms were directed at crab collectors, not nearby trawlers revealing how the rhetoric of scarcity is socially generated (Mehta 2013) and requires an understanding at a local level of intricate politics of resources use and social inequality (Mehta 2013; Leach 2015). Local conservationists like Shomit da, picking up on the language of visiting scientists, often justified their policing by bringing up a scarcity-driven resource politics (Mehta et. al 2019) that once again blamed the poorest. “There will be no crabs left in the Sundarbans for future generations. Crabs will become extinct [*lupā*].” If concerns of overfishing were genuine, then the targets of the conservationists and the Forest Department would surely be the nearby fishing trawlers (see Longo, Clausen, Clark 2015). However, those too, like the container ship vessels, were not within their mandate to control. Fishing trawlers, Indian and international, obtain their licences from the Government of India Fisheries department, which is once again too powerful a body to contend with. The conservation movement has been a willing participant in vilifying the crab collectors, and reproducing the greed trope that provides a moral basis for their vilification, because of the movement’s political exigencies coupled with the political vulnerabilities of the crab collectors themselves.





*Figure 31 Ship vessels transporting fly ash and other toxic materials travel through the same waterways.*

How does this make us re-evaluate the productivity, and the effect, of “catastrophic thinking”? In the era of global warming alarmism and ecological degradation, forests need to be saved, especially ones that provide the habitat of the Royal Bengal tiger. From the perspective of the scientific community, civil society organizations, and conservationists, the contemporary moment in the Sundarbans represents a near-apocalyptic crisis. It has been argued that imagining life among future ruins has the potential to generate alternative kinds of critical temporalities and be generative of critical politics (Latour et. al 2018; Tsing et. al 2017). In neighbouring Bangladesh, iNGOs, international aid organizations and national development bodies working on climate change and adaptation regimes treat embanked islands as sites of experimentation, a place of ruin but also a laboratory where possibilities and alternatives for other parts of the world facing similar consequence may be tested out (see Cons and Paprocki 2018; Paprocki 2018). In the West Bengal side of the same delta, an examination of how the energy and resources generated by this crisis play out at the village level, this chapter has shown how certain kinds of blame, and the accompanying economic, social and psychic burden, are being placed on the weakest and poorest. While billions of dollars flood in for biodiversity conservation and climate change resiliency projects, those that bear the

“poison of the accusation and the doom of responsibility” (Latour et. al 2018) are men and women belonging to the most marginalized groups.

## **Crab Antics**

In tracing how the charge of greed comes to be levelled at the poorest and weakest in society, this chapter has tried to show how the politics of accusation in the Sundarbans is a window into investigating a wide range of dilemmas in our society. China’s ravenous demand for crabs has led to improved material conditions for erstwhile crab collectors. This has generated new value systems and a raft of bio-moral accusations about greedy crab collectors. Like in the epigraph from Peter Wilson (1973), Shomit da and Laltu da as members of the local elite, attempt to drag down the Sundarbans’ crab collectors from their recent trajectory of upward economic mobility. Policing their social and material strivings through the accusation of greed. Closely related, I show how the nitty-gritty details of the accusations of greed and the minutiae of the defences offered by crab collectors such as Pavan da, Vikas da, and Kaveri di merit our attention for they highlight the rich moral-thought worlds of the accused and their reflections on sufficiency, excess, habit, desire and risky work.

I then step back to emphasize a second form of “crab antics,” which revolves around the selective dimensions of this moral battleground, and questions why landless and poor crab collectors are targeted while more flagrant environmental threats to the Sundarbans are ignored. I show that the conservation movement, and an allied Forest Department, are politically unable to confront larger ecological threats. Trapped by an imperative to action, this has led both environmental actors and the state to redirect the material and moral resources meant to combat environmental apocalypse against the poorest and weakest. Without any basis—scientific or environmental—the crab collectors are prevented from entering the forest by a form of policing underwritten by moral paternalism.

Here, viewed from a greater distance, the conservation movement and Forest Department are also crabs in the same bucket, trying their hardest to bring down the crab collectors. They too are stuck in a confined space with the crab collectors, trapped by the modalities and shortages of political power that surrounds and limits their scope of action. Every time I left my field site, I was reminded that the delta was sinking under outside influences: India’s economic boom as well as Western, Northern industrial consumerism

(Crate 2011; Moore 2017; Chakrobarty 2009; Moore 2017; c.f. Hornborg 2017). But in the field, there was no talk of these larger forces. The ships, trawlers, luxury cruisers and eroding shoreline went unremarked, hidden in plain sight. The villain was instead the crab collectors and the focus on their venal sins. The bulk of the emotional, physical and economic resources are misspent on the most inconsequential environmental threat. The Sundarbans delta is submerging. It is not as if this has led to apathy, inaction or denialism in the face of an increasing crisis. It is not “we knew everything and did nothing” (Latour et al. 2018; see Stengers 2015). The “great derangement” (Ghosh 2016) in my opinion is worse: we know everything, and we are doing something, busying ourselves raining moral opprobrium on the poorest and the weakest. We are staring at the trees while the forest drowns. We are all playing a game of crab antics.

## Chapter 5

### A Tale of Two Claims: Forest Rights or a “Commons in Times of Need”

“The forests rights on ancestral lands and their habitat were not adequately recognized in the consolidation of State forests during the colonial period as well as in independent India, resulting in historical injustice to the forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem.”

-The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights Act), 2006.

Stringent forms of conservation have displaced millions of individuals and communities living alongside protected areas. Simultaneously, and in opposition, there have been initiatives the world over to put people at the centre of conservation. In India, the most radical people-centred approach to conservation has been the passage of the Forests Rights Act (FRA) in 2006. This created a set of national eligibility criteria that, if met, guarantee individuals a justiciable right to the natural resources where they live. Conservation NGOs have often fought to dilute the FRA, including in court (Srivastava 2019), while state-level forest departments have variously upheld, rejected or ignored claims stemming from it. Alongside forest-dwellers and forest-dependent people, a robust national consortium of civil society organizations and social movements have mobilised to fight for forest rights.

During the course of my fieldwork, local NGOs with the support of these national movements began to make inroads into the Sundarbans islands. The very first Public Hearing in the Sundarbans on the non-implementation of the FRA took place in 2016. A Public Hearing [*janshunani*], known in other parts of India as “People’s Hearings” [*jan sunwai*], are widely used vehicles by a consortium of activists to air people’s grievances, particularly around the inefficiency or misconduct of government, and take place in front of an audience of local residents, an invited jury of guests and local activist groups as well as state officials. In the Sundarbans, local chapters of national fishers’ unions have been

active, on behalf of Sundarbans fishers, for fighting for their rights. Forest rights activism joined forces with fishers' unions to host the first ever Public Hearing on the issue in the region. These initiatives propose a conjoined alternative to mainstream exclusionary conservation practices in the Sundarbans.

However, the vast majority of the Sundarbans residents have not yet been exposed to rights. This is slowly changing in the region with increased mobilizations since 2016. Nevertheless, the particular timeframe when I conducted fieldwork, that is before the ingress of a language of rights, allowed me to capture the particular vocabulary, imaginations and values through which men and women who do the jungle articulate their relationship to the forests. This Chapter is concerned with the disjuncture between their words and the idea of having a "right over the forest" [*jongoler upporey adhikar*]. I provide four ethnographic cases that highlight this gap. My findings pose a fundamental question: are forest rights appropriate in the Sundarbans context, or might there be other "people-centred" approaches to conservation that are more appropriate? Rights-talk and rights-cultures accompany a form of "fixing" (Nigam 1998: 17) that have the power to erase other forms of language, thought and valuation. By excavating the ways in which people currently relate to the forest, I open up the possibility of locally embedded means, but with clear global resonances, through which a language of justice (Asad 2000) may be expressed.

The final section of this chapter treats rights activists as ethnographic subjects - in line with Goodale (2011) and Riles (2006) - and details some of the structural reasons the rights movement has met with an ambivalent reception in the Sundarbans. I highlight the internal contradictions within the movement advocating for fishers' rights, particularly the rift between unions and local civil society organisations, which rupture and weaken an outwardly united front.

## **The Symbolic Importance of Rights-based Mobilizations: A Public Hearing**

Pavitro da and Tapas da hung a large green poster as a backdrop to the stage, which faced an empty tent and a large carpet. It read in English, and then below in Bengali: "Breaking the Chains of Historical Injustice: Dalits and Adivasis assert their rights over Sundarbans forests." We were in the courtyard of a primary school on Rangabelia, one of the neighbouring Sundarbans islands from where I was based. Nearby, 15-20 volunteers

chopped and added enormous quantities of vegetables to a large cauldron in preparation for the meal of *kichdi*, rice and vegetables. Over 200 participants were expected during the day's proceedings for the Public Hearing.

Over the past two decades, *jan sunwais* or “people’s hearings” have become a common mode of collective action in India. The first hearing or *sunwai* was organized in the mid 1990s by Rajasthan-based *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (MKSS)—a civil society organization working with workers and farmers (Lama-Rewal 2018: 3). Ever since *sunwais* have burgeoned to become a crucial repertoire of collective action in the landscape of social mobilization in India. There are several different variations in *sunwais* in India which range from highlighting corruption in public schemes varying from food security, right to work legislations, to the atrocities on *dalits* and *adivasis*, and depending on where they are organized, and for what purpose, they have varied audiences (see Lama-Rewal 2018; Sengupta 2017; Pande 2014). *Sunwais* are events that are the public culmination of longer-term processes in the aggrieved areas, such as social audits, or various other kinds of civil society mobilizations and everyday meetings.

This Public Hearing was the first of its kind in the region. Like most *sunwais*, it was also decidedly more than a local affair. The hearing had been organized by the All India Union of Forest Working People (AIUFWP) in conjunction with the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF), and also had support from the Delhi Solidarity Group (DSG), a Delhi-based organization that lends political solidarity to social movements and civil society organizations. Pavitro da and Tapas da were representatives of the Sundarbans Jan Sramjibi Manch (SJSM), a member organization of AIUFWP and the local NGO that had put in all the groundwork for the preceding months to make this hearing possible.

SJSM is the only NGO working full-time on forest rights in the region, and its small, underfunded team has only recently begun to engage the 52 far-flung Sundarbans islands that are inhabited by 4.5 million people. Over the years since the passing of the FRA, its implementation has been repeatedly thwarted by the West Bengal Forest Department and local political parties (Sen and Patnaik 2018). As a result, the larger purpose of the event, from the point of view of the organizing groups, was to simply build awareness about the FRA.

On the stage, seated in front of the large green poster, were several high-profile guests: Medha Patkar, arguably India’s most eminent activist known most famously for her campaigns against the damming of the Narmada river; Advocate Sanjay Parikh, a

Supreme Court of India judge; Dr. Nandini Sundar, Professor of Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics, a Kolkata-based journalist and representatives of local organizations. The gathering included Ashok Choudhury and Roma Malik, national activists and members of AIUFWP; as well as other imminent activists, researchers and journalists from Kolkata and Delhi. On the carpet in front of them sat residents of the Sundarbans as well as *adivasis* associated with the AIUFWP from other far-flung parts of India—Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

While all *sunmavis* take different forms across the country, a common trope is that they are a form of advocacy which targets the judiciary, along with local government and state bureaucracies. All *sunmavis*, in the way that they are structured, give a voice and a platform to people who are supposed to be targeted beneficiaries of government welfare or in the case of the Sundarbans have been aggrieved by the non-implementation of a national legislation. The relationship to the Indian courts and legal jurisprudence is crucial at most *sunmavis* which customarily have the presence of imminent lawyers. Proposals and recommendations are often put forth by citing constitutional legislations. Sivaramakrishnan (2011) notes the importance of environmental jurisprudence in shaping struggles around resource access in India. Organizing members of these *sunmavis* are both aware of this, work within the rubric of the law while simultaneously use these *sunmavis* as a means through which to push for new legislations (see Jenkins and Goetz 1999; see also Sundar 1990' 2013).

The day consisted of a few speeches from visiting guests after which the morning and long afternoon was dedicated to the testimonies of local fishers who came to the stage one by one to share their challenges in trying to obtain a dignified livelihood from the forests. For the majority of men and women who provided testimonies, this was the first time they had been given such a platform. Many spoke about the fear that the Forest Department had instilled in their minds in relation to the ever-expanding zone of prohibited [*nishaid*] forest areas. A man shared how his father had died in a tiger attack, but that his family had never received any compensation even though this was stipulated by the law. Others spoke about the below market price at which the Forest Department bought their hard-earned honey. Each testimony highlighted in detail the problem of Boat License Certificates (BLCs), and the cycle of debt associated with acquiring them through “big men” (as discussed in detail in Chapter 1).

Besides testimonies given by Sundarbans fishers *adivasis* women who had taken train journeys of two days or longer to share their trials and tribulations with the Forest

Departments in their own forests and villages took to the stage. This is not uncommon at public hearings across India and spoke to the day's secondary goal to bring geographically removed resistance struggles together, both in solidarity and as a means for people to learn from other contexts. These women inspired Sundarbans residents to join the struggle [*sangarsh*]. One such speech was delivered by the formidable Sokalo Gond, an *adivasi* woman and resident of Uttar Pradesh (U.P), who has been a key figure in the fight to safeguard the FRA.



Figure 32 The Public Hearing on the non-implementation of the Forests Rights (photo credit: Tapas Mondol)

Language was a challenge. Testimonies given in Bengali were translated to Hindi, and speeches made in Hindi were translated into Bengali. Perhaps unsurprisingly, both detail and nuance were lost in the long-windedly tedious and at times inaccurate translations. Outside visitors had a hard time understanding the specificities of the Sundarbans landscape, and their speeches on the eligibility of local fishers to take advantage of the FRA often fundamentally misunderstood the context. The Sundarbans fishers, for their part, were equally confused. The wording of the legislation, the eligibility criteria, and other intricacies shared by the organizers seemed at times like distant information about somewhere far away. For the people I spoke to at the hearing, legal FRA facts didn't resonate in relation to their own lives and everyday anxieties. This was evidenced by the fact that the Sundarbans residents' testimonies did not include aspirations for the implementation of forest rights. This was understandable as the majority were simply not aware of a right to the forest. Unlike in many other forests of India, and compared to women such as Sokalo Gond—who has been active in rights-



based mobilizations for over a decade in other North Indian forests, “rights-talk” was unfamiliar to Sundarbans residents.

By the afternoon, after the lunch of *kichdi*, people who had journeyed to the Sundarbans had, out of exhaustion, fallen asleep on the felt carpet with their bags as pillows. Energies continued to wane until the end of the day, when Medha Patkar took the stage to huge applause. After she finished delivering an energetic speech, she began to sing songs of solidarity popular in the landscape of activism and protest in Northern India. Even though the lyrics of the songs were in Hindi and unfamiliar to the Sundarbans fishers, the message Medha ji wanted to get across was that the story of dispossession is a pan-Indian one, and that people had to come together to fight against it. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

“Birsa [referring to Birsa Munda, an *adivasi* freedom fighter] calls *dalits* and *adivasis* to unite, fishermen and farmers to unite, villagers to unite...we won’t leave the village, we won’t leave the jungle, we won’t leave our motherland, we won’t leave the struggle... we will fight, we will win<sup>64</sup>.”

[*Birsa pukarey, ek jut ho, ao desh vasi, dalit ho adivasi ho, machwarey aau kisan aau, aau desh vasi. Sunno desh vasi...gaon chodoba nahi, jungol chodoba nahi, ma maati chadaba nahi, ladai chadoba nahi...ladenge jeetenge.*]

As a finale to the day, Medha ji and the other activists and organizers on stage began chanting popular national slogans: “We are one!” [*Awaaz do, hum ek hai*] and “This jungle is ours, not just anyone’s father’s patrimony” [*Yeh jungle humara hai, na kisi key baap ka hai*] and “We will fight, we will win” [*Ladenge, jeetenge*]. These slogans were in Hindi. The Hindi-speaking contingent from far away responded with fists pounding the air, united with a fight that seemed, for those few moments, a national fight.

This feeling of solidarity, rather than the idea of rights, seemed to be the main takeaway for many Sundarbans islanders in attendance. In other contexts, citizen led movements have been critiqued for being removed from the people on whose behalf they work (see Shah 2013). However, in the Sundarbans, the opportunity of fishers to share their struggles and hear others in similar situations, from different Sundarbans islands and across the country, was very significant. People of all age-groups in attendance, including myself, felt a sense of collective euphoria having attended the event. There was a palpable

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<sup>64</sup> This song was initially written by Bhagwandas Maji, an *adivasi* leader who led the agitation against the bauxite mining mafia in Kashipur, Jharkhand. It has since become an emblematic song for protest movements against the forces of development that dispossess *adivasis* across the country.

feeling of a Durkheimian (2001) “collective effervesce” perhaps one akin to mass rallies, protests and concerts. A high school student in his school uniform and backpack – straining on tiptoe to get a better glimpse of the stage – had rushed straight from school to see Medha ji. He had only seen her in newspapers and couldn’t believe that she was actually talking in his village about the problems of the Sundarbans. Pointing to a man with a big camera, which are only ever directed towards tigers rather than people, he said that it gladdened him that his village would show up in the newspaper. I asked a Muslim woman crab collector who had come with her very young son from the island of Samsednagar, bordering Bangladesh, if she had heard about the Forests Rights Act. She hadn’t, and still didn’t seem to understand what it was about, but regardless she felt that this meeting was important “because now they [the outside guests] will see how we live.” Everyone I spoke with expressed the same sense of pride that people from “outside” and as “far-away” as Delhi had come to the Sundarbans. After the *summai* there was a generalized sense—not only among organizers but also among participants and attendees—of how euphorically the day’s proceedings had unfolded.

In the Sundarbans, the hearing was considered a huge success, both in terms of its symbolic significance to the people and for having created a participatory space in which those that are the least heard could voice their grievances. In addition to building solidarities across the nation, it was also seminal in raising awareness of the Sundarbans’ issues beyond West Bengal. It was covered by local, state and national newspapers. In addition, *The Research Collective* (TRC)—a group of Delhi based researchers associated with the Programme for Social Action (PSA)—used the occasion to conduct several interviews, document the testimonies of Sundarbans residents, and produced an informative report<sup>65</sup> detailing the Forest Rights Act and highlighting the long history of conservation malpractice in the Sundarbans.

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<sup>65</sup> The excellent TRC report is called “Visible Tiger; Invisible People: Study and Report Based on the Public Hearing held at Sundarbans Islands, India” November 2017 accessible online: <https://updatecollective.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/visibletiger2017.pdf>



Figure 33 Sundarbans fishers giving testimonies on stage (photo credit: Tapas Mondol).

For me, the event presented the opportunity to connect to the rights movement. I talked to several journalists, activists, lawyers and organizers—including Pavitro da, Tapas da, Ashok da, Roma ji and others—whom I continued to be in touch with over the next few years. The hearing also led me to attend other meetings and rallies on the FRA, both at a local and national level, and to learn about the technicalities of the legal right to forests delineated by the 2006 Act.

In the hearing's immediate aftermath, encouraged by the movement's commitment and elated by having been a part of a pan-Indian movement of resistance, I returned to Bali island with a new set of questions. Armed with a handful of FRA flyers, I set out to investigate peoples' opinions about having a right [*adhikar*] to the forest. Rights, backed by legal jurisprudence emanating from the Supreme Court, seemed like an obvious and appropriate tool through which people could fight everyday oppression and dispossession. Despite a lack of awareness, and the fact that SJSM's work had barely infiltrated into the island where I was based, I expected most of my interlocutors to embrace the notion of a right to the forest immediately.

However, instead of doing so, those who do the jungle articulated their claim on the forest using very different vocabularies and associations with the forest. Rights [*adhikar*] were not the terms through which they articulated their relationship to the forest.

In one sense, this disjuncture in vocabulary could be attributed to people's unawareness of the FRA. After all, the FRA was new to the Sundarbans and people had simply not heard about forests rights before. What I found to be fascinating though was that when presented with the notion of rights, people did not simply negate them, but responded with different, affirmative ideas about who should be allowed to do the jungle and under what conditions could one use the forest. The forest was considered a "commons in times of need" as Chapter 2 described in detail. The jungle was known as and referred to as *Ma'ar Khamor* or the "common-storehouse" or "granary" of Bonbibí. These metaphorical and ritual associations are not just mere words but in fact, as I show, are crucial to how Sundarbans fishers co-constitute their identity and relationship to their surrounding environment and labour (see Bear 2015). Human thought processes are in many fundamental ways metaphorical (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The metaphor of the jungle as being a "commons in times of need" is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words. As Lakoff and Johnson have argued metaphors are a "conceptual system" which allows one to "both think and act" (1980: 4). According to them, "our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities" (ibid). In what follows, I show how the ways of describing and relating to the jungle for Sundarbans fishers, and the linguistic expression it takes is not merely a matter of a difference in vocabulary but reveal their conceptual systems and ways of relating and making meaning and getting around in the world (ibid: 6).

Vocabularies and the language used to express a relationship to a landscape are neither static nor unchangeable. It is crucial to point out that since this first Public Hearing in January 2016, there have been several other meetings, mass mobilizations and workshops canvassing for a "right to the Sundarbans forest" spearheaded by SJSN and supported by AIUFWP. During a follow-up trip to the field site in August 2018, a few more people had heard of rights to the forest than the previous year when I had been based on Bali Island. The majority however still used a starkly different language with which they perceived their relationship to the forests. It is precisely this particular set of political and ethical imaginations, expressed through a distinctive metaphorical and conceptual vocabulary, before the widespread ingress of rights-talk that this Chapter captures. These imaginations, associations and forms of claim making, if we might call them that, are both locally embedded and with global resonances for environmental justice. They needn't be entirely antithetical to the rights-discourse, but equally several of

the conceptual frameworks I unpack might not sit in tandem with rights. Perhaps one way to think about these conceptual vocabularies is that they provide an alternative not just to coercive forms of conservation but also to the language and discourse of rights. Might these be nascent and new vocabularies of and for justice.

## **The Rights and Wrongs of Rights**

Modern human rights depend on national rights in that the state is both the guarantor of those rights and also often the violator (Asad 2000). In this sense “resistance must work, to some extent, within the parameters established by that which is being resisted” (Rajagopal 2003: 10). Rights-activism often has to operate, perhaps for pragmatic reasons, within the frameworks of what it believes to be the hegemonic order of the state. In South Asia, with robust social movements and participatory citizen-led activism as described, the critique in relation to the rights discourse has often centred on accessing and implementing rights but does not question rights itself.

Popular movements have “no other language except the language of rights in which to articulate their claims” (Nigam 1998: 16). Rights in India, like many other parts of the world, have achieved a hegemonic status and are seen as “the sole approved discourse of resistance” (Rajagopal 2003: 9). The questions posed are if rights can be implemented in practice, rather than simply enshrined in policy? This is reflected in scholarships which seek to question whether the introduction of new rights is able to recalibrate skewed relations of power within communities that prevent people from accessing these rights in the first place (e.g. Corbridge et. al 2005; Harriss 2013). There is much well-founded scepticism as to whether the local institutions of government on which the rights architecture depends are functional enough to avoid the distortions of “hierarchies of power” (Cousins 2009; Fuller and Benie 2001) and the perverse mediation of the state through corruption, brokerage and patronage (e.g. Wade 1982; Gupta and Sharma 2005; Corbridge and Shah 2013). These critiques have historical resonance in the Sundarbans in relation to the Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs). The community-based forums, dating to the 1990s, have been largely captured by the local elite rather than catalysing more democratic decision-making (Poffenberger and McGean 1996; Springate-Baginski and Blaikie 2013; Nayak and Berkes 2008).

A second line of critique around the “global diffusion of a culture of rights” (Ignatieff 2001) focuses on the universalizing, top-down process through which rights

originate, work, and are granted. Socio-legal scholars studying many different parts of the world, not just India, have provided well-founded critiques of the way rights and rights cultures are disseminated (See McCann 2014; Asad 2000; Goodale and Merry 2011). The problems with a universalizing rights culture apply both globally, and within India (see Cowan, Dembour and Wilson 2001).

Transposing this line of critique to the Sundarbans, it is unsurprising that a national framework for forest rights, written with mainland forests in mind, would be of limited applicability to the very different forests and livelihoods in the peripheries and peripheral ecologies of the nation. This shortcoming is perhaps most obvious in the eligibility criteria set out in the FRA. Forest rights are granted to forest dwellers; *adivasi* or Scheduled Tribes (ST); or to forest dependent communities who can prove three generations of residence in a particular forest. None of these criteria apply to the majority of those who do the jungle.

In regard to the first criteria, those who do the jungle spend 15-20 days per month fishing or collecting crab and do so dwelling in these boats inside the mangrove creeks. However, strictly speaking, the particular mangrove ecology of the Sundarbans means that no one lives there; there are no inhabited villages in the forests. In regard to the second criteria, the ethnicity and caste backgrounds of people in the Sundarbans is highly mixed since the majority are migrants from Bangladesh and other parts of West Bengal. In the past few decades, Sundarbans residents have acquired caste certificates and now predominantly belong to the official caste categories of “Scheduled Castes” (SC) and “Other Backward Castes” (OBC). However, these official caste categories don’t necessarily represent older, pre-migration caste identities, and it is the recent welfare benefits attached to lower caste certificates that has motivated many to become “SC.” Today, the work of doing the jungle is by no means restricted to the category of ST or *adivasi*. It is a livelihood that is open to and practiced by many caste and religious communities. As has been argued by Jalais (2010), and as the Introduction to the thesis explains in detail, caste is not a defining category in the Sundarbans.

The Sundarbans does have a small population of indigenous groups or *adivasis* – Mundas, Oraons, Bhumij—with Scheduled Tribe (ST) caste certificates. However, they are not what is thought of in the rest of the country as an “indigenous” population but were brought by the British from the Chota Nagpur plateau to work as labourers helping exploit the forest’s resources during the colonial era, clearing the forests for paddy cultivation and building embankments. There are others who are indigenous to the region,

known in the Sundarbans as *adi lok* or the “original people”, whose ancestors largely worked as woodcutters, honey collectors and fishers, and who come mainly from the *Rajbongshi*, *Mallow*, *Jbeley*, and *Chandal* caste communities. Demographically, they are a small fraction of those who do the jungle today.

The third criteria of long-term residency also fails to match the particular migration histories of the Sundarbans’ people. People migrated in multiple waves at multiple time periods (see Introduction). When it comes to doing the jungle, some people come from families that have done forest work for generations, while others are more recent entrants. Livelihoods and forest dependency are neither static nor reified categories. In short, because of the region’s particular ecology and migration history, most of the people who do the jungle do not meet the FRA’s eligibility criteria because neither have they been living in the region for over three generations nor are they ST.

These questions around access, eligibility, and implementation writ large are however mere technical details with the main reason for the non-implementation being that the Forest Department does not have the political will to implement the FRA, and the eligibility criteria and wording of the Act, are used as convenient justifications (see Sen and Pattnaik 2018). The eligibility criteria is a favourite excuse deployed by the Forest Department senior bureaucracy and conservationists to continue to deny Sundarbans fishers from obtaining access to the resources alongside which they live. On the occasions that I asked senior officials about the FRA, they argued against its implementation by citing the wording of the Act itself, claiming that the legislation doesn’t apply to a “critical tiger habitat” and they highlighted the demographic differences of the Sundarbans from other forests in India. Other officials merely shrugged off the matter stating that the implementation of the FRA did not come under their mandate but that of another government ministry, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. In general, from the top of the Forest Department hierarchy all the way down to the Sundarbans residents, the FRA was met with shoulder shrugging, confusion or outright ignorance. While these issues are by no means trivial, my interest in this chapter lies elsewhere. My interest is in asking a more fundamental question: are rights the most appropriate tool to recognise and govern the relationship between those who do the jungle and the forest?

By now various chapters of my thesis have shown how those who do the jungle are harassed by the alliances of conservation, wildlife protection laws and big industry. There is no doubt that the Sundarbans forests requires people-centred approaches to conservation. But what might those be? Does resistance to exclusionary conservation

have to work within the parameters of what is being resisted or can there be more creative vocabularies, literal and figurative metaphors, for creating new political imaginaries. Metaphors, that in the case of the Sundarbans, already define people's imaginations and practices in relation to their forest.

### **A Different Imagination of the Forest:**

Despite the meteoric rise of rights-based activism, which underpinned new forms of legislations such as the Forest Rights Act, there have been few ethnographic studies that have examined whether these new rights represent the ethical, social and material aspirations of the people for whom they are conceived. A large body of scholarship seeking to break down the hegemonic understanding of rights does so by arguing that these concepts are inherited or derived from the West. In representing this view, Sumi Madhok (2017) argues that the spread of rights all over the world is often linked to “Western colonialism, immigration, international legal instruments, and global communication,” and is made sense of through an Orientalist conceit: “the conceptual, philosophical, and empirical experience of rights can be traced to the revolutions of the modern West and are in fact a testament to the incontrovertible march of progress and civilization heralded by them” (2017: 501). In contradistinction to this global march of rights, Madhok (2017) presents evidence for vernacular rights cultures. From her work in Rajasthan with the Bhils, an *adivasi* community, she unpacks their notion of a right, or *haq*, to the forests: “*haq* operates to uphold a cosmological and a normative order with its prescribed set of ethical relations and responsibilities, which include duties to (protect) nature” (ibid: 497). She redefines the connotations around the concept of *haq* in the context of South Asia, showing that while it is popularly used synonymously with “rights”, it has several etymological meanings ranging from “right, true, just or ‘proper’ and real” that give it a much broader ethical and normative undertone (ibid: 487).

In a similar vein to Madhok, Mutua (2010) attributes what she deems the failure of rights to a largely European, Rousseauvian framing of the individual as object and subject of rights, and thinks rights are both the goal and the instrument of a modern-day civilizing project in the non-Western world. She asserts, in line with other scholars, that human rights have not evolved through a genuinely multicultural debate built upward from the values and ethical frameworks of societies around the world (see also Mutua 2002). My apprehensions to rights are not grounded in whether their points of origin are



European or not. In India rights have the potential for flexibility and have been adapted to suit the landscape of India as is the case for a colossal host of immensely beneficial rights-based welfare schemes. To critique rights because they are derivatives from the West, in my opinion, is not a substantive enough critique.

I returned to Bali Island after the public hearing to try to understand what its residents thought about the idea of forest rights, and why rights did or did not match their own vocabularies of relating to the forest. What was reiterated to me was that the forest was conceived of as a common storehouse of Bonbibí [*Ma'ar Khamor*] (Chapter 2). The idea of common property might date back to the Laws of Manu from 200 BC in South Asia or as Herring (1990) notes, the “commons” might also have their origins in *res nullis*, originating from a European genealogy. Whether European or Indic, the “common storehouse” is also very much the language and imagination through which the Sundarbans forest, a realm of Islam, (Jalais 2010) is conceived. A commons in times of need captures more closely the language, imagination and ethics of the already existing “rules of the jungle”, the rather sophisticated rules around resource use followed by those who do the jungle.

I should point out that most people's first reaction to forest rights was not confusion but rather lack of knowledge and disinterest. To have a conversation on rights required concerted effort and redirection of the conversation back to the topic. The fact that it was always a conversation I felt I was forcing on my interlocutors was in itself revealing and spoke to what I thought was initially a generalised disinterest in new laws [*ain*] due to my first impressions that these had little effect on villagers' day-to-day lives. However, over the course of fieldwork, I noticed that Sundarbans residents availed of and appreciated a whole host of state welfare measures and every household was well-versed in the latest iterations and amendments around state-benefits. Unlike what Shah (2010; 2013) argues for *adivasis* in Jharkhand who attempt to “keep the state away,” going as far as to reject state schemes, residents living in the Sundarbans, though critical of and fully aware of their local politicians' corruption, are simultaneously glad to be recipients of state welfare.

As we saw in Chapter 3, those who do the jungle were very good at disaggregating the state when it comes to the differences between forest rangers and senior level forest bureaucrats. They had a similar relationship to their local elected village heads: the Pradhan, Up-Pradhan and various Ward level (villages are divided into polling booth ‘wards’) representatives and functionaries. It was possible, and normal, to levy critiques at

government officials and local politicians while also desiring state-welfare. The two did not contradict one another. This was evident in village conflict resolution meetings [*bichar*] (Chapter 6) where elected government heads were invited to mediate conflicts and their roles as arbitrators appreciated, as well as in the day-to-day means through which households availed of a large range of welfare benefits. For example, the Public Distribution System (PDS) that provides subsidized rice, kerosene, sugar was undergoing a process of digitizing people's Below Poverty Line (BLP) identity cards and, because people benefitted from these monthly rations, this new measure was of concern to every single household. Similarly, the government scheme to subsidize the building of brick homes and toilets<sup>66</sup> was something to which all households aspired to gain access. Brick homes signified sturdier homes that could withstand cyclones and more accessible ways of going to the toilet during the monsoons. From student scholarships, and free cycles for girls through the Right to Education Act, to old age and widow pensions, young and old took advantage of several government welfare schemes. Residents also participated in state assembly elections [*vidhan sabha*] which took place during my time in the field with enthusiasm. Every single eligible voter from those who had just turned 18 to the very elderly, dressed in their best shirts and saris, and waited in long lines at the polling booths to cast their vote (see Banerjee 2014). While the Sundarbans might well be on the coastal peripheries of India, its residents have been deeply entangled with a whole host of state, civil society and citizen-led movements and actors for decades.

With this as the backdrop, I was perplexed by the fact that forest rights were received with such disregard and even disapproval. Perhaps it was their mere lack of awareness of the FRA, and so I attempted to try to get people to imagine a hypothetical scenario where they did indeed have a right to the forest: "What if everyone was given a right to the forest through village councils?" I explained the stance of the FRA activists, who thought that people living alongside the forests ought to have such claims. Initial enthusiasm gave way, after a few minutes, to hesitation, and then there was often outright discomfort with the idea of giving everyone a right to the forests through village councils. In part, the discomfort came from a generalised lack of faith in the Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) that have been captured by the local elite and which directs benefits to family and kin networks. This, however, does not entirely explain their

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<sup>66</sup> The government scheme for brick homes is known as the *Indra Awas Yojna*. Toilets were being constructed as part of the "Total Sanitation Campaign." Both schemes were being implemented at the time that I was in the field. The toilet in Piyali and Kamal da's house was built mid-way through fieldwork and was something the household took pride in having and using.

apathy toward forest rights because many of the government schemes they did avail of were also accessed through brokers, mediators and patronage relations (see Wade 1982; Harriss-White 1996; Corbridge and Harris 2000; Mosse 1997; Gupta 1995; Parry 2000; Shah 2009). So, I wondered why these same individuals didn't embrace the idea of forest rights. Despite the usual hurdles around access, rights had the potential to ultimately provide them an entitlement over forest resources and allow for a more dignified way to conduct their livelihoods without the fear of the Forest Department's surveillance.

In seeking further the basis of the discomfort around the FRA, one that went beyond the issue of access, what became clear is that the idea of rights were disconnected from the existing language, imaginations, and relationships to the forest. Rights were not how the fishers of the Sundarbans make claims on the forest. Here my argument departs from Madhok (2017): peoples' relationship to the forest does not hinge on rights, vernacular or otherwise. Instead, they have distinct ways of thinking about or making a claim on the forest as the following four cases demonstrate.

### ***Rights Versus Need***

One of the first houses I went to in order to have a lengthy discussion about forest rights after the Public Hearing was that of Jhorna pishi. For many years only her husband did the jungle. Then a bamboo pole went into his left eye, leaving him blind in that eye and unable to continue to work. Jhorna had to be the sole breadwinner for the family. Born poor, married off to a man even poorer than her father's household, and with two little sons, she turned to the jungle for work. In those years, she recalls that crab prices were nothing like they are today but, without agricultural land, the jungle was the only means through which she could provide for her household. Jhorna did the jungle for 15 years.

It has now been seven years since she has stopped collecting crabs. Her two sons are in their early 20s and both work and contribute to running the household. Pinto, the older son, who was a close friend of mine during fieldwork and a chaperone for all kinds of late night meetings that I was cautioned not to go to by myself, is employed as a civic policeman.<sup>67</sup> Bapi, the younger son, works in Kolkata as a night guard in an office compound. The family was given a brick house by the Eco-Development Committee

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<sup>67</sup> The West Bengal government employs, on a voluntary basis, civic policemen. They are not permanent government employees but are hired on a fixed term basis to work for the police force.

(EDC, the precursor to today's JFMC). They have no outstanding debts or underlying medical problems. With pride, gesturing to her brick house and sowing frills onto a pillowcase, Jhorna says that she now has enough [*aubhav naye*].



Figure 34 Jhorna pishi's house or the household of sufficiency.

When I broached the issue of rights to the forest, Jhorna pishi simply ignored my use of the word “right” [*adhibikar*] and said that “those days are over” and she didn’t need to go into the jungle “to beg from Bonbibi” anymore. She explained to me that the years she collected crabs were years when there was dire need to provide for the household, however circumstances had changed and now there was no outstanding lack [*aubhav*] or necessity for her to enter Bonbibi’s common storehouse [*Maa’r khamor*].

Jhorna pishi’s narrative reveals that her relationship to the forest hinges on need. She is now living in accordance with her own conceptions of a sufficient life and doesn’t feel the necessity, as she once did. This does not imply that she doesn’t have other aspirations – she wants her sons to find good wives, hopes that the salaries of her sons’ jobs increase, would like to own a TV, and has been promised a solar fan for the hot days of summer by her children. Gesturing to the small Bonbibi shrine next to her pond, she explains that in accordance with the rules of the jungle, the income from her two grown sons means her basic need to conserve the household is satisfied. Her belief in *jongoler*

*niyam*—and the idea that the forest is a storehouse in times of need—is the means through which she determines her need to go into the jungle. Forest rights wouldn’t recalibrate her relationship with the jungle since rights have little to do with her decision-making.

To be clear, the Forest Rights Act most certainly also cares about “need.” The broader idea behind the eligibility criteria for rights—targeted to *adivasis*, three generations of residence inside a forest, and those that are “forest-dependent”—are all in themselves proxies for need, since these have historically been the most marginalized, poor and *needy* groups. The slight incongruence with this is that while rights are meant to be “targeted” to those in need, if looked at from Jhorna pishi’s explanation one gets the sense that need is something she as an individual, through the logic of her own household, decides. In her case, it is clear that she herself, based on her own moral and economic judgments around sufficiency, makes her independent calculus of whether to do the jungle. This decision does not converge with the state’s proxy categories of who might be “needy” or “forest-dependent.” The emphasis here is on her own ethic of self-limitation and not that of an external determination reliant on a state.

From the point of view of legal jurisprudence, who gets access to rights are permanent, and in the case of the FRA derive from a static identity—“*adivasi*,” “forest-dwelling,” “forest-dependent” or a resident of the Sundarbans for three generations—categories that don’t apply to Jhorna pishi. She herself admits that at one point in her life she was dependent on the forest, but that dependency has changed with her two grown sons now earning decently well. According to her, who deserves access to the forest changes over time depending on the lifecycles of households and peoples’ individual situations as they move through their lives.<sup>68</sup>

### ***Rights Versus Courage***

Bankim da is a young man in his mid 30s. He belongs to the lower caste *Pod* or *Poundra Khoitro* community. His wife, Saraswati, and he have been married for over ten years but have not been able to conceive a child. This is the central concern in their lives. Based on recommendations from a host of people, they have visited several kinds of medical practitioners within and outside the Sundarbans, eaten various kinds of herbs [*jadi buti*], visited temples, and seen doctors in private hospitals in Kolkata. In August of 2018,

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<sup>68</sup> Recall from Chapter 4, Kaveri Mridha who says she does the jungle out of need because she has no sons who can earn, and a husband who cannot work. Jhorna was at some point in her life in a similar position as Kaveri, however with two working sons she has outgrown her need.

they decided to embark on IVF [explained to me by Saraswati using the English word “injection”] at one of the private hospitals in the outskirts of Kolkata. This would cost a lot of money, financed by borrowing from neighbours and money lenders in the village, and they were acutely aware that it would take almost a lifetime to pay back.

The family’s situation was precarious firstly because the family owned no land. Their home—a tiny one-room hut—was on *khaas jameen*, land that did not belong to them but over which they had squatter rights.<sup>69</sup> In addition, Bankim da had no stable work in the village. Bankim da’s work, in his own words, was “*kbata kbatni*”, a term used to describe an eclectic range of back-breaking, low-paid, precarious manual labour in the village. Bankim da worked for minimum wage to help repair boats, re-thatch roofs, or sow and harvest the lands of others during different seasons. For a chunk of the past few years, he had worked as a construction worker on a government tourist lodge that was coming up in our neighbourhood. This was known in the village as the “VIP lodge”—rivalled only by the cyclone shelter and the high school as the tallest brick construction on the island—and while all the skilled and semi-skilled labour was brought from outside the Sundarbans, the work of loading and off-loading sacks of cement and brick were given to men like him. On several occasions, I saw Bankim da doing the work of cutting mud [*maati kata*] in a neighbouring village. This work entails digging and cutting through damp mud and manually transporting it, usually to reinforce an embankment. Of all the different means of making a living, the work of mud cutting is considered the hardest and most undesirable, too taxing on the body for what it pays. Bankim da was one of the few men in my neighbourhood who did such work on a regular basis. Others dabbled in it for short periods during their break from crab collecting or farming, but few were sufficiently desperate to do it on a regular basis.

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<sup>69</sup> They “voluntary” decided to move out of Bankim da’s parent’s homestead because his mother was repeatedly unkind to Saraswati with regard to her infertility and now live in an awkward pathway, on the edge of the agricultural land of Bankim da’s father and someone else’s homestead.





Figure 35 The work of "cutting mud" [*maati kataar kaaj*].

What was odd about Bankim da's choice of work was that he came from a family that worked in the forest. His grandfather, who was born in what is now Bangladesh and moved to Bali Island after the partition of India, worked as a woodcutter and fisher. So did his father and brother. In fact, his father was one of the few men on the island who owned a BLC—inherited from his father—in his own name, and in recent years his older brother had also managed to buy himself a *nauka* [a wooden boat]. The fact that the household doesn't have to rent a BLC, like everyone else, or pay to fish on someone else's boat would seem to make doing the jungle an obvious, convenient livelihood for Bankim

da. Soon his father will stop going into the jungle entirely because of his age, and there will be even more of a reason for him to step in.

I asked Bankim da why, unlike everyone else in his family and neighbourhood, he avoided this work. He answered that he has never had the courage [*shahuas*] for it. “I went once with them to collect honey [*mahauley*] and I was so overtaken by fear [*bhoiy*] in the jungle that I came back and never stepped foot in *Maa'r khamor* again” he recalled. There hadn't been any particularly untoward incident on this trip, it was simply the knowledge that the jungle was also home to tigers that mentally crippled Bankim da. He referenced the well-known death of Shekhar da, a man from the neighbourhood killed while doing the jungle a few years ago, and Shekhar da's widow and three fatherless children to emphasize his point. Turning to the increase in the price of mud crabs over the past few years, Bankim da shared with an earnest smile how he wished he had the courage to do the jungle because such work would allow him to save money for Saraswati's IVF treatment. He is certain, though, that the jungle is not for him. With wide eyes, still smiling, and shaking his body on purpose to perform fear, he says: “The jungle is a dangerous place, you have to have a lot of courage [*shabaus*]. I feel too scared. *Khata khatni* is no good but I will make do like this.”

One evening, while I was relaying details from another forest rights meeting I had attended to Piyali and Kamal da, Saraswati was also present at our house. She said derisively that such a right would do no good for a husband like her own. “Even if you give him a right to the forest [*jongoler uppor adhikar*] what good would it do,” she asked me? “He is too scared to set foot in the jungle...will this right of yours change that?”

Saraswati's comments gave me pause. Bankim da makes sense of the forest through his fear. A right to the forest would not change his fear of it. Unlike Jhorna pishi, his household's clear, even desperate need has not convinced him to do the jungle. FRA advocates might respond to both Jhorna pishi and Bankim da's case by arguing that it might make sense to give everyone a right, even if they don't avail of it themselves. However, this is where once again the universality of the FRA, passed with very different forests in mind, becomes a problem. Bankim da's comments highlights another ecological specificity of the Sundarbans that distinguishes it from other forests in India for which the FRA was designed. Unlike in many of those forests, obtaining a livelihood from the Sundarbans is undeniably life-threatening work. Working in the forest does require courage<sup>70</sup>. While notions and perceptions of risk vary and for some working in the jungle

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<sup>70</sup> The Conclusion of the thesis explores the importance of courage in the life of Sundarbans residents.



is only as risky as working in India's informal economy, for a considerable number of people in the Sundarbans, like Bankim da, who desire a safe, secure livelihood, despite how arduous and back breaking it might be, working in the forest is not a viable option. A right to do the jungle would not make the jungle a less dangerous place; a right would not change Bankim da's fear. He himself, Saraswati, his brother and father all wish that he could summon the courage, but the idea of the jungle overwhelms him with fear.

### ***Rights Versus Respect***

Pavan and Vikas are two of four brothers who do the jungle who we met in Chapter 4. The entire family, including elderly parents, wives and children, lived in the same homestead until very recently, and its members are entirely supported by their work in the jungle. This is a considerable challenge since the household is riven by disability and illness. The youngest of the four brothers, known as Bacha, has what seemed to me to be Downs Syndrome, but who was referred to in the village as “mad Bacha” [*pagol* Bacha]. Bacha is unmarried and lives in Pavan da's household and is cared for by Pavan's wife. He is spoken of as a burden on the rest of the family, someone who will require lifelong care and will never be able to contribute to the upkeep of the household. Vikas da's older son, now seven or eight years old, was also born mentally and physically handicapped. Once again, the actual diagnosis is unclear, but huge effort—trips to faraway pilgrimage sites, visits to medical practitioners and healers of all kinds—has been spent in search of a cure. In addition, Pavan and Vikas's parents are getting old and suffer from various illnesses.

A brief digression on the healthcare system in the Sundarbans is in order to put Pavan and Vikas's situation in proper perspective. There are two main options for medical care: public or private. Government hospitals are intimidating places. I heard innumerable accounts lamenting the long waits, the paperwork, the disrespect, and the fear entailed in ignorance about how to navigate the system. They were also far away. Bali Island still doesn't have a government primary healthcare facility. A non-profit organization called SAMARPAN built a hospital on the island with recycled materials—plastic bottles and sand—but never managed to get approval to run it. Characteristic of a failed development project, the building lies vacant with state-of-the-art medical equipment and machines still

in plastic casings.<sup>71</sup> At the time that I was in the field, and in the lead up to state assembly elections, there was abundant talk of a new government hospital. But these were distant promises and getting to a government hospital and back home to the village after waiting to see a doctor was, especially for the elderly, the cause of as much trauma as the underlying health condition.

For now, most people's faith lies in private healthcare. Compared to government hospitals, private hospitals are thought to have better doctors, shorter waiting times and more technologies. X-rays, CT Scans, blood tests are all enchanting to most Sundarbans residents, even if these tests often only increase the cost, not the effectiveness, of treatment (see Das 2015). Better communication and connectivity in recent years have brought an awareness of the names of many of the big private hospitals in nearby cities like Canning, Kolkata and even as far afield as Delhi, Pondicherry and Vellore.

Improved access to private healthcare has been accompanied by higher aspirations to avail of it. Pavan da and Vikas da shared that they both now feel a greater sense of responsibility to their disabled or ailing family members than in previous years. Vikas da and his wife have discussed taking their son to be treated for his various physical and mental disabilities to hospitals in Kolkata. A decade ago, most healthcare needs were met by practitioners and healers based in neighbouring villages. They might also have been ignored altogether due to lack of money or awareness of the very notion of taking family members to hospitals. Increased aspirations and responsibilities have also brought increased costs. Over the years, crab prices have increased but not commensurately with the cost of private healthcare. The financial challenge of private healthcare is the overriding preoccupation in Pavan and Vikas da's households.

I was aware of the household's reliance on the jungle and assumed that the two brothers would embrace the idea of rights. Like everyone else in the village, Pavan and Vikas had not heard of the FRA. After reading out the entire write-up in the FRA flyer, I asked them, "Would rights over the forest make a difference to your life?"

Pavan da and Vikas da, understanding my question perfectly well, responded by telling me what would make a difference in their lives: the increased proximity of the buffer area. Under the current demarcations, the forests across from their homes had been designated as out of bounds, and the buffer area was close to the border of Bangladesh where there was a fear of pirates [*dakaats*]. Big rivers had to be traversed to

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<sup>71</sup> Local politics got in the way of this hospital. One of the volunteers of SAMARPAN, Manisha Sobhrajani (2018), has written a personal memoir of living on Bali Island trying to start the hospital and the reasons for its failure.

get there and their *naukas* were too fragile for that. Rationalising or removing the BLC system would drastically improve their situation. The household got its BLCs from “big men” and the costs of renting licences which should belong to them in the first place was a cause of frustration. The pressure [*chaap*] and fear [*bhoij*] from Forest Department patrol boats another stressor. It was leading them into the mouth of the tiger and was making work in an already dangerous forest even more risky. The fines that the Forest Department imposed were small, and a form of unnecessary harassment.

These had been the grievances that men and women at the Public Hearing had also shared in their testimonies. The Delhi-based “The Research Collective” that had produced a report on the Public Hearing highlights all of these concerns as well. Pavan da and Vikas da had a long list of grievances, and since they were unaware of rights, they were unsure of their implications and which of their problems they might solve. Structural problems like archaic licences like the BLC and the system of fines were specific to the Sundarbans rather than being soluble by a pan-Indian Right to the Forest. However, perhaps if there were to be forest rights in the Sundarbans, then the Forest Department harassment through fines might indeed stop. In place of being forced to incorporate illegality (Anderson 2014) they might be able to pursue their livelihoods in a more carefree way.

For a few moments we chatted about the positive potential of rights, but soon enough I realized that there was another aspect of the idea of rights that more directly troubled both brothers. For them, as for Jhorna pishi, the forest was only talked of in terms of a place where one went out of need. They saw themselves going into the forest as beggars and as healthcare aspirations and costs increased, felt that their household needed them to continue doing the jungle. In the course of our conversation, I had used the term “rights over the forest” [*jongoler upporey adbhikar*] a few times, with the attempt to explain to them the position of rights activists and proponents of the FRA. I sensed a discomfort that the two brothers felt in the use of my language and how I talked about the forest. Pavan da felt he needed to remind me how they conceived of the forest and said to me in more serious tone, “Megnaa di, you know our situation, we go to beg [*bhikha kotte*], we go because Ma [*Bonbibi*] knows that without her there is no way for us, everything we have is because of Ma...the children’s education [*cheley mer shikha*], all these illnesses [*ashuk bishuk*].... We don’t have a right [*adbikar*] to the forest, we respect [*jotna*] the forest.” I realized that it was inappropriate to try to talk about the forest, as I had been, as a natural resource to be extracted from or over which everyone was entitled.

Perhaps this sense of an “entitlement” to the forest will also emerge as rights activists mobilize people like Pavan da and Vikas da. But perhaps it is also crucial to document that for them, the only way to understand the forest was that it was the “common storehouse” of Bonbibi into which they went out of need. In line with the *jongoler niyam*, they reasserted the importance of respecting the forest, rather than thinking of themselves as entitled to a right over it.

### ***Rights Versus Knowledge***

Although Sandip da, who we met in Chapter 2, lived in a neighbouring village from where I was based, the first time I met him was at the Public Hearing on the FRA where he was one of only two fishers in attendance from Bali Island. Over the course of fieldwork, I got to know him and his family well. Recalling from Chapter 2, his father had eight *bhigas* of land but disowned him because of his “love marriage” outside of the community and it is with his father-in-law that he learnt to do the jungle 30 years ago.

Despite sharing a livelihood and set of material circumstances with those who do the jungle, Sandip da is distinct in some crucial ways. He once dabbled in local party politics but had quickly become disillusioned and turned instead toward involvement in fishers’ unions.<sup>72</sup> He was the only person I knew on Bali Island who attended union meetings and rallies, and he corroborated that there were very few others as actively involved as himself. A few years ago, increasingly disenchanted with the unions as well, he learned about the work of SJSM. He had attended a few of their preliminary meetings in the lead up to the Public Hearing and had agreed to participate by giving a testimony of his own experiences with the Forest Department. Through his political engagement, Sandip da has several well-articulated demands and grievances against the Forest Department. He was against tourist boats and how they had been allowed to run amok in the forest while fishers were strictly policed. He was upset that compensation money for victims of tiger attacks in the core area was hard to access, and in his free time compiled the paperwork required for families applying for their due compensation. It angered him that the honey collected had to be sold back to the Forest Department below market rate.

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<sup>72</sup> Usually the means through which people get to know a union leader is when they have some problems and the local leader, usually also affiliated with a political party, acts like a patron sometimes helping common men in distress in the form of advice or at least moral support. A particular court case he had become embroiled in had brought Sandip da to seek help from leaders of fishers’ unions based in Canning.

He held conservation NGOs equally responsible for many of these wrongs, and especially despised their leadership whom he derided as businessmen for tourists, or “*tourist byapari*.”

Sandip da and I met at multiple SJSM meetings on other islands, and once even saw each other in Delhi when he was travelling to a rally in Saharanpur district in Northern India to attend another meeting on forest rights organized by activists who supported the SJSM. His sophisticated critiques of the Forest Department, and his initiation into the idea of rights, would seem to indicate his support for the FRA. However, it was at meetings at his home, while we ate meals together with his family and chatted about all kinds of things—his childhood, a court case he had been embroiled in, his love-marriage—that I understood the complexity that attended his thinking around the idea of forest rights.

During these meetings, I asked Sandip da if it would be beneficial for the Sundarbans residents to have a right over the forest. He responded in the affirmative: “absolutely [*aboshoi*], it is important that the right to the forest be implemented here” [*bon adhikar ain ekhaney lagoo hoye khook dorkar*]. Sandip da was one of the few men in the Sundarbans who, at the time of fieldwork, could articulate the necessity of implementing forests rights through a language of rights. In August of 2018, during a follow-up trip, he was among a handful of men who could talk the rights-talk. With SJSM mobilizations, meetings and workshops this number is bound to increase. However, even Sandip da, in the private settings of his home didn’t dwell on rights for too much longer. Instead, he switched themes and began to catalogue the practices of honey collection in the jungle and the hardship one endured as a collector. He showed me deep gashes on his feet, remnants of bee stings all over his arm, scratches on his face. It was with a proud smile that he pointed out all of his injuries. He provided the details of the endurance, courage and attentiveness required to collect honey in a forest of tigers. He shared with me the intricate knowledge of how bees were smoked out of their hives and the best way to tap the honey without breaking the honeycomb. There were many skills and much knowledge that men like him, through years of working in the jungle, had acquired.

Continuing, he attributed the fact that he had returned home safely to Bonbibi’s protection because—pointing to his wife and children eating with us—his household had behaved according to the rules [*niyam anusar choleyche*]. He said, “Not everyone can follow *jongoler niyam*....the jungle should be for only those who can respect [*sbradha*] it.” At informal settings in the village, both in Sandip da’s home and tea stalls where we spent hours chatting without the company of forest rights activists or NGO workers, Sandip

da repeatedly highlighted the values—courage, responsibility, discipline, respect, and a deep knowledge and understanding of the forest, the rivers, its flora and fauna—that doing the jungle according to its rules [*jongoler niyam*] required (see Chapter 2).

The nature of Sandip da's response to forest rights amounted to a pointed rhetorical question aimed at both me and the rights discourse itself: Did we think everyone could do the jungle? The jungle is not a place for everyone, and not everyone ought to have a right over it. For him, the ability to follow the *jongoler niyam*, and meet its stringent criteria of need, courage, and discipline, determines who should go into the jungle. Despite his exposure to the rights movement, in private settings Sandip da articulates a very different way of relating to the forest.

### **The Erasure of *Jongoler Niyam***

Returning to the work of Sumi Madhok helps suggest a way to unify the four vignettes I have presented. She writes that “a critical aspect of vernacular rights cultures as a framework of analysis is an attention to the languages—both literal and conceptual—of rights/ human rights and also to the political imaginaries that these languages make available” (Madhok 2017: 487). Later, she observes that the vernacular rights expressed in the word *haq* are “based on an ethical, normative, moral, and empirical idea, which exists independent of the law and has a moral authority of its own” (Madhok 2017: 494). This implies that rights needn't be derived from the state or government but can have an independent justification (ibid 2017: 497).

Following Madhok, paying attention to the vernacular language and conceptions of the forest used by the jungle-doers reveals a political imaginary distinct from rights. Sundarbans residents do not use the word *adhikar* or *haq*. Instead they refer to the jungle as *Maa'r khamor*, literally meaning “mother's common storehouse.” The mother here is the goddess Bonbibi, and their relationship to the forest is predicated on certain values, the *jongoler niyam*, and the ethics they propose. The most important aspect of *jongoler niyam* is to take from the forest only when one is in need, and to stop going into the jungle once the needs have been met as Jhorna pishi does. *Jongoler niyam* requires courage and reverence for a dangerous landscape, which not everyone – including Bankim da – can stomach. *Jongoler niyam* is a deeply disciplined relationship, grounded in respect, self-limitation, and other intricate moral codes observed both in the forest and at home. Following this code, “which exists independent of the law and has a moral authority of

its own,” (ibid) provides the means for Pavan da, Vikas da, and Sandip da to relate to the forest and obtain dignity in their labour.

In the Sundarbans, ways of relating to the forest are fundamentally different from the forest rights enshrined in the FRA. Where rights make claims on the forest, *jongoler niyam* espouses an ethic of care and a duty to the forest. Where rights are based on the law enforced by an external state, *jongoler niyam* doesn’t require someone else to give you a right and is instead grounded in self-governance and the ability to muster personal courage. Where forest rights guarantee men and women an equal claim on the forest, *jongoler niyam* poses restrictions on those that stay back at home, especially the women. The ways that the jungle-doers think about the forest, and the way that *jongoler niyam* governs men and women and at times restrains the freedoms of women, are entirely distinct categories of thought that do not overlay onto rights cultures.

Rights have the capacity to erase existing ways of using, making a claim on, being accountable to, and relating to the forest. To illustrate this point, it is useful to return to the person in whom *jongoler niyam* and the forest rights movement converge: Sandip da. Sandip da had many avatars. While he championed the vocabulary and belief system of *jongoler niyam* in the private settings where we often met, he spoke in a different language at more public fora. Here he took up the language of making demands, using the word *daavi*. In one such gathering, for instance, he said, “Our demand is that the rivers should be free areas [*chaad ilaka*], and we won’t step foot on the jungle.” I only heard this word in NGO and fishers’ union meetings, never amongst the fishers I lived with.

Despite Sandip da’s private discomfort with rights in relation to other ways of thinking, experiencing and relating to the forest, the language of rights had a seduction to it. Rights were indeed the only tool for fishers’ resistance. They are the most prominent language through which social movements can define their agency and subjectivity (Nigam 1999). I’m reminded here of McCann (2014) who says that often rights have the power to dupe the disenfranchised or “brainwash ordinary people” (ibid: 250). I wouldn’t say Sandip da has been duped by rights. He can plainly see the loopholes within the rights-architecture, in just the same way rights activists and myself, can see the loopholes in rights. Indeed, Sandip da ably critiqued several activists and journalists and their points of view to me. He didn’t have blind faith in rights activism or individuals who advocated for rights. His commitment to rights, similar to some rights activists, was at a pragmatic level. There were no other tools with which to resist and so often resistance had to work within the parameters of what was being resisted (Asad 2000; Rajgopal 2003).

What I found slightly more perturbing though was that in the realm of his political engagements —rallies, public hearings, NGO and union meetings where I was also present—he self-censored his detailed knowledge of *jongoler niyam* and all the related language, mythology, and ways of relating to the forest. These practices and beliefs, he had decided, had nothing to do with forest rights. This was not unique to Sandip da. Local level rights-based activists, those working in SJSM, in general sanitize religious beliefs and mythologies from their rational, secular pursuit of justice.

Rights-talk, in the way that it is structured, and the narrow terms it imposes on the debate in the Sundarbans—focusing only around access, eligibility and politics (see Sen and Patanaik 2017; 2018)— risks effacing pre-existing ways of relating to the forest. David Engel (2009), in his study of injury in Thailand, argues in a similar vein that the inroads of liberal rights-based discourses of seeking justice have eroded customary laws, religious beliefs and traditional ways of healing, leading to a situation in which people can't find reconciliation through either means. In the Sundarbans, while rights have not yet become as widespread, there is the possibility that new ways of claim making on the forest will erode other ways of relating to it and, as in the Thai case, create an irreconcilable rupture.

This however needn't be the case. In fact, legal jurisprudence in India can, as it has done so in the past, take into consideration the ritual and ethical associations of communities living alongside natural resources. A famous example of this is that of the Dongria Kondh of Odisha who have been suffering from bauxite mining in their surrounding villages (see Padel 2012). Conflicts reached the Supreme Court of India who in 2013, “disposing off the writ petition on mining in Niyamgiri, Orissa....recognized the cultural consequences and moral hazard of destroying Niyamgiri, a site sacred to the Dongria Kondh” (Sivaramakrishnan 2015: 1267). Like in the Niyamgiri case, where the court took into consideration the fact that the identity of the Dongria Kondh depends on the Niyamgiri Hill (ibid), people like Sandip da needn't sanitize their ritual associations from the spaces of secular activism. Laws can be both repressive and a tool for resistance in the context of natural resources.

The struggle for forest rights in the Sundarbans seems to be making the same mistake that the Forest Department and conservation NGOs make, that is, ignoring the divine and daily forms of governance (Chapter 2&3) that continue to define everyday relationships to the forest. Belief in Bonbibí does not hark back to some traditional past but as several chapters of this thesis have tried to show continues to animate ethics and



actions, through theatrical performances [jattras] and *pujos* and an everyday linguistic expression which is at once metaphorical and conceptual in relation to the forest. In this sense, forest rights might be risking both its own legitimacy to the very people it is trying to help, but perhaps more harmfully creating an erasure of their own ways of relating to the forest. In reality, the ethico-religious language—the forest being a “common storehouse” in times of need, taking from the jungle only that which one needs, and practicing restraint, while being very locally embedded have deep global resonances. My interest has not been to set in opposition a local understanding versus a universal rights-discourse but instead to show how local imaginations such as a forest “commons in times of need” might in fact have global resonances too.

### **Fishers’ Unions, Commission Agents and Feuding Activists**

Another reason why there has been a lack of momentum behind rights-based movements has to do with the internal contradictions within the landscape of social activism in the Sundarbans. The landscape of rights-based social movements in the Sundarbans is dominated by forest rights activists and fishers’ unions. The Public Hearing with which I began this chapter was co-hosted, in theory, by both these groups. While the bulk of the planning, preparation and organization for months in advance came from SJSM, the unions have a much longer history in the region, and so SJSM had to invite them too. West Bengal Fishermen’s Forum (WBFF) is the biggest fishers’ union that started in the 1990s in West Bengal, and is affiliated with the National Fisherworkers Forum that operates in several states of India with its vast 6000km shoreline. Santosh Mitra is the Vice-President of WBFF and on the day of the Public Hearing gave a short speech. Interested in learning about the history of the union, its work and membership, I often visited the WBFF President Gaurav Mukherjee in his office in Kolkata, as well as Santosh Mitra’s home in Canning.

Mitra lives in a small brick house with his wife and two high-achieving daughters, one of whom works as a schoolteacher and the other as a professional musician who travels the country to perform at concerts and events. His public identity is that of an activist fighting for fishers’ rights. He presides over WBFF Union meetings, gives speeches and has organised several union “deputations” against the Forest Department to let fishers catch fish more freely. He is immensely knowledgeable about the demarcations of the core, sanctuary and buffer. He meets with fishers who are in trouble,

often after their licences and boats have been confiscated by the Forest Department, lends money when they are in need, and fights on behalf of several families that had lost someone to a tiger attack. Mitra does a lot of work on behalf of fishers, acting as a local patron who provides them protection. However, like all local patrons, he doesn't perform this service for free.

Mitra's secondary, less public identity is that he is a commission agent, known in Bengali as an *adatdaar*. *Adatdaars* are middlemen that buy the catch of fishers and resell the fish to retailers. Santosh Mitra has a stall in the fish auction market in Canning, one of the largest hubs where the catch from the Sundarbans arrives and from where retailers [*paikadis*] and exporters buy fish in bulk to sell in Kolkata or overseas.

The relationship fishers have with *adatdaars* is not limited to a mere economic transaction. Most *adatdaars* have a few BLCs that they rent out to fishers. Santosh Mitra is no exception and has a few BLCs in his name. He rents these out, and brokers the renting of other BLCs, in exchange for fishers' catch, obliging them to sell it back to his particular stall at the auction. He is one of those "big men" that many fishers referred to in their testimony at the Public Hearing, someone who has a BLC in his name but has no direct involvement with the work of fishing or crab collecting. It was ironic, to say the least, that several fishers had openly complained about the BLC that they had to rent from "big men" in faraway towns, only to have that same "big man" take the podium a few hours later to speak on their behalf. Soon after giving his speech, Mitra promptly slipped out of the Public Hearing.

I was not the only one to notice these contradictions and split loyalties. Those who were critical of the ethos of the Public Hearing had an easy basis for criticizing it. When I returned to Bali Island, Shomit Mondol - the field officer of the conservation NGO who, along with the JFMC representative Laltu da (Chapter 4), had maintained a discreet profile during the hearing - remarked to me, smirking, that the public hearing was a joke: "All those activists came for a day... they have gone.... who was going to fight for the rights of the people now?" I reminded Shomit da that SJSN was a local organization with members who lived in the Sundarbans. Their goal was indeed to continue to fight for the rights of the people. Shomit da knew Pavitro da well. The two despised one another and had previous altercations. In fact Shomit da almost had Pavitro da sent to jail once. Shomit da's critique continued, he asked me, "do you know how many BLCs Santosh Mitra has in his name?". There was an undeniable insincerity in Mitra's identity.

Shomit Mondol was seen as a dubious figure himself, a man who ran a “tourist business” while labelling it conservation and social work. While others accused him of being a hypocrite, there was a deep hypocrisy according to him, in the identity of union leaders such as Santosh Mitra. When I brought up the rights activists and union workers with Forest Department officials at the Canning office, they too quickly pointed out the contradictions inherent in the movement. Referring to individuals like Santosh Mitra, and citing the cases of other local politician-cum-union leaders, they observed that the same man who co-opts fishermen into cycles of debt and dependency was the spokesperson for the rights of the fishing community. Even the WBFF President, Gaurav Mukherjee, acknowledged these contradictions to me in our interviews. He held, however, that Santosh Mitra was just one person in a union with a much bigger membership, and the majority are not *adatdaars* but rather “genuine fishermen.” He emphasized that Mitra, apart from his own vested interests, did also spend a lot of his time and energy at huge personal costs to provide help and support to distressed fishers. These shifting coalitions were his own strategies of survival.

However, Mitra’s business as an *adatdaar* led to an irreconcilable conflict of interest that extended far beyond the rhetoric at the Public Hearing. Just before the highest- ranking Forest Department official – the PCCF [Principal Chief Conservator of Forests], Pradeep Vyas – who we met in Chapter 1 was about to retire, he decided to pass a legal notification around the problem of BLCs.<sup>73</sup> The new regulation, acknowledged the deep injustices of an archaic licence regime, and proposed to cancel out all the existing licences and grant new ones to “genuine fishermen” based on a survey that the Forest Department would conduct. In other words, the regulation proposed to take BLCs away from people like Santosh Mitra and give them to people like Kaveri Mridha, Pavan da, Vikas da and Sandip da, who were “genuine” fishers.

When the notification to cancel existing BLCs was announced I attended a meeting hosted by WBFF in Canning to discuss the new notification. I assumed that this radical measure by the otherwise vilified Forest Department would be warmly welcomed by the various activists, NGOs and unions working on behalf of the fishers. Instead, rather bewilderingly, representatives of WBFF explained that their demand was that the Forest Department expand the number of BLCs and issue new ones to include a larger number of fishing boats. They were however staunchly against cancelling out the current

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<sup>73</sup> We met Mr. Vyas in Chapter 1. While he supports the creation of a “core” area that keeps fishers out. He is also behind one of the boldest and most progressive notifications attempting to improve the lives of genuine fishers by cancelling out the old regime of BLCs.

BLCs. A young lawyer who dedicates his spare time to doing pro-bono work for environmental causes had been invited to attend the meeting by the WBFF President, Gaurav da. He was being consulted to think of ways to challenge the new government notification.

It was Santosh Mitra who was vehemently against this legislation. As a result, WBFF as a whole did not champion it either. WBFF was a fishers' union committed to championing the suffering of fishers but, because of its own compromised leadership, it bureaucratically delayed and issued a legal challenge to a process that had the potential to radically improve thousands of fishers' lives. All subsequent union meetings around the new regulation highlighted the various flaws and loopholes in its wording. Instead of embracing a progressive and bold regulation by the Forest Department, they continued to harp on its various injustices.

Mitra, as Vice President, also happens to be the individual that represents the union at national and international level meetings. In November 2017, the World Forum for Fisher People (WFFP) was held in New Delhi. Amidst people from Latin America, Europe and different parts of Africa, with U.N style translations taking place in Jantar Mantar's convention hall, there were two groups representing the issues of the people of the Sundarbans: the WBFF and the SJSM. From SJSM both Pavitro da and Tapas da were present as well as members of AIUWFP. From WBFF, there was Gaurav Mukherjee, the union treasurer Mithun Das, and, unsurprisingly, Santosh Mitra.

WBFF's demands focused on the Forest Department increasing the number of BLCs, that is, giving licenses to more fishers, but without cancelling the old ones and upsetting the established middlemen. SJSM's representatives, representing the other camp, argued for the implementation of forest rights in the Sundarbans, and eradicating the BLC regime altogether. While on paper the two groups should and could be allies, and do converge on some issues, this clear divergence at an international forum crystallises the fact that the fishers' unions and rights activists have major disagreements that run from the top leadership down to local staff. The leaders of these groups do not even talk to one another. Interviews with leadership in both camps confirmed that there are deep ideological divisions between the two to the extent that often SJSM doesn't invite representatives of WBFF to their forums and vice versa. This is in no small part due to the internal splinterings within the union itself, emblematised by the dual positionality of Santosh Mitra, and SJSM's attempts to distance themselves from such a compromised ally. Such divisions and the contradictions within organizations—be it NGOs, unions or

political parties—are not unique to SJSM and WBFF but ubiquitous of social movements all over the South Asia (see Parry 2009; Breman 1996; 2001; Baviskar 1997). However, they reveal the reasons, in part, for why creating unified movements of solidarity and resistance among the populations on whose behalf they work become more challenging.

Over the course of three days, as I attended various meetings and speeches at the Forum relating to the Sundarbans, other coasts of India and the challenges of fishers all over the world, I noticed one thing that unified both the camps representing the Sundarbans. Unions and rights activists alike never expressed the ways in which those who do the jungle relate to the forest. It was seemingly inconceivable to express or represent the needs and aspirations of the families amongst who I lived, and whose stories I tell in this thesis, in the language and ideas that they themselves think with.

### **Old Claims, New Vocabularies of Justice:**

The excellent report published by The Research Collective after the Public Hearing provides the history of colonial mismanagement and the malpractices of current day conservation. It is very ethnographic in that it provides the testimonies of fishers, their hardships and struggles, and the harassment meted out to them at the hands of the Forest Department in their own words. However, it fails to mention Bonbibí, *jongoler niyam*, or the fact that going into the jungle is an act of going begging [*bhikha kotte*] based on need. Tapas da, one of the main representatives of the SJSM, has made a film on the non-implementation of the FRA in the Sundarbans. Even this film, for the purpose of spreading awareness, with powerful footage on the livelihood of those who do the jungle and how the conservation apparatus is obstructing it, fails to mention the way in which Sundarbans residents make sense of their work and the landscape of the forest in which they carry it out. The fundamental ways in which people relate to the forest is airbrushed out of reports, films and rallies and therefore people like Sandip da too self-censor the beliefs most meaningful to him.

The Public Hearing with which I began this chapter was a success in calling attention to a pan-Indian form of dispossession, as Medha Patkar expressed so powerfully through songs and slogans. However, my contention here is that this solidarity, in failing to recognize the pre-existing ways in which people already relate to the forest, risks erasing them altogether. The universalising impulse of the rights discourse, from which it draws great strength, does not simply jeopardize issues of implementation, such as the

mismatched eligibility criteria. It also flattens out the sophisticated language, metaphors, beliefs, ideas, practices, and potential forms of resistance implicit in the ways the jungle-doesers themselves live alongside the forest.

Through the words of Jhorna pishi, Bankim da, Pavan da, Vikas da, and Sandip da, I show how men and women of the Sundarbans respond to access and eligibility to the forests before having been exposed to the language of rights. Jhorna pishi views the forest through the lens of sufficiency and need, and has taken from the forest only when her household and personal circumstances implored her to do so. Bankim da, the third generation in a family of forest workers, views the forest through the lens of fear, and doesn't have the courage to do the jungle despite his household's pressing need. Pavan, Vikas and Sandip da conceive of the forest through narratives of hardship, respect and care. All of these individuals have an intricate means of co-living and co-relating to the forest - why they chose to do the jungle and why others don't - grounded in the moral rules and knowledge-based practices of *jongoler niyam*. Their language, use, and imagination of the forest does not depend on rights, whether vernacular or legalistic.

Rights also lack momentum in the region because the social movements championing them are internally divided against themselves. The main fishers' union is compromised by powerful leaders who are simultaneously fighting on behalf of fishers while seeking rents from them (both literally and in the broader economic sense). Rather than putting up a united front, this intimate antagonism had splintered the main activist groups on both policy and politics and driven the unions and the main forest rights group in the Sundarbans apart. The Sundarbans forests are characterized by the overarching conflict between the tiger and the people, what gets lesser attention are other antagonism and segmentations within groups that are from the outside on the same camp. These internal contradictions are often the cause of even more violent injustice for example the resistance, because of personal vested interests by union leaders, to the cancelling of the regime of BLCs.

Ultimately, this chapter is not intended as a critique of rights-based activism but instead should be read as a provocation for a conversation around other forms of affirmative politics which might inform the rights movement or, where applicable, develop alternatives to rights all together. In other words, one proposition would be to have rights activism and legal jurisprudence incorporate aspects of the existing moral observances which govern the lives of people who do the jungle. This is what Riles (2006) notes as providing the "culture concept" in an otherwise universalizing Human Rights

Law. This would require forest rights to be altered creatively according to regional specificities and local people's ritual and political imaginations, much like in the case of the Dongria Khond in Orissa. Another perhaps more radical proposition that this chapter has attempted to propose is that this same "culture concept" could allow for, not just more culturally sensitive rights, but for people-centred alternatives beyond and instead of rights. I have tried to show how it is possible for these alternatives to be both locally embedded but also have aspects with profoundly global resonances. For example, while the particular courage required to do the jungle might be unique to these forests with tigers, there are many other parts of the world where use-access to surrounding resources is predicated on need, on knowledge, on skills, and through respectful use and rules around a commons. This opens up a space for thinking of alternative ways, perhaps in tandem with rights, through which a dignified relationship may be established between the forest and the people who depend on it.

Resistance is not merely always a reaction to hegemony, but also provides a multitude of alternative visions of social relationships (see Rajgopal 2003: 10). These alternatives might incorporate some of the vocabulary and imaginations of those who do the jungle, while also acknowledging their shortfalls and means through which they are vulnerable to manipulation. Perhaps one of the biggest inequalities in the ethics around the forest are those rules that seek to restrain the movements and desires of women (Chapter 2). But to blame this inequality on *jongoler niyam* ignores the much deeper roots of patriarchy that exist within the household and are perpetuated through the gendered roles within marriage and family. The next chapter turns to one of the most fundamental aspects of men and women's lives: the family and household. We learn about women's desires, their roles in production, reproduction and as crucially, thwarting social reproduction, within the household and the village.

## Chapter 6

### A Crisis of Intimacy: Making and Escaping the Household

During my fieldwork, a rumour went around that in the nearby village of Amlamethi, seven wives had run away and abandoned their families and households all within the same month. In the village where I was based the rumour was that it was fifteen, not seven wives. For the several weeks that followed, this epidemic of runaways was all anyone wanted to discuss. From tea stalls in the village bazaar to the semi-public places where women waited to draw water from the hand pumps, among groups of giggling children returning home from school and inside homes in the evenings, the case of the seven (or fifteen) wives was on everyone's lips. The term used to describe these runaway wives was *paliyegachi*, literally meaning "escaped." These wives had "abandoned everything and fled" [*bou shobh chedey choley gaachey*]. On further investigation, this "everything" referred to the wives' *shonghsar*, a term that refers to the household, family, and the roles and responsibilities of care within the domestic sphere as it relates to broader economic and emotional well-being.

The conversation about abandonments followed a particular pattern: so-and-so's wife had fled "toward Kolkata," and now so-and-so husband was having to "cook his own rice" [*nijer bhaat ranna kotte hochey*]. This was a cause of deep shame [*lajja*], not just for the husband but for the entire household. These stories seldom failed to elicit sympathy from other men, who launched into the hardship they took on to provide for their families. The conversation usually concluded with a pronouncement around how the wives of the village [*gramer bou*] were becoming too bold for their own good, increasingly willing to disrespect their household duties [*shonghsar-dharma*] and even daring to "escape."

Pulled in by the swirling current of rumour, I grew more attuned to these conversations amidst what was described to me as the contemporary "era of love" [*bhalobhashar yug*]. Keeping in mind the wider socio-economic changes in this region, this



chapter explores the combination of factors motivating the women of Amlamethi to defy their husbands and households. What are the repercussions of such defiance? How did other women perceive such actions? What were the lines being crossed that husbands feared most? And what, if anything, did this have to do with the forest?

If Chapter 2, set in the mangrove creeks of the forests, is about (mostly) men's aspirations towards ascetism, this chapter set in the village across from the forest, is about women's desires. It provides what is perhaps one of the most intimate of antagonisms, that between husbands and their wives, and yet simultaneously one of the most political, between production and social reproduction. In line with several scholars of South Asia who have produced ethnographies of women's lives (Gardner 1991; Raheja and Gold 1994; Kapila 2003; Lamb 2000; Stadlen 2018) I privilege the voice of women in three progressively intimate ethnographic cases. In doing so, I explore the logic, importance and anxieties that surround family, household and marriage to Sundarbans residents. I highlight the deep frustrations, especially from the point of view of women, with their domestic arrangements. Women grapple with powerful internal conflicts in trying to uphold "traditional norms", including the "rules of the jungle", in the face of their desires. From women's decisions to defy their husbands and households in several subtle and not so subtle ways, we learn that what men want conserved is exactly what women are attempting to defy.

This chapter is, indirectly, a gendered perspective on the forest and resource use. Gendered perspectives on conservation and resource use have largely been silenced or romanticized. In India, Vandana Shiva (1988) argued that women have a natural and spiritual affinity to nature. Melissa Leach (1994; 1997; 2016), Moore and Vaughan (1994) and Bina Agarwal (1992; 2010) have been seminal in arguing against such romanticized and depoliticized characterisations of the relationship between women and the environment (see also Rangan 2000; Sundar 2009). Taking up this more critical tradition in the Sundarbans, Jalais (2010) shows how certain conservation policies, like banning prawn seed collection, disproportionately disadvantaged women. In Chapter 2 I have already drawn out the gendered expectations embedded in the *jongoler niyam*. To better understand the *jongoler niyam* and its interpretation by those who follow it, I look beyond the forest and focus on the surrounding values tied to the household and family. Literature on gendered perspectives of conservation often misses out the wider place of women vis-à-vis others (Leach 1992). The values through which those who do the jungle relate to the forest are co-constituted by values around the household [*shongshar*]. *Shongshar's* own

set of restraining moralities and norms is “generative” of wider systems and sociality (Bear et.al 2015).

First, I define the term *shongshar* as it was used in the Sundarbans. It describes the gendered duties, for both men and women, that are normalised by *shongshar*, as well as the ways that a particular *shongshar* is judged bearable or unbearable, well-functioning or dysfunctional by those within it. I then present the changes in the wider political economy of the region that have brought with them transformations in people’s romantic relationships and desires and interacted in complex ways with the norms of *shongshar*. I first share women’s own diagnoses for the onset of the “era of love”, which centres on particular economic and technological processes that are part of the “ingress of modernity” (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006). I delve into one particular phenomenon, “wrong number romances”, in detail. While these narrowly refer to relationships that emerge by dialling the incorrect number on a cell phone, I show that they are in fact a euphemism for a much broader set of social experimentation. I show how the category of the wrong number romance enables a new space in which the norms of *shongshar* can be ignored and fantasies acted out (Huang 2018). The last part of this section divulges women’s reactions to other women – such as the runaway wives – who defy the expectations and role prescribed by *shongshar*, and analyses the extent to which this has caused them to rethink their own households. Women judge runaways on their individual merits, and under specific circumstances feel a keen sympathy for others who abandon their *shongshar*. At the same time, they do not seek to challenge the order of *shongshar* or *jongoler niyam* themselves.

Next, I explore one particular extramarital affair and its very public resolution through a formal village meeting, or *bichar*, used to resolve conflicts. There are mixed consequences. We learn that adultery can be condoned. However, deviation from a life focused on *shongshar* is only allowed insofar as it doesn’t challenge the prescribed order of social reproduction in the domestic sphere. The actions of the woman at the centre of the *bichar* are subtly changing the dynamics of power within her own household, but ultimately the status quo of *shongshar* is preserved.

Finally, I focus on an unconventional household in a neighbouring village of Sattyanarayanpur. Kamakshi and Jatin da live together without being married. This arrangement defies the norms of *shongshar* but, while attracting scrutiny and criticism, is nevertheless accommodated given their individual circumstances. The most significant of these is that Kamakshi is barren, unable to bear children. Society’s accommodations don’t

prevent unmarried women such as Kamakshi from feeling a painful alienation in a village setting where husbands and sons are what the measure of a good woman hinges upon. I also discuss Kamakshi's own "wrong number romance", which she uses to escape the pariah status assigned to her by the logic of *shonghsar* and simultaneously to fantasize about conforming to and building a model *shonghsar* of her own.

## Production and Reproduction Revisited

My interest in this chapter is in exploring change and retrenchment around the norms of the household, and to situate this give and take in the context of wider economic and social transitions. In doing so, I write about the household not merely as a "domestic" space but as an integral part of economic and political activity. As generations of feminist scholars have shown us, households are as much about production, exchange, power, inequality, and status as they are about "reproduction" (e.g. Dalla Costa and James 1975; Fortunati 1995; Yanagisako 1979; 2015; Bear et al. 2015). Yanagisako sums this up by saying that "when we fully acknowledge that the family is as much an integral part of the political and economic structures of society as it is a reproductive unit we will finally free ourselves from an unwarranted preoccupation with its procreative functions and all the consequent notions embodied within such a stance" (Yanagisako 1979:199).

In the Sundarbans, like in many other parts of South Asia and the world, marriage is the institution that defines and perpetuates norms around the household, and the political and economic implications that follow from these norms. Marriage in the Sundarbans is at the centre of a patriarchal kinship system in which descent, inheritance and succession are all reckoned through the male line, where residence after marriage is patrilocal, and authority is exercised by senior males of the family (Uberoi 1995; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008). In Bengal, through various rituals in their life cycle, women act the "roles of virgin, daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother and mother in law" (Fruzzetti 1982:128). Their role is always in relation to some man, and they are referred to either as a man's daughter, a man's wife or a son's mother. Women in the Sundarbans are transacted from being a part of their father's house [*baaper badi*] to be married off to their father-in-law's house [*sasur badi*]. Wives in rural Bengal were considered "receptacles through which men ensure the immortality of their line" (Fruzzetti 1982:199). As a result of women's movement away from their natal home their autonomy is extremely limited, especially in the case of widowhood or marital breakdown (Palriwal and Uberoi 2005).

For example, despite legal provisions by the state, it is usually impossible for women to inherit property in their husband's village (Palriwal and Uberoi 2005; see Miles, Mody and Probert 2015).

Within a traditional marriage and household, women's primary role is the "domestic" work of social reproduction, including cooking, cleaning, taking care of their children, and easing the burden of labour for their mother-in-law.<sup>74</sup> Claude Meillassoux pointed out the consequence of this "ordered manipulation" of women in arguing that the control of the means of production was less important than the control of the means of reproduction (Meillassoux 1981, xxii–xiii). Moore (1988), taking up the arguments of Meillassoux and others, states that productive and reproductive labour can't be separated, and that therefore social continuity itself depends on the particular role and labour women play in social reproduction. The high stakes surrounding women's role and labour strongly resonate in the Sundarbans, and in explaining the aftermath of the "escaping wives". The anger, shame and embarrassment around men "cooking their own rice" [*nijer bhaat ranna kotte bochey*] reflects the disruption to – and defence of – the expected norms and responsibilities of the domestic arrangement. The men of the Sundarbans are aware of what Marxist feminists and feminist anthropologists have been saying all along, though they articulate it differently. Social reproduction is tied to and acts as the basis of production. If the wives stopped doing the housework, who would feed the men?

Through the ethnography I present here, I show that women are increasingly aware of the disruption any "escape" from their prescribed role causes and are in some cases purposefully being "too bold for their own good." This can invite grave consequences. The opportunities, as we will see, for wives who attempt to runaway are bleak, ranging from insecure construction work, to sex work, to remarriage into a situation that resembles what they were trying to escape. In trying to make sense of their behaviour, I draw on the work of Holly Wardlow (2006), who explores the reasons why Huli "passenger women" in Papua New Guinea choose to exchange sex for money. After showing how the Huli bride wealth system commodifies women, she argues that the passenger women use their sexuality, one of the only possessions that is truly theirs, as a kind of subversive and "incipient individuality" (Wardlow 2006:151). Despite the host of consequences, including physical abuse, medical problems, and social alienation, choosing

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<sup>74</sup> Sarah Lamb (2000), writing about Bengali marriage rituals, narrates that when a son goes to bring home his bride, the mother asks the son three times "Oh, son, where are you going?" and the son responds "Ma, I'm going to bring you a servant" (ibid: 57). The significance of this ritual, Lamb says, is that the son pays back his debt to his mother by bringing home a wife, who will act as her servant or *dasi* and release her from her labours.

to sell their body is a form of “negative agency” (Kratz 2000 as cited in Wardlow 2006: 72; see also Mahmood 2004). Like the “passenger women,” the desires, goals, and imaginations of the women of the Sundarbans are overwhelmingly slotted into the projects of men. I make sense of their small and larger rebellions, despite their repercussions, as a similar exercise of “negative agency” aimed at thwarting social production.

### ***Shongshar*: “The Cycle of Life Revolves Around Marriage”**

The term *shongshar*<sup>75</sup> is broad and encompasses many aspects of life. As used in the Sundarbans, it refers to the cycle of life, death, and reproduction as experienced by a family and household. *Shongshar-dhormo* refers to the duty of man and woman to have conjugal relations, to bear children and manage family life. In the words of one married man, “the cycle of life revolves around marriage, *shongshar-dhormo* is everything, it is the cycle of life.” [*biyer uporey jeeboner chokro chaley, shongshar-dharma toh shabb keichu, shongshar toh jeeboner chokro*].

The logic and motivation behind any form of work is to provide for the *shongshar*. This is true for both men and women. It informs the calculus around migrating or staying in the village or venturing into the jungle for work. All livelihoods are motivated by the desire to provide for the family’s wellbeing. The duties of “doing” or “making” a *shongshar* are gendered. The role of the wife in a well-functioning *shongshar* encompasses all the tasks of reproducing the household: cooking, fetching water, washing clothes and dishes, sweeping the homestead, myriad daily chores (such as putting fresh mud and dung paste on the house walls), taking care of the children, and taking care of the in-laws. Women also take care of the household’s livestock and work on their own agricultural

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<sup>75</sup>While pronounced in Bangla as *shongshar*, and spelled that way in more recent scholarship (Sarbadhikary 2019), the word has varied spellings and definitions among scholars of Bengali kinship. Fruzzetti spells it as ‘*sangsar*’ and defines the term as “consisting of the members of one’s house and their lives. This includes activity within the house (the physical location), the domain of affectivity, kinds of relationships obtained among relatives, links with servants, and care of the animals within the compound. ....marriage, death, and birth are a part of the *Sangsar*. *Sangsar* ties are ongoing, enduring, reciprocal and dependent. They encompass locality, relatives and sentiments.” (Fruzzetti 1982:129; Fruzzetti and Östör 1976a, 1976b). Sarah Lamb, following the Hindi or Sanskrit spelling, writes that “the most common Bengali term used to refer to what we in English might call a “family” is *samsar*. It literally means ‘that which flows together.’ ....In its most comprehensive sense, *samsar* refers to the whole material world (prithibi or jagat) and to the flux of births and deaths that all living beings and things go through together. More commonly, the term designates one’s own family or household (which is in some ways viewed as a microcosm of the wider world’s processes)” (Lamb 2000:43).

land<sup>76</sup> or, depending on the household's circumstances, on the land of others or in the jungle. In sum, while women are engaged in waged work—be it crab collecting, daily wage labour, shop keeping—a woman's foremost responsibility is to put in all the generative labour (Bear et. al 2015) that sustains each member of the household, as well as maintain the physical homestead (see Dalla Costa and James 1973).

A husband is praised or criticized chiefly according to his ability to provide for his family. A man who doesn't work hard enough is a man who “can't make his household run” [*shongshbar theek korey cholachey na*]. The duties of *shongshbar* are not limited to the domestic sphere but also extend outward to the remunerative work that provides for the household. For households that do the jungle and observe the *jongoler niyam* it is even more acutely the case that the household and the jungle, the spheres of domesticity and work, production and reproduction, are inextricably linked in ritual practices of ascetism (Chapter 2).

The physical and emotional health of a marriage is also an important component of *shongshbar*. If there is marital discord between a man and a wife, such as constant bickering or deep dissatisfaction with one's marriage, it is said that there is “no peace in the household” or “unquiet in the household” [*shongshbarey ashanti*]. From the perspective of the women, this discord can occur if the marriage doesn't satiate broader emotional desires, such as if the husband or in-laws don't respect and care for the wife [*jotna korey na*]. Such forms of care are often concretely displayed through small gifts. An unhappy *shongshbar* can also be linked to the fact of physical abuse. While a man is sometimes praised for never having raised his hand against his wife, most households have some amount of hitting – where the husband hits the wife [*maara-maari*] – which is seen as normal. The health of a *shongshbar* can also be based on physical dissatisfaction. For both men and women, physical attributes are crucial: light skin is preferred to dark skin; fatter women with long hair are preferred to skinnier ones with short hair; and men who don't take care of themselves or have no interest in self-grooming are deeply unattractive. A combination of factors—a husband's inability to provide for the household, disrespectful or overbearing in-laws, excessive hitting, or physical dissatisfaction—can make the *shongshbar* unbearable. From the perspective of men, women who didn't do their household chores as expected and who didn't pander to the wishes of their in-laws or

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<sup>76</sup> Agricultural work was predominantly working on one's own or someone else's paddy fields, and entailed sowing, reaping, harvesting, threshing—work that men and women did. However, the process of readying rice for household consumption or sale, from the stage of par-boiling it, drying it and storing it was done solely by women. Agricultural work could also include tending to vegetable gardens within the homestead [*bhite*] itself, depending on if the family had requisite land.

bickered too much were thought of as poor householders, shirking their most important duties as wives and creating disquiet within the household.

The other crucial aspect of the *shonghsbar* is to be able to reproduce it through children. Shortly after marriage a couple is expected to have a child. Having a daughter is considered adequate, although this would not have been the case approximately two decades ago. It is the inability to have any children at all that is the single biggest tragedy that can befall a *shonghsbar*, with the blame falling disproportionately on the woman.

A “happy household” [*mongol shongbar*] was one where man and woman performed their gendered roles, economic, emotional and sexual needs were adequately met by both members, and the wife produced sons. Such a situation was rare, and a household characterised by some amount of disquiet, bickering and fighting [*gondogol*] –with grievances from both men and women –was more common. In all cases, the gendered norms of *shonghsbar* underlie everyone’s conception of a happy or unhappy household.

## The Era of Love

Echoing a global trend in companionate marriages (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006), Fuller and Narasimhan (2008) note the same for middle class India. They attribute this to “individual personality, self-expression, and free will, which is in turn connected with improved education (especially for girls), the rising of age of marriage and reduced gender inequality” (ibid:751). In the Sundarbans, marriages arranged through parents that is “arranged marriages” [*dekba shona*] or through a village match maker [*ghatok*] have been the norm. Those who are set up to get married rarely ever have any veto power over the decision. During the time that I was in the field, there was a consensus across the village that they were all living in the “era of love” [*bhalobhashar yug*]. The most obvious symptom of this era was that love marriages, as opposed to arranged marriages, are a growing and seemingly unstoppable trend. For the young, love marriages are both a fashion and internalised as a fundamental part of being an individual.

Bali Island was replete with stories of young elopements. Many of these elopements cluster around a public holiday from school, Saraswati *pūjo*—the goddess of knowledge—which is the one day of the year that teenage girls have more freedom than usual to move around the island visiting different idols of the goddess at various schools. For weeks in advance, I listened to all the young friends I had in the field planning

elopements on Saraswati *pūjo*: the day meant to worship the goddess of knowledge. While many got cold feet, three couples I knew ran away. One couple was returned to their respective homes by the police, one other couple eventually returned on their own and then eloped again, and another girl, a 17-year-old niece of Piyali who ran away with a Muslim boy, never returned.

It was also widely acknowledged that this behaviour was not limited to the young, and that eloping or abandoning one's family - as described in the case of the Amlamethi wives and the rumour around them - was becoming more common among adult men and women. Extramarital affairs, secondary marriages, love marriages and elopements had happened before in the Sundarbans, as happens in other parts of India, particularly within low caste groups (see Parry 2000: 785-87) and in urban areas (see Grover 2009; 2011). However most often they accompanied grave consequences. If in the past my interlocutors could count these cases on one hand, the scale over the past few years had, according to them, exploded. Laughing, one middle-aged married man explained to me that we live in a time where the old women [*budī*] are learning from the kids [*baccha*] about the force of love and the possibility of pursuing it. For one very elderly man it was no coincidence that this "era of love" coincided with the *kali jug* or the fourth stage or cycle of life in the Hindu mythological calendar known for degeneration.

Women provided multiple diagnoses for these transformations in attitudes toward romance, marriage, and the household. One popular scapegoat was TV. Even though there was no grid electricity, solar panels allowed more households than ever to have cable TV, and those who didn't have their own television went to their closest neighbour to religiously consume soap operas, serials and movies. Set in Indian cities and marble bungalows that could not look more different from the Sundarbans, the storylines were primarily around love, and the struggles of pursuing love against all odds.

New spaces for romance were also associated with out-migration. Following Cyclone Aila in 2009, that devastated homes and fields in the Sundarbans, at least two men from each household had been forced to find work outside the Sundarbans to rebuild their homes, and nearly every household still had at least one member—a father or brother—migrating out for work seasonally (see Ghosh 2017). Often when men and women talked about affairs they drew a causal relationship between husbands that were away from home for long periods of time – some only returned once a year - and wives that had found new admirers. Extramarital affairs, I was told, were common for those who stayed back. Both women and men believed that women were choosing to use their



sexuality as a means to fulfil their bodily desires [*sharirik ichaay* or *sharirik chahida*]. Sexual relationships, euphemistically referred to as “staying close” [*kaache thaaka*], were also sometimes tied to material benefits women received from admirers. These ranged from small items like nail polish or hair clips to more coveted gifts like jewellery, saris and new blouses. Especially for women whose husbands were gone most of the year, romance was a way to earn some “extra income,” expressed in English or explained in Bengali as *haath karoch* or “pocket money.”

For most of the stories I heard, the pursuit of financial and romantic independence was hard to separate. In this sense, new work opportunities and better access to the city were oxygen for romantic flames. It was speculated that some of these Amlamethi “runaway wives” might have also found work for themselves “toward Kolkata.” Other cases involved women who left to join an acquaintance who had already found work elsewhere, and then found someone to re-marry. Distant work opportunities in factories and construction sites also allowed forbidden lovers within the village to imagine, and sometimes pursue, a viable future for it outside. These elopements were similar to the case Shah (2006) describes where migrants from Jharkhand go to work in brick kilns not out of poverty, but to carry out romantic relationships prohibited in the village. During conversations around eloping on Saraswati *pūjo*, all the young couples’ strategy of choice was to run away “toward Kolkata” [*Kolkatar dikey*] to find work. An adult couple from my neighbourhood abandoned their respective families, and two children each, and travelled still further—to the Andaman Islands—to work on a construction site.

### ***The Wrong Number as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”***

Almost everyone I asked attributed the rise in extramarital affairs and elopements to the mobile phone. Unlike in the recent past, every household now owned one. They facilitated the communication and coordination [*jog-a-jog*] for many things, including romance.

Dialling a wrong number or receiving a call from an unknown person was fairly common in the Sundarbans. One association is with young male adolescents, who purposefully dial random numbers in the hope of instigating conversations with girls. However, the wrong number is actually a much wider phenomenon. For women, interned in the home while men were in the jungle or at night while men played cards and hung

out at tea stalls in the village market, talking to strangers was a way to pass the time [*time passer junne*] and break one's boredom. In some cases, playful flirtations blossomed into a wrong number romance, even though the individuals would never meet in person. This echoes the growing literature on cell phone friendships and intimacies, such as the Nigerian women described by Gilbert (2018) where affective intimacies can be lived out while simultaneously “maintaining distance” from the men, or the young Bangladeshi iAgents who use phone friendships to dabble in exploring new moral boundaries and aspirations (Huang 2018). For others, the wrong number played a more serious role. For one girl I knew, born with polio and disabled from the hip down, wrong number relationships were, in her own words, her only chance to experience love [*bhalobasha*]. This follows Wardlow (2018), who shows that the “phone friends” acquired by women living with HIV provide “emotional support, mental diversion, romantic escapism and even material support” (ibid: 39-40).

It took me a while to realize that, in the Sundarbans, the wrong number was a euphemism to avoid explaining how one might have fallen in love or begun a romantic liaison. Many love marriages from the past decade were initially introduced, while blushing and smiling, as “wrong number marriages.” On further investigation, there was almost always another story behind how people met, but the wrong number was an easy, all-purpose, and self-explanatory justification. In a context where every conversation on the phone would otherwise be followed by a barrage of follow-up - who was it? what did they say? why? - no further questions were asked, except if you were an anthropologist, and no further answers had to be given. The code around the wrong number was that of “don't ask, don't tell” in that everyone knew what it stood for—relationships based on love and flirtation—and yet no one had to acknowledge this.

For married couples, the wrong number served as both a convenient euphemism and a pardonable excuse. Several fights erupted around extramarital affairs when a husband or wife caught their partner having an affair on the phone. However, the accused could plead innocence, stating that they had only picked up a wrong number call and therefore shouldn't be blamed. Lengthy explanations were offered of how one was trying to call a relative, but they mixed up the digits by mistake or the call was picked up by someone else. After a few days of marital discord [*shonghsharey ashaanti*] the couple would return to cordial relations again. In this way, the wrong number could explain away a whole host of illicit affairs, which the husband usually accepted as long as the domestic arrangements, and the household duties of the woman, were not disrupted. As a form of

coordination [*jog-a-jog*], wrong numbers allowed men and women in the Sundarbans to transgress the boundaries of *shonghsbar* and satisfy a whole range of desires – for excitement, friendship, romance, and taboo liaisons across caste or religion. At the same time, by serving as an umbrella excuse, the wrong number allowed them plausible deniability. In a context where love or *bhalobhasa* is still a new phenomenon, freighted with shyness and embarrassment and defiance of *shonghsbar*, “wrong numbers” conveniently absolved all agency.

### ***Women’s Views on the Runaway Wives***

In the months after the rumour of the runaway wives of Amlamethi began to circulate, while gossip about their whereabouts, return, and remarriage remained a hot topic of conversation, I noticed that women’s perspectives on these “physical relations” and “runaways” were very different from men’s: that these women had no shame left [*lajja naye*] and were “too ripe” [*paacka*], a phrase which carried derogatory connotations that they had become too bold for their own good. Alongside this, the men’s concern was around who would cook, clean, do the household chores, and perform all the domestic labour now that the wives had “escaped.” It was a matter of grave public ignominy, for both individual and household, if a married man had to “cook his own rice” [*nijey bhaat ranna korey kachey*].

Back in my neighbourhood, the women’s comments were much more ambivalent. After initial commentary on how terrible and shameless it was to abandon one’s *shonghsbar*, the women in my neighbourhood sympathized with the runaways. Piyali knew one of the Amlamethi wives’ husbands, with whom she used to do the jungle a few years ago. She told a group of us how dirty he was, with uncut nails and a bad smell. She also recalled that she had attended a *bichar*—a village meeting—centred on resolving marital disputes between this couple a few years ago. Piyali wasn’t surprised that the woman had “escaped”—in fact, she was surprised it took her so many years to finally leave the man! All the women present agreed with her.

Other conversations about the runaway wives centred on hypotheses around abusive marriages whereby the wife’s motivation was not escaping to a lover, but rather escaping from a husband or in-laws. These included husbands that beat their wives, or men who did not respect their wives enough. In discussing past cases like this, a married neighbour said, “But what do you expect... her husband was a *bekaar* [unemployed,

wasting away].” Or, in the words of another neighbour, “I hear she lives close to Kolkata and is now earning enough money to send her daughter to private school.” Their comments show, if not outright approval, an empathy with the logic of running away under certain circumstances.

One story from our own neighbourhood was a kind of archetype in our conversations about women who engage in “physical relationships” in reaction to their deeply dysfunctional marriages. This was the case of 19-year-old Sarika, who had two little children and a deadbeat husband, Anirban<sup>77</sup>, who had no work and constantly beat her. When the beatings got really bad—as when she was pregnant with her second child—she ran away to her parents’ home [*baaper baadi*]. However, as this impugned the honour of her parents and was an added burden on the household – (she was one of five daughters) – Sarika was compelled to return to Anirban (cf Grover 2017). Months after, as a form of punishment, Sarika was forced to provide for herself and her children on her own. She was unable to take any paid work in the village because her in-laws refused to take care of her two toddlers while she worked. On a follow-up trip to the field I took in 2018, Sarika was having “physical relations” with other men as a means to provide for her household. With resignation she said, “This is what is written in my fate [*kopal*, or forehead], there is nothing I can do.” She was waiting for her children to grow a little older before considering leaving the marriage and the village altogether [*ekabare choley jabo*].

In Sarika’s case, the women were clearly sympathetic in private conversations, saying things like “Who marries their daughter off to such a monkey [*bandor*]”? An elderly woman, the mother-in-law of a friend in the neighbourhood, exclaimed that, in the past, women had usually endured a bad marriage by praying for death to come quick. Running away wasn’t an option. “Where would we run away to?” she asked rhetorically. Commenting on the village gossip that had reached her ears, she said (albeit rather disapprovingly) that now the audacious wives [*paacka ban*] were running away instead of waiting for death.

Among themselves, women in my neighbourhood thought it was eminently reasonable to “abandon” or “escape” certain marriages. They gossiped for hours about each case on its merits, trying to determine whether it was an abandonment or elopement, whether it involved an extramarital affair or an abusive husband, whether a wife’s actions were or were not justified. As is evident from their comments, women’s sympathy was

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<sup>77</sup> It seemed to me that Anirban suffered from an undiagnosed mental disability himself. He was hard of hearing and had a speech impairment that was often made fun of by other villagers. The one person he could wield his power over was the only person weaker than him: his wife.

couched in terms criticising the man's ability to uphold the norms of *shonghsbar*. These women were not necessarily questioning the norm but reflecting on who was to blame—husband or wife—for disrupting it.

In the “era of love”, amidst a wave of wrong number romances, women in my village still had not created spaces or attitudes where they were thwarting the norms of *shonghsbar*. Instead, their own reflections showed the searing importance and pressing relevance of the norms of *shonghsbar*: to be a woman meant to be cared for by a man, to be married, to produce sons. However, they were sympathetic toward the suffering of other women in bad marriages. Abandoning one's *shonghsbar* was an increasingly viable possibility, due to recent economic and technological changes. While it was not something women condoned in public, and especially not in front of other husbands, they had an acute and very pragmatic sense of its justification under certain circumstances.

## Women's “Negative Agency”

This section explores a particular extramarital affair and the means of resolving it through a public meeting (*bichar*)<sup>78</sup>. Up until two decades ago, village disputes were adjudicated within the community by members of the community. The *bichar* was presided over by someone known as the *Modol* or *Matobar*, a village elder who was often also the largest landowner in the village. By the time I was conducting fieldwork, the practice had been adapted such that either the Pradhan or Up-Pradhan—the elected heads of the village government—was invited to preside over any *bichar*. The Pradhan or Up-Pradhan facilitated the conversation, and also acted as the judge whose decision was final. When two feuding parties call a *bichar* and invite the Pradhan, the intention is to resolve the conflict without having to resort to a court of law or the police. In some instances, especially when disputes were difficult to resolve and carried on for years, a combination of state and village level processes were adopted. Usually the *bichar* itself resolved the dispute, and the decision of the Pradhan was final and honoured by all parties.

Meetings varied in size, duration and demographics. Some *bichars* could be as small as 15-20 people, while 300 or more people attended others. Most were dedicated to a single dispute and could last from a few to many hours. Both men and women attended most *bichars* in equal number, and in theory women could speak as much and as loudly as

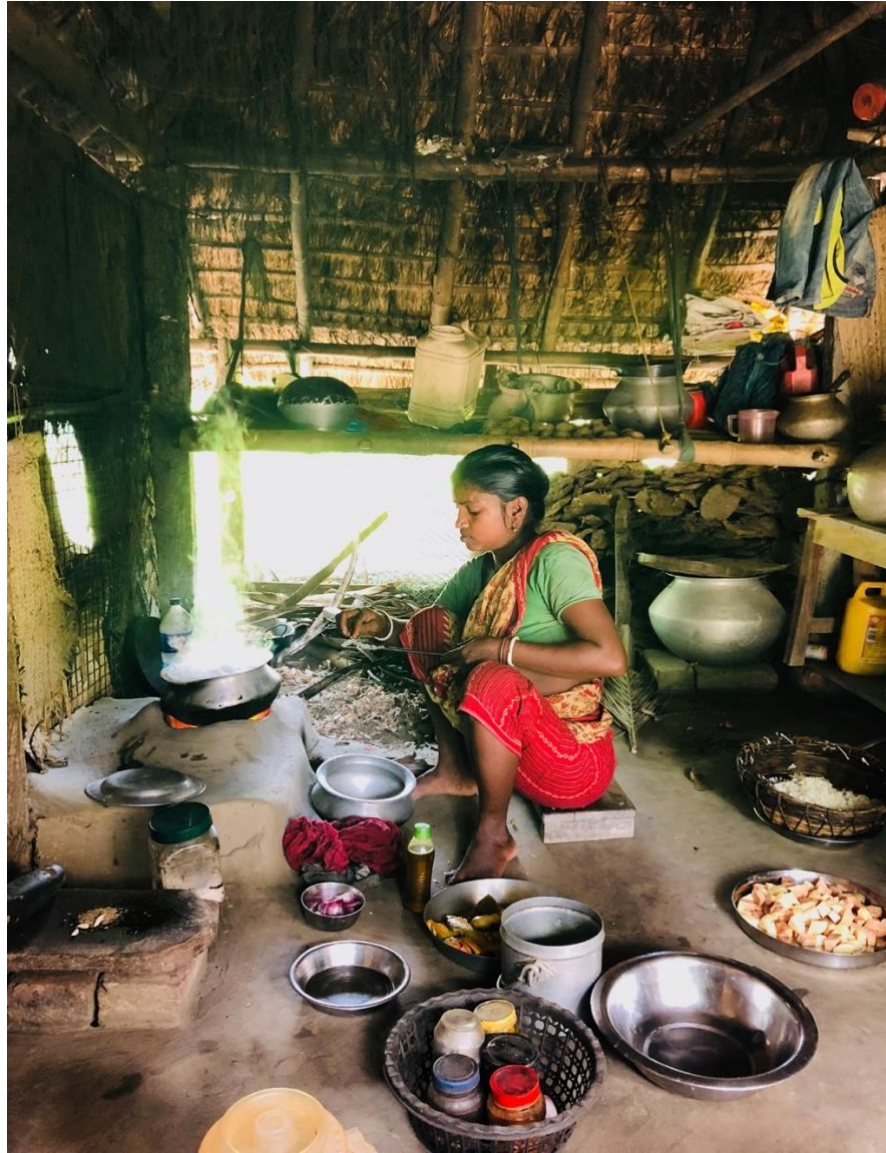
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<sup>78</sup> The *Samsad Bengali-English dictionary* defines *bichar* as "consideration, deliberation; argument; discussion; decision; inference; a (judicial) trial; judgment, finding."

men, although not everyone found the courage to represent themselves in front of such a large assembly. However, decision-making and procedural power – introducing the dispute, facilitating the conversation, and resolving it – was reserved for men.

*Bichars* were used to solve an extensive range of problems. Conflicts that took place in the forests were resolved through the *bichar* in the village. This was also a form of vernacular governance that mediated social relationships, fixed ideas of fairness and upheld notions of justice (through men's decision making). The most common dispute was around land ownership, closely followed by conflicts around another valuable property: women. By showing the logic of *shonghsbar* challenged and defended in a public forum, this particular *bichar* was a chance to see its tacit norms openly discussed and revealed.

I present this case as a sister example of what Wardlow (2006) calls “negative agency.” It is an example of a woman flexing her muscles within her *shonghsbar* even as she faces punishment and is constrained by *shonghsbar's* broader norms. Like the runaway wives of Amlamethi, and the private reflections their example stirred in my neighbourhood on men's relative responsibilities and blame, women in the Sundarbans are asserting a new kind of agency that seeks to revise power relations within *shonghsbar* even as they ultimately continue to reproduce it. Women can still very much be a part of the norms of *shonghsbar*, while defying it. These subtle forms of defiance and that of other “escaping” wives, changes certain dynamics within the household.



*Figure 36 What "cooking one's own rice" might entail, if the wives "escaped."*

### ***An Extramarital Affair***

In the next neighbourhood over from mine, a married man named Sujit had begun to have an affair with the wife of a man named Tapan.<sup>79</sup> Sujit operates tours on a rented boat, and for that particular tourism season he had hired Tapan's wife as the boat's cook. Meanwhile during his affair he had been beating his pregnant wife at home. The wife's condition was so fragile that Sujit's neighbours decided to get in touch with the Pradhan

<sup>79</sup> In the lead-up to the *bichar* and after, both the wives are referred to according to their husband's name and not by their own names, i.e. Sujit's wife and Tapan's wife [*Sujiter Bau & Tapaner Bau*]. In writing about this *bichar*, I follow the terminology used in the village to describe the situation. It is telling that the names of these women were inconsequential.

and request him to hold a *bichar*. Their main concern was not the affair itself but rather the physical health of Sujit's wife, whom they worried might die if no one intervened. In this particular case both Sujit and Tapan—who was fully aware of the affair—were keen to avoid the *bichar* in order to protect their dignity. However, through the intervention of neighbours, a date and time was fixed for the Pradhan to come, obliging everyone involved to attend.

Piyali, who knew Tapan's wife well, decided she would not attend the *bichar*. It was a matter of “a woman's honour” [*maan shamaaner kotho*] and out of respect she didn't want to be present while another woman's marital situation was discussed. All our female neighbours refused to go, and discouraged me from going as well, for the same reason. Even if the women had attended, none would have felt comfortable voicing an opinion on the husband or wife's relative culpability – as they did so volubly in private—since such actions would have repercussions in their own homes.<sup>80</sup> After some discussion, I was permitted to go because, as an outsider, I was deemed to be somewhat neutral and uninvolved. Jhorna pishi's son Pinto, a young man in his early 20s and a friend, acted as my chaperone for the evening. Piyali warned me that there might be obscene language and physical fighting, and that the *bichar* would go on late into the night.

People started congregating at 7pm on the grounds of the Vidya Mandir High School. The Pradhan arrived an hour later and the meeting began promptly thereafter. The gathering consisted of approximately 200-250 men. The few women present were very elderly, and Pinto explained that they lived in homes adjacent to the school ground. I presume that the wives of all the men present had been discouraged by their husbands from attending or, like Piyali, did not want to do so, since it would interfere in everyday social relations [*byabohar*] with the women concerned. Looking around, I noticed that many of those present today were young men, like Pinto, sniggering on the peripheries, present mainly in the spirit of entertainment. Girls their age would be doing the evening cooking and did not have the freedom at such a late hour to be outside the home.

The Pradhan and a few other men sat on plastic chairs and a *charpaiye* while everyone else sat on the ground. The Pradhan began speaking. First Sujit spoke, then Tapan, then their two wives. After these four had said their bit, others present would give testimonies— in-laws, neighbours, and the men on the chairs. It was to be a long, dramatic, violent evening.

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<sup>80</sup>I also saw this during other *bichars*. During two separate *bichars* around Sarika and Anirban's marriage, very few women supported Sarika in public meetings despite the sympathies they express for her situation in private.



### ***Weakness as Justification***

A crucial part of the *bichar* hinged on Tapan's wife's testimony. When Tapan's wife had a chance to speak, which she did with surprising confidence, she justified the affair with Sujit on the basis of Tapan's "bodily weakness" [*shareerik durbolta*]. The term *durbolta*, literally meaning weakness, was taken up by the Pradhan and discussed in detail. It was clear from the Pradhan's further questions that "bodily weakness" was a euphemism for impotence. The Pradhan asked Tapan's wife how her husband could be "physically weak" when she had a seven-year-old daughter. Tapan's wife responded that, since the birth of their first child, Tapan had had an "accident" [the English word was used] while working as a migrant outside the Sundarbans which had rendered him "physically weak." The accident in question was purposefully kept ambiguous. Every time Tapan's wife talked, Tapan started swearing at her, trying to shut her up. He was clearly embarrassed and angry. Each time this happened, the Pradhan intervened to quiet Tapan down and encourage Tapan's wife to continue talking. The Pradhan was sympathetic to her reasoning, and her justifications for having an affair were taken seriously. In the discussion that ensued, the term "physical relations" [*sharirik shompark*] was used many times. The Pradhan acknowledged the physical needs of men and women.

During Tapan's testimony, the conversation and commentary by the Pradhan turned toward the importance of marriage and maintaining *shonghsbar*. Tapan complained that his wife was not fulfilling her role as a good householder [*shonghsbar kotte paachey na*]. As evidence, he offered a long story, the thrust of which was that his elderly father's meal wasn't ready when it should have been on a number of occasions. He spent a long time citing other examples that highlighted his wife's lack of care and the dereliction of her householder responsibilities.

The Pradhan acknowledged both testimonies in his summary. Much time was spent on emphasizing the importance of *shonghsbar-dhorma* as a woman's primary duty. But marriage was also important for the purpose of reproduction, and for the ability to bear children. Tapan had been able to give his wife a child. Men and women had sexual needs too - the operative term used was "physical desire" [*sharirik chahida*]—and Tapan's "physical weakness" was unable to satiate these. In his slightly convoluted way, which took around 30 minutes, the Pradhan was saying that, in these circumstances, Tapan's wife's affair with Sujit was justified.

This particular Pradhan was a charismatic speaker who was able to muster support from the crowd. At this juncture the mood of those gathered shifted toward sympathy for Tapan's wife, who until then had been badmouthed for destroying the household and violating *shonghsbar*.

### ***A Woman's Defiance***

Another shocking twist was still to come. At around midnight, toward the end of the *bichar*, the Pradhan offered Tapan's wife a choice: was she ready to go back to maintaining her *shonghsbar* with Tapan, this time more dutifully, or would she like to be with Sujit? In front of the 250 men present, Tapan's wife said that she wanted to be with Sujit and leave her husband Tapan for good.

Everyone was outraged. It was hard to see from where I was sitting but a man sitting beside her came down on her back with a hard blow. There was a general uproar, with men standing up in anger and swearing at her, until the Pradhan once again quieted everyone down. Pinto, smirking, commented, "Did you hear that, she has no shame [*lajja nay*]".

The Pradhan resumed, but this time took a new tack. Directly addressing Tapan's wife, he asked if she knew that domestic violence was an offence punishable by law for which a man could go to jail. Everyone knew what he was referring to: Sujit had been beating up his wife. This had been covered earlier, and in fact Sujit had been so violent that she had miscarried their child. The Pradhan cited the laws [*aiyn*] in the Indian constitution [*samvidhaan* – a word very rarely used in the Sundarbans] to safeguard women from domestic violence. Speaking to the entire crowd now, as if reminding all the men present, he detailed the legal ramifications of domestic abuse. Once he finished, he asked Tapan's wife once again, with the knowledge that Sujit could be sent to prison, "who did she want to go with?" [*kaar shongey jaabey*]. Tapan's wife was silent.

In the silence, others spoke urging the Pradhan to take legal action regarding Sujit's misdemeanours. Sujit's wife had also spoken earlier that evening but very softly, and those of us at the back couldn't hear what she had said. Sujit had tried to stop her from speaking too but the Pradhan had sternly warned Sujit against intimidating her. Over the course of the evening, the idea of filing a court case against Sujit was dropped. Likely, this had only been proposed by the Pradhan as a tactic to scare Tapan's wife. The Pradhan had assessed that Sujit's wife was entirely dependent on her husband. Her parents were

dead, and in her current state of illness, her husband—albeit an abusive and adulterous one—was her sole caretaker.

At the end of the evening, Tapan's wife spoke again, this time very briefly. She said she would go back to her husband and would be grateful if her in-laws accepted her back into their house [*sasur sasudi maniye nebey tob*].

The word *durbolta*, meaning weakness, was used throughout the *bichar* and with different connotations each time. Sujit's character was deemed to be weak, for a man who hit his wife was a weak man. Tapan had been called weak as a result of the "accident". The affair between Sujit and Tapan's wife was also described using "*durbolta*," this time in the context of Tapan's wife's "weakness in judgement." Used in several connotations the peculiar use of the word "weakness" allowed a space for forgiveness.

Around 1.30am, after five hours of monologues, physical fighting, and public shame, a resolution had been reached. Both wives were sent home with their respective husbands.

### ***Changing households norms?***

I took two main messages away from the *bichar*. First, love [*bhalobhasha*] has nothing to do with the responsibilities of *shonghshar*. Within the village, for several weeks after the *bichar*, Tapan's wife was slurred as a woman "unable to be a householder" [*shonghshar kottey parey ni*] or who "won't make a household" [*shonghshar korebey na*]. No one cared about the affair. *Bhalobhasha* could happen and adultery could be condoned, but what could not be countenanced was failure to fulfil the duties of a wife: this constituted a threat to the reproductive and productive order. Fidelity to the *shonghshar*, particularly to the chores of the household and domestic duties, was paramount. After the *bichar*, most people assumed that while Sujit and Tapan's wife would continue to have an affair with one another, they would both heed the responsibilities owed to their respective *shonghshar*. While aspects of household, marriage and family relations have been challenged and changed by the "era of love", the norms of *shonghshar* remain non-negotiable.

However, this conclusion cannot fully explain Tapan's wife's moment of defiance. Tapan's wife knew that there was no way she was going to be able to leave her husband and her daughter and remain in the village with Sujit. She also knew that by publicly shaming her own husband she was inviting a thrashing at home (perhaps one she would

get anyway). Aware of all of this, why did she purposefully spit in the face of *shongshar* in front of the 250 men present, her husband and her in-laws included?

I suggest that Tapan's wife's defiance was a proclamation of agency. As a woman, and as a wife, she was asserting perhaps the only kind of power she held, which was to shame her husband and his family. This she did successfully through her public critique of Tapan's inability to fulfil his own duties as a husband, all of his various "weaknesses", and in her explicit threat to abandon her *shongshar* altogether. Returning to the work of Holly Wardlow (2006), Huli women stop being commodities in men's worlds by repossessing their sexuality and selling it for money, exiting the domain where men can make decisions for them. Wardlow argues that women are either put in a position where they have to cooperate with the wishes of men and for which they receive no credit (as this is just expected of them) or, if they refuse other's arrangements, they are maligned (ibid: 72). Huli passenger women exert their negative agency by exiting the bride wealth system that encompasses them. The "escaping wives" of Amlamethi are doing something similar. Tapan's wife's defiance is perhaps more subtle than that of the "escaping" wives. I saw Tapan's wife in her house several months later. We didn't get a chance to speak at length because her mother-in-law and Tapan himself were present too. In a snatched moment of privacy, I asked her how things were at home. She said in a whisper, smiling, that things were better and that the hitting [*maara-maari*] had lessened. They were expecting another child. Her example shows that it is possible for women to not have to entirely exit the domain where men make decisions for them but even remaining within *shongshar* they could attempt to change the dynamics of it.

While I never managed to speak to Sujit's wife, I asked Piyali what she thought might happen to her. Piyali replied matter-of-factly, "What will happen, she will die, what else?" [*ki hobey, morey jaabey, aar ki?*]. Economically dependent on Sujit and without any other family, sent back to the man who had beaten her into miscarrying their child, her options were violently limited. Perhaps, in such an unbearable *shongshar* and unable to exercise her power within it, she will one day follow the intrepid wives of Amlamethi and, rather than praying for a quick death, escape.

## A Modern Family?

A household in the neighbouring village which I frequented often offered me the most intimate glimpse I had into individual attempts to live outside the norms of

*shonghsbar*. Kamakshi lived with a man named Jatin da. At the time of fieldwork, Kamakshi was in her early 30s and unmarried. She was unable to conceive children. Jatin da, approximately in his late 50s, had been married with two grown children. For the past ten years, the two of them have been living together in the home that belonged to Kamakshi's deceased parents. There was a third member to their household: Aruna, the 13 year-old daughter of Kamakshi's sister, Poornima, who lived with her husband behind Kamakshi's house. Pampered by Kamakshi and doted on like a granddaughter by Jatin da, Aruna chose to spend at least half her time at their house

Even though the two were unmarried, Kamakshi lived and acted as the de facto wife of Jatin da. "Households" and "family" are not the same thing. A household has mostly been defined with regard to physical propinquity, while the family is conceived of through genealogical kinship (Yanagisako 1979). Instead of kinship being just about the biological facts of reproduction, anthropologists have argued that family and household should not be defined through universals but from concrete, observable actions and the means of living together (*ibid*). Kamakshi, Jatin da and Aruna were, in concrete terms, in how they lived, ate together, fought and cared for each other, both a household and a family. I was initially struck by the apparent acceptance of Kamakshi and Jatin da's live-in relationship, and its non-conformity with *shonghsbar*. During the course of fieldwork because we became so close, I also gained access to Kamakshi's internal world in a way I had not managed with that many others. In reality, she suffered terribly from her inability to fulfil the expectations and responsibilities of a woman and was pursuing a vibrant wrong number romance to both spite and fantasize about her *shonghsbar*.

### ***"No Father, No Husband, No Son, I have No One in this World"***

The jungle is a midwife to several kinds of companionate arrangements. As described, it has an egalitarian ethos to it (Jalais 2010), or in the words of Jatin da, "the jungle makes us all into equals" [*ek samaan korey*]. Everyone goes begging, and it accepts everyone who needs it. This was the case for Jatin da and Kamakshi. They come from entirely different economic backgrounds, but in the grip of desperate situations found refuge – and each other – through the jungle.

Jatin da is originally from a neighbouring island where he was the owner of a successful *khoti*. *Khotis* are small shacks located on the river's edge where boats, after returning from the forest, sell their catch. Most often the *khoti maliks*, the owners of the

*kehoti*, advance loans to fishing boats in exchange for rights to their catch. Jatin da had invested in this way in a group of five boats when they were attacked by pirates [*dakaat*] that had crossed over from the border in Bangladesh. He was ruined. He couldn't pay back his own debts. A few months later his wife abandoned him, taking their younger son with her and leaving the older son with a relative in the outskirts of Kolkata. She first went to live with her own parents and subsequently he heard that she remarried a Muslim man.<sup>81</sup> Financially devastated, and with the ignominy of his wife having left him, he decided to come to join a relative on Bali Island to start afresh. By chance this happened to be in Kamakshi's neighbourhood.

In parallel, Kamakshi was passing through one of her most difficult phases of life. She was one of four sisters. Massive costs had been incurred for her three sisters' weddings, and the family lived a life of distress, poverty and constant indebtedness. Kamakshi had been forced to drop out of school after Class four. In addition, she had been sickly throughout her childhood. On one particular occasion in her late teens when she fell ill, following the recommendation of others in the village, she underwent an "operation" at the village "nursing home" which left her infertile.<sup>82</sup> As news of her infertility spread throughout the village, and surrounding villages, it became clear that no one would marry her. This was a huge blow to her parents, and shattered not only her own hopes but her prospects for a secure life.

Compelled to support herself, and with the additional burden of caring for her ailing mother and father, 17 year old Kamakshi decided to start collecting crabs on a boat with Jatin da. She says, "Everything I know about the jungle, I know from him." She recollected this story to me several times over the course of fieldwork, emphasising each time the trope of beggars entering the abode of Bonbibi: "We were really begging from Ma Bonbibi for whatever she would give us." Even then, when she didn't know Jatin da that well, he became her pillar of support, both emotionally as well as financially helping

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<sup>81</sup> This was said with much disapproval – almost as if Jatin da's wife's character could be deciphered based on her choice of partner.

<sup>82</sup> In my entire time in the field and having asked several times at several occasions, I couldn't understand exactly what happened, what medical condition and what operation rendered Kamakshi infertile. She would simply say I had to have an "operation that cut my stomach" [*pet kata*] and after that she knew she couldn't have children. The "nursing home" where this operation took place was in the village bazaar: a privately-owned medical centre run by "quack" doctors, a term used by the villagers themselves. When I was in the field, it consisted of a large room with an alabaster roof, with a few beds and only basic medical equipment that could function without electricity. I shudder to think what the "nursing home" looked like 12 years ago when Kamakshi underwent her operation. Infertility aside, the operation caused several complications - infections, swellings, and bleeding – necessitating a more recent follow-up operation. For this, Jatin da took her to the hospital on the mainland in Gosaba.

her save money for her own and her parent's healthcare costs. Around ten years ago, once her parents died, Jatin da moved into her house.

In a patriarchal village that follows a patrilocal marriage rule, this was unique. Moreover, while romantically involved, the two never got married. During my time in the field, some ten years after they had been cohabiting, people still criticized this subversive living arrangement, saying "Don't you think it is wrong for an unmarried woman to live with an older married man like that?" However, on further questioning, even those that initially criticized them were rather sympathetic toward their relationship. Later in the same conversation they would equivocate, "but she was unwell [*ashushto*], no brothers even, no one would ever marry her, how would the household run [*shonghsar ki korey cholbey*] it is good that he "stays close" [*kache thaake*]." <sup>83</sup> The two were both well respected, dearly loved and, at times, fiercely criticized like anybody else in the village. While against *shonghsar-dhorma*, this "modern family" seemed like an acceptable solution given the circumstances.

While this was my sunny impression for long periods of fieldwork, a conversation from a particular evening changed my understanding of how Kamakshi felt about her situation. It was quite late at night and Kamakshi and I were sitting together after a long day of labour and excitement in preparation for the Hari *pujo*. This was an annual religious festival that took place at a shrine located next to Kamakshi's homestead and because of the location of the shrine her homestead acted as the main base for the festivities. The following night hired musicians would sing devotional songs for Lord Krishna and his consort Radha,<sup>84</sup> and the entire neighbourhood would assemble for 24 hours of singing, dancing and a meal of rice and vegetables [*kichdi*]. Kamakshi had fond memories of this *pujo*. She began to reminisce about her parents and her childhood memories of this event. All of a sudden, she began to cry inconsolably. Amidst the loud sobs, she said several times that she felt alone in this world: "I have no mother, no father, no husband, no children, no one" [*amaar kayo naye, Ma naye, Baba naye, bor naye, bacha naye, kao naye*]. She kept repeating the phrase that she has "no one in the world" [*amaar kao naye*]. I tried to console her by saying that she had Jatin da, her sisters who lived in the same village and that she had brought up Aruna like her own daughter. She retorted that all of this didn't count. Her sisters had their separate *shonghsar* with their own households with in-laws,

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<sup>83</sup> The words "stays close" or *kache thaake* were always said slightly disparagingly for they imply, as mentioned earlier, not just staying in the same house but sleeping together.

<sup>84</sup> Another name for Lord Krishna is Hari. Bhakti and Vaishnavism have been a part of Bengal's landscape since the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century.

children and relatives. Their children would look after their homesteads. With tears streaming down, she said “not even her sisters understood what it meant to be lonely” like she was. She confessed she had not been able to share these thoughts with anybody until now and that her deepest fear, one that kept her awake at night, was that she would grow old alone without anyone to look after her (see Lamb 2000). The biggest curse for her parents was to fail to have had a son. Her biggest curse had been to fail to bear children.

She explained to me that while Jatin da was there now, he was also much older than her, with deteriorating eyesight, she was unsure how much longer he would be able to do the jungle. More worryingly, he had another family. He was not in touch with his wife, but he loved his two sons and had an allegiance to them and would send them money whenever he could. Kamakshi feared that one day he might decide to go and be taken care of by them and live out his old age in a much more comfortable brick home in the outskirts of Kolkata away from village discomforts.

She cried for another two hours. Now very late into the night, still weeping softly, she brought up another topic that had always been difficult for her to broach. This was her awareness of the ways in which people talked behind her back and passed snide comments about her relationship with Jatin da. Being an unmarried woman [*dhyaaadi mein*] was a swearword in village slang, one of the most derogatory slurs. In our more mirthful moments Kamakshi would direct this swearword at me—as someone who was as old as her and also unmarried—and everyone around would burst into laughter. Now she recalled earlier years when her life embodied an insult. She had been sworn at openly and was the butt of village rumour and gossip. From her telling of these stories, it was transparent how hurtful even recollecting these memories were for her. These were injuries lodged deeply in both her body and psyche (Ralph 2015), and had to do not only with how others conceived of her, but also of how she conceived of herself.

At one point during her confession, I had asked Kamakshi point-blank why she hadn’t married Jatin da. She had dismissed it, bringing up Jatin da’s age, the fact that he was already married with two grown sons almost as old as her. She brought up village norms and societal traditions, those that in other occasions she herself would criticize.

This conversation with Kamakshi allowed me to grasp the loss and fear she felt in not having a real *shonghsar*. While the norms of *shonghsar* had made way for another form of companionship, Kamakshi still felt an inalienable sense of loneliness as an unmarried and infertile woman, unable to fulfil the scripted roles of men and women in



the village. It was ultimately only family, one's own husband and one's own children, and people of one's own blood [*nijer rokto*] who could be relied on in times of deep uncertainty. While she and Jatin da cared deeply for each other on an everyday basis, theirs was an unscripted relationship and it was unclear what their future commitments to each other would be. Bereft of the usual logic of conserving life in relation to an heir [*santan*], there was no point in marrying and no way to make a household [*shonghsar kora*]. This terrified Kamakshi.

### ***Temporary Escapes and Adjustments:***

It was in the context of Kamakshi's very private experience of loneliness that allowed me to make sense of her wrong number romance. For a period of eight-nine months, Kamakshi spoke on the phone to Prateek, a man from the Sundarbans who had migrated 2000 kilometres away to Gujarat to work as an electrician on a container ship at a port. Kamakshi was elusive about the real story of how she first met Prateek, which involved a chance in-person encounter during a film shoot on Bali Island.<sup>85</sup> Instead she explained that Prateek had got the "wrong number", said in English and with a self-explanatory tone. When I eventually found out that the wrong number was a cover-up, Kamakshi admitted that there was less shame [*lajja*] in framing the relationship through the wrong number. It absolved her from blame, while simultaneously providing a dignified retreat if the relationship were to fail.

When Kamakshi first told me about Prateek, she said that talking to him was a form of causal friendship, mere "time pass": "When I feel bored [using the English 'bore'] I give him a missed call and if he's not working, he calls me back." Like the young Bangladeshi entrepreneurs that Huang (2018) writes about, getting to know someone on the phone was a form of "fearful excitement" that broke the monotony of her everyday life (ibid: 107). It was also a means to find some companionship, and there was no denying that she enjoyed the attention which was of a very different register to that which she received from Jatin da.

Conversations with Prateek would pause when Jatin da was at home. When he left to collect crabs in the jungle, often for stretches of up to ten days, they would resume

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<sup>85</sup> The film is called "*The Japanese Wife*" and is directed by and stars several household names in Indian cinema: Aparna Sen, Rahul Bose and Raima Sen. The shoot on Bali had been a major event, and crowds of villagers from other islands, including Prateek, had come. Ironically, the film is also about a long-distance romance carried out from the Sundarbans: fact following fiction.

again. Kamakshi's romance was a secret, a transgression. Flirting on the phone with Prateek while Jatin da was in the jungle was violating not only *jongoler niyam* and societal norms, but also Kamakshi's deeply felt loyalty to Jatin da. Kamakshi quite consciously reflected on these norms, and both challenged and was tormented by them. When I asked about the breaking the rules of the jungle she had replied saying, "But there is nothing to life other than love. Is there?" [*Bhalobhasha chada jeeboney kicchu nai. Ache?*]. At other times, she made it a point to state that she was not breaking all the rules of the jungle, many of which she continued to follow with rigor. This was not a clean break from tradition, but rather an indeterminate space that allowed Kamakshi to self-fashion herself as following norms while also pursuing new desires (Huang 2018).

A few months into their phone romance, via WhatsApp on my iPhone, the two were able to exchange photographs with each other. Kamakshi took hours to get ready for the photoshoot. She opened a padlocked aluminium trunk of treasured clothes and accessories to get dressed up. In her enjoyment and excitement, getting ready for the photo shoot and the exchange to follow was tantamount to a festival day. Despite the self-embellishment, she was still insecure as to how she looked and wondered if in fact the photograph she should send Prateek was one taken almost a decade ago—also retrieved from the trunk—for the government ID card she used to buy subsidized rice through the Public Distribution System. Holding the image of her younger self in her hand, she asked if I could take a photograph of the older photograph to send to Prateek: "Today after so much illness [*ashukh bisukh*] I look like a patient [*rogi*]...I used to be so fair [*porishkar*], so healthy looking [*mota shota* – literally meaning fat] now I have become dark [*kalo*], I am skin and bones [*shuddu haad*]...Will anyone like me like this? [*koi amakey eb bhabhey pasando korbey*]." After much contemplation, she chose to send Prateek one photograph from the morning's photo shoot in her best turquoise sari along with the one from her youth in which she felt she looked most attractive. She wanted to do whatever she could to please him.

As time passed, Kamakshi and Prateek's conversations got longer and more frequent. Their relationship got more serious. He inquired about her blouse size to send her new sari blouses. He asked what colour nail polish she preferred. He said he was going to come to take her away. She was able to share with this stranger, a man she had met only once, her entire life story. A burden had been lifted from her. At her lowest ebb, and at a time when her future with Jatin da was uncertain, Prateek was a source of vitality. She shared with him some of her deepest insecurities, not just her infertility, but also the years

of injury and insult she carried within her because of it. At some point there was a marriage proposal. Praising Prateek, she said he would marry her even though she couldn't have children.

Kamakshi, desperate to have a *shonghsbar* like everyone else in the village, seriously considered this possibility. She was convinced that the main responsibility and duty of a woman was to get married and bear children. Perhaps she could at least attempt to lead a conjugal life as the wife of Prateek. For these two individuals, stuck in two different realities, the wrong number permitted both of them to flirt with many of their fantasies. Like the work of Archambault (2016), the mobile phone was a means of privileging pretence over truth and transparency, a way to combine the real and the impossible. For a short period, Kamakshi sincerely believed she could get a new lease on life, move away from her village, and start afresh somewhere where her infertility wouldn't matter. Perhaps this was a fantasy, but like the truest fantasies, it revealed her most closely held hopes and desires for a different kind of future. Her fantasies were her realities.

Kamakshi's story from outside the margins of *shonghsbar* reminds us of the intensity of "everyday negotiations of power, violence and possibility taking place everywhere" (Stadlen 2018: 29). Even though she has lived with the piercing injury of being an infertile and unmarried woman, her story is not one of social abandonment (Biehl 2013). Kamakshi and Jatin da have fashioned an alternative for themselves outside the confines of *shonghsbar*, building a non-traditional household where they can, and continuously do, care for each other. At the same time, those who are unable to marry and do not conform to the norms of *shonghsbar* are made into pariahs, both by society and, to the extent that they internalise these norms, by themselves. Kamakshi uses the cell phone and her wrong number romance to evade the loneliness that *shonghsbar* condemns her to, and yet in the fantasy she constructs around Prateek she nonetheless imagines a *shonghsbar* as it is meant to be. In her recounting of her conversations with Prateek to me, it struck me that one of the most vital forms of care she received was not from kin, not her sisters, and not even Jatin da, but in fact Prateek who, albeit for a fleeting moment, allowed her to both dream a new reality and share with him the injuries of her current reality. Yet, in her desires and yearning for care, and intertwined with the changes that surround her, Kamakshi is at once "traditional"—whatever this might mean—but also keenly critical of the norms that constrain her but which she fundamentally seeks to uphold.

Eventually Kamakshi and Prateek's relationship fizzled out. For one, Kamakshi didn't like the way Prateek looked. While Prateek had been struck by her the first (and only) time they met in person, she hadn't paid any attention to him at the time, and barely remembered his physical appearance. She said, "I was trying to get a glimpse of the hero and heroine [at the film shoot]." Prateek, as she would find out later, had singled her out in a gathering of hundreds and had not been able to get her out of his mind for years. But once she received his photograph over my WhatsApp, she was disappointed. She proclaimed that he was too dark [*kalō*] and that she had imagined him to be fairer [*phorsba*]. Nevertheless, their conversations continued until she found out that Prateek was already married. By the time I finished fieldwork, Kamakshi had stopped picking up Prateek's phone calls. On a follow-up trip a year later, in August 2018, Kamakshi had fallen very ill again and was in bedrest for weeks, unable even to go to the toilet without help. Jatin da was doing the cooking and cleaning, buying her medicines, accompanying her to the hospital, and caring for her.

What might be the purpose of writing about Kamakshi and Jatin da's lives with such microscopic intimacy? Long-term ethnographic fieldwork allows one to understand some of the most private hopes, fears and anxieties of the people with whom ethnographers share their my own life. It is these intimacies, and their bigger backdrops, that can be gained from participant observation. We take seriously what people say, do, think and don't say, do or think (Astuti 2017). Simultaneously though there are also limits to language and the ethnographic methods of producing knowledge about the lives of others (Pinto 2014) as they continue to unfold once we leave the field. In sharing with such detail the lives and emotions of Kamakshi and others like her, my interest has been twofold. First, I hoped to shifted the notions of what ought to be conserved, and what is worth conserving, and how variegated the answer to this question might be not only within a village, or neighbourhood but indeed in a household. Secondly, and as crucially my interests has been to shift the kinds of stories and lives we chose to write about. What gets written about with regard to the Sundarbans, and what life-stories and values are ignored, form as much a part of the narrative violence that is wrought upon the region as the other more obvious forms of physical and material dispossession that several of the preceding pages have detailed.

## Conserving Desires, Conserving the Household

In line with more recent ethnographies on women in South Asia (Stadlen 2018; Huang 2016; Pinto 2014; Patel 2010), my ethnography shows a growing duality in women's lives. Through the defiant and at times self-destructive actions such as that of Tapan's wife and the "escaping" wives of Amlamethi, I show how they are consciously disrupting the role of social reproduction allocated to them. In doing so, and behaving "too audaciously," they are subtly changing dynamics within their own households and the village. The backdrop to these changes—more abandonments, elopements, affairs, and wrong number romances—is the new "era of love", catalysed by cable TV, mobile phones, better access to Kolkata, and more migration. Yet if one aspect of this chapter has been about change, it is also about the insistence of men and women for some domestic arrangements to remain the same.

What I have attempted to highlight through the *bichar*—where decisions about women's lives are taken by men—is a double morality where adultery is condoned, but any disruption to the domestic arrangement is vehemently frowned upon. Justified through the use of elaborate language games and euphemisms, extra marital affairs, love [*bhalobhasa*] and the wrong number romances are seen as inevitable and permissible. In this sense, the norms of *shongshar* were flexible but only in so far as the wives still continued to do all the care work and didn't "escape" from their role as women who "fed men their rice."

Women like Kamakshi, unmarried and unable to bear children, and others in similar positions who I got to know in the village, are social pariahs. While Kamakshi creatively negotiates other ways of finding companionship and care, she ultimately chases after *shongshar-dhorma*. Women in their discussions of "escaping wives" and in relation to conversations around other wives, are conscious and critical of the norms that constrain them, nevertheless these were the same norms that they desperately hoped to uphold. In this sense, I have tried to show how *shongshar* is both challenged and re-inscribed. I show its power over women's lives and their imaginations of themselves.

One way of conserving life for women is "running away", having "physical relations" [*sharirik shompark*] in exchange for money, eloping, and having wrong number romances. Men, in contrast, want to conserve the prevailing norms around care work within the household. Those aspects of village life that Sundarbans men want conserved are what the women seem to be defying.

Norms of forest-use are not the only norms that constrain women. *Jongoler niyam* is patriarchal insofar as everyday household relationships are also patriarchal. Forest, village and household norms shape, re-shape and co-constitute each other and are not easily separated out.

## Conclusion

### **The Many Ways of Dying, and Conserving Life Along the Way**

One of the central questions that I have returned to consistently, both during fieldwork and implicitly throughout this thesis, is why those who do the jungle choose to undertake a form of life and work that could easily kill them. Could it be that the choice of leading a life that is acutely risky could indeed be a life worth living? Can the willingness to die accompany a commitment to live? These profound choices of what it means to live are at the heart of what several actors involved in conservation in the Sundarbans and their various camps all misunderstand. To answer this question I turn to the story of Rahim da. It is a story that returns to the question of how one might lead a good life in a bad one (Butler 2012), and how one can be free even while remaining bound up in the necessities of how to live (Arendt [1958]1998). In the words of Rahim da, it is about how one might “live better.”

#### **“Living Better”**

Twelve years ago, Rahim da and two companions were in the mangrove creeks fishing for crabs. Two men waited on the boat, at anchor next to a forested sandbank, while a third collected dry twigs for cooking fuel from the forest floor. In a flash, a tiger pounced from behind the man, caught him by his neck and dragged him away into the mangrove thicket. Rahim da and his friend went in pursuit but it was in vain. Panic-stricken, and in an area that was legally out of bounds, they rowed back to their village. For Rahim da, the seconds-long memory of his friend struggling to free himself from the embrace of the tiger is an injury, physical and psychic, from which he will never entirely recover.

Over the months that followed, this experience was so debilitating that he couldn't find the strength to step foot on his boat again. Shobita boudhi, his wife, says that for weeks he stayed at home, unable to get out of bed. Both husband and wife recall offering whatever they could to help the victim's widower, but with three daughters of their own to look after they were facing steep uncertainty around running their own household. Without any land, and with no formal education, crab collecting had been the only means Rahim da knew to make a living, just like his father. The only

alternative left was to migrate out of the village to work as a daily wage labourer. Rahim da left the Sundarbans for the first time and set off to Kerala.

His story does not end on a factory shop floor in Kerala, or the subsequent 18 months he spent working on a construction site in Orissa. At the time I met him, it had been seven years since he had returned to eking out a living from the mangrove creeks in front of his village. What could have convinced him to return? I wondered how Rahim da made sense of his own choice. When I asked him to explain it to me, he replied:

“I know I left doing the jungle because of fear, but then I realized that we all have to go someday [from this earth], so be it if it is in the attempt of trying to live better...to keep living in poverty [*aubhan*] that is no life, this is not living...so I thought, what was the point of suffering...to be away from home, to be so sick far from my wife and children?...that isn't any way to live, so I came back to the village [*desb*]...crab collecting allows me to run the household. We are doing fine. I haven't been able to do much but I've saved enough for a brick home for next year. Besides, I realized that like tiger accidents, more accidents happen in the city...on trains and buses, men fall down from buildings, people die in all kinds of ways.”

He continued at length, narrating in intricate detail how daily wage labour in Kerala and Orissa had depleted him. It was unfamiliar work. He couldn't speak the language. The contractor who had recruited him had promised a much higher wage than what he received. Worst of all, he constantly fell sick. In the span of two years he got malaria once and dengue fever twice. Being away from his wife and children meant that even in times of debilitating illness he had to continue to work to pay for rent and food. After almost three miserable years, exhausted and defeated, he couldn't understand what he was doing living away from the family [*shonghsbar*]. He repeated to me that “this was not living...this was no way to live.” Finally, he took the decision to return home to crab collecting. He recalls that it took a near-impossible amount of courage to step foot in the jungle again, but it was this courage [*shabans*] in the face of death which was his attempt at “trying to live better” and valuing what mattered: to be at home and to do, what in his view, was more dignified work.

In the eyes of local conservationists, the most plausible explanation of Rahim da's actions is that he is morally depraved, a greedy crab collector with “no value for his own life” [*nijer jeeboner kono mullo naye*]. It was the valuations on the devaluation of Sundarabans crab collectors' lives that allowed the Forest Department and local conservationists to perceive their own work as noble. They were trying to get these



reckless men and women to “stop risking their lives.” As Shomit da loved to say, “greed is what kills man” [*manush lobber junne morey*]. I have already shown the ulterior motives that belie this accusation. This includes the ideologies and alliances that drive the wider conservation movement toward privileging the tiger and the various global alliances that put pressure on the Forest Department toward the same goal (Chapter 1), local hierarchies and new conservation elite in the village, and the politics which displace the blame for environmental catastrophe onto the poor in a game of “crab antics” (Chapter 4).

Rahim da’s choice to return to crab collecting can’t also be explained by the more sympathetic reading, advanced by several NGOs and the conservation movement, that blames landlessness, poverty, and a desperation borne of structural inequality. This diagnosis prescribes “alternative livelihoods” as the cure and in the Sundarbans they take the form of free fish, chicken, goat and duck for livestock rearing. Livelihoods provided in the Sundarbans are both woefully inadequate and at times inappropriate.

The only alternative available for those who do the jungle, at least at any meaningful scale, is out-migration to the city. This is precisely what Rahim da tried and rejected. Rahim da’s vignette offers something fundamental that is left out from explanations that blame crab collectors’ of their reckless behaviour. This is their sense that crab collecting provides them dignity of labour. Rahim da and Jatin da both stressed that this work gave them autonomy [*swaadheenta*], or at least more autonomy than other options. Jatin da thinks of himself as his own boss [*nijer malik*]. He has the flexibility to be home but also to partake in the *pujos*, fairs and wider life of the village. For Jatin da, he says that his body is too frail to take on hard manual labour [*khatu khatni*]. Crab collecting is work that his body can manage. It was gentler on the body compared to daily wage labour. One of his most dearly held aspirations is to have Rs. 200, 000 [GBP 2000] as savings for when he grows old and to make a small music room in his home to give harmonium lessons to Deb and other children in the neighbourhood. These aspirations went beyond just his material needs.

Rahim da returned to his home [*desh*] and to be close to the family [*shongshar*]. To be far away was “suffering”. The logic and motivation behind undertaking any form of work was always explained to me in relation to the home and household. To have a family, that is to “make or do a *shongshar*,” and to fulfil the gendered roles within *shongshar* were of paramount importance (Chapter 6). The choice to stay in the

Sundarbans and undertake life-threatening work in the mangrove creeks was a deliberate choice that allowed one to stay with one's family.

Returning to the words of Rahim da, his choice to go back to crab collecting reflects a commitment to life despite an acute awareness of his proximity to death. He chooses a riskier life because he perceives it to be a fuller form of living than his deracinated existence as a migrant away from home. His is a deliberate and considered choice that reflects deeply held values around what is most worth conserving in his life.

Rahim da's choice is also an indictment of what he does not find worth conserving: the "slow death" (Berlant 2007) he found in the factory and construction site in Kerala. In his own words, the life of a migrant is a life where there is no *sukh* [happiness, peace, contentedness]. This shallow definition of life is the one deployed by the conservation movement. Their conception of saving life centres around biological survival or "bare life" (Agamben 1998). This is also the definition of life referred to when the Forest Department and allied development and conservation actors push the mantra of alternative livelihoods. The alternative livelihoods proposed to the jungle-doers are an attempt to discipline and transform (Scoones 2009: 184) their choices in how to live and make a living. They carry preconceived notions of "good" versus "bad" livelihoods (ibid) that rely on the criteria of mere survival which entirely misunderstand what a good livelihood means to the fishers themselves. Crab collectors reject proffered alternatives out of hand because they bring with them a way of life that does not appeal to their underlying values.

The last line of Rahim da's response adds a final dimension that is key to understanding his choice to return to the forest. He cites an equivalence between the "tiger accidents" and accidents in the city. In his mind, the city was an equally dangerous place as the jungle even if judged solely on the narrow criteria of "bare life."

Scholarship on working conditions in India's informal economy corroborates Rahim da's provocative claim (see Shah and Lerche et. al 2018; Breman 2013; Lerche, Guerin and Srivastava 2012; Harriss-White and Guptu 2001). The statement "don't risk your life for greed" rings even more hollow if one considers the far higher mortality rates from other structural inequalities in the Sundarbans which, because they didn't concern the business of conservation, were conveniently ignored. While I have stated this several times, it bears reemphasising that at the time of fieldwork, Bali Island did not have electricity, adequate drinking water, or a single government primary health care centre. In this context, easily treatable problems often escalated into life-threatening

injuries or death. Even restricting the conversation to death by wildlife, poisonous snakes kill far more people in the Sundarbans— in the village itself, often while people are asleep in their beds—than tigers, crocodiles and sharks combined (Ghosh 2017: 116). Those who do the jungle keenly feel the hypocrisy of the conservation movement’s moral paternalism, and rebalance the moral scales around how to live accordingly.

## On Courage

A corollary to the way that current approaches to conservation in the Sundarbans misunderstand risk in the jungle is their misunderstanding of courage. The defining quality of courage comes up in every conversation with those who do the jungle. It separates those who dare to venture into the forests from those, like Bankim da in Chapter 5, who cannot. Courage in the face of death, linked to reverence in Bonbibi and faith in her protection, is an essential part of the crab collectors’ relationship to the forest. This is why the idea of forest rights, and the universal access they imply, sat uncomfortably with many who do the jungle (Chapter 5).

Courage has been an important virtue for several political philosophers. The virtue of courage was one of the most elemental of political attitudes for Aristotle (Arendt [1959] 1998). For Aristotle, a free life required courage. If the love of mere biological life, that is, to just be alive, is too great, then this obstructs freedom and is a sign of slavishness (Schlaifer 1936 as cited in Arendt 1998 [1959]: 36). Similarly, Skaria (2010) notes that Gandhi envisioned courage as an essential quality to living the proper political life: “Abandoning the fear of death, therefore, is not about dying but about living the life proper to *swaraj*” (Skaria 2010: 213). *Swa-* meaning “self” and *raji-* meaning “rule” was the philosophy underpinning Gandhi’s public activism, religiosity and ethics (see also Mehta 2010; 2014). Uday Mehta also reflects on the place of courage and the willingness to die in Gandhi’s political philosophy and conceptions of an ethical life. For Mehta, Gandhi’s democratic sensibility gathered around the idea that the common man had the ability to not fear death, and by cultivating this quality could confront and when necessary challenge power, authority, order, security and a concern with mere life (Mehta 2014).

Courage, the willingness to die, and a commitment to life does not sit well with the liberal state. The liberal state and a set of liberal institutions interested in the

preservation of mere biological life and the production of “docile bodies” (Foucault 1978) find it impossible to understand a form of work that comes to be defined by courage. As thousands of fishing boats enter the core area every day, the state has to continue to pretend that this part of the forest is “inviolable” with no human activity. These fishing boats are an implicit rebuke to the state that seeks to keep them out. Multiple audiences both national and international are watching the Sundarbans and the Forest Department’s sovereignty over it. The Forest Department believes itself to be in charge. Yet these deaths, the inability to control the actions and choices of men like Rahim da from going into the jungle deeply unsettles their power, exposing it to be at best power in performance (Mathews 2011) and an illusion of sovereignty (Rutherford 2012). As Daniel Rutherford argues “audience is sovereignty’s basis and its bane” (ibid 2012: 2) and these deaths create a deep anxiety for the Forest Department in a global conservation hotspot. Despite huge funds spent on alternative livelihoods and forest patrols, people’s willingness to die in a forest of tigers, undercuts and undermines the state’s supreme and absolute power over life.

This apparatus of “protection” is of course not unique to the Forest Department but its logics are akin to the formation of modern states that premise their existence on their role as protectors of life. Hobbes’ justification of modern state power in Europe was premised on exactly this form of protection. It was the fear of death, the concern with corporeal safety, and the mitigation of risks that became and continues to be the enduring and underlying basis of politics. Conserving Life has tried to show a different basis of politics.

It is precisely in the condition where there are few choices about how to live, in a life that is foreclosed by many constraints (Butler 2012), where the courage to do the jungle becomes an act of freedom. I do not wish to romanticize this form of work, the choice to undertake it, or the bravado in dying by a tiger. As several Chapters have shown, doing the jungle was work one undertook in times of dire need (Chapter 4 and 5). It was when one went empty handed [*kehali hatein*] to beg from Bonbibibi. Perhaps this is then a situation in which there is no freedom. However, some of the most restrictive and constraining circumstances are infused with active ethical choice and affirmations of meaningfulness. The courage to make this choice does not reflect desperation or hubris, but rather a commitment to lead a full life that exceeds the biological necessities of maintaining it. Contrary to the narrative propagated by the Forest Department and conservation movement, those who do the jungle are engaged in a conscious and

complex calculus around risk and courage. Their willingness to die is born of a commitment—ethical, social, and political—to a particular value of life and how to “live better.” This realisation, embedded in stories like Rahim da’s, never forms part of the narrative of conservation in the Sundarbans. It is precisely in those condition where there are few choices, where the necessities of how to maintain life are limited, where the courage to do the jungle becomes a political and ethical choice. Conservation needs to pay better attention to what people might want to conserve for their own lives.

## **Steps Toward Conserving Life in the Sundarbans**

Conservation is one of the most urgent contemporary global challenges, but we are yet to conceive of ways to conserve that do not come at the cost of people. Putting people at or closer to the centre of conservation requires attention to their relationship to the forest, and the values that inform it. As Rahim da’s story shows, all the actors with a stake in conservation in the Sundarbans misunderstand – both unintentionally and wilfully - the ways in which those who do the jungle value their lives. This thesis has attempted to present the key tenets of what conserving life means to the jungle-doers. I have done this through three conceptual frameworks that explore the forms of “divine and daily governance” that influence jungle-doers alongside the state; underlying value systems that inform what they want from the forest, which are related to broader “notions of a sufficient”; and the local politics that make conservation a far more complex endeavour than choosing between the tiger and the people.

### ***Divine and Daily Governance***

Political imaginaries around forest governance usually centres around the state, and falls somewhere along the spectrum between state domination and local people’s resistance. Conserving Life has tried to show a different basis for forest governance. I argue that alternative forms of power and sovereignty co-exist – and have always co-existed – alongside the state.

In the Sundarbans, this power is concentrated in the protectress of the forest, Bonbibi. She arrived with Sufi saints who came to the Bengal delta as early as the 12th century (Eaton 1996), although the regions multicultural deltaic history has made her into an obviously syncretic figure. Bonbibi exerts far-reaching powers over human

morality and behaviour through her *jongoler niyam*. At the heart of these rules is the requirement to practice restraint, both in the jungle and by family at home, while doing the jungle. Those who have a usufructuary relationship with the forest are supposed to enter it only in times of need. One goes into the jungle “empty handed” [*khali hatien*], motivated by the “burning of the stomach” [*peter jala*], to “beg” [*bhikkha kotte*] for alms from the goddess. Bonbibi urges each individual and each household to reflect on its need and deservingness, which are set in opposition to greed in her mythology. Poverty [*aubhar*] becomes the basis for access to Bonbibi’s “common storehouse” [*Maa’r khamor*]. The *jongoler niyam* and the ethical self-cultivation they encourage provide an alternative logic to governing the forest commons.

*Jongoler niyam* is neither flawless nor unchangeable. Bonbibi’s ethics and practices are constantly reinterpreted as landscape, labour relations, household relations and supply chains interact. Newly globalised crab supply chains related to the opening-up of the Chinese market have introduced heightened competition that is eroding norms of mutuality. Women, constrained by the rules, are defying them in accordance with their desires. It is a form of governance which, like any other, is subject to manipulation and corruption, but is flexible enough to be reinterpreted and adapted to contemporary challenges and changing values.

What is perplexing is how a system that defines the jungle-doers’ relationship to the forest’s resources has been entirely ignored by all conservation stakeholders in the Sundarbans. Other paradigms of forest governance conceived through the state—be it the police state in the form of the Forest Department, or the liberal arm of the state represented by rights activists—dismiss a code derived from a local goddess as inadequately political. If they acknowledge Bonbibi they consign her to the realm of superstitious belief and folk ritual. This echoes a global history of casting “indigenous” groups of people who attribute agency or life to nonhumans as having a “premodern mentality” (Povinelli 2016: 5) and relegating their belief systems to the realm of the “impossible or absurd” (ibid: 21). As in many other parts of the world, categorization of truthful versus mythological discourses (Peet and Watts 2004: 15) are embedded in struggles of power and representation (Tsing 2005) and generate new forms of dispossession (West 2016).

I contend that Bonbibi’s *jongoler niyam* illuminate new and distinct possibilities for forest governance by locating political potency in hitherto overlooked forces (Bennett 2009) alongside rational bureaucracies and secular activism. By guiding ethical, economic

and social decisions (see Bear 2015), Bonbibi is one form of governance among other forms of everyday relationships. These other forms of governances relate to the relationship between fishers and rangers and the legal apparatus of the forest. Bonbibi and her rules of the jungle “are dominant figures in what we habitually call ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ in all the societies so constituted” (Sahlins 2017: 102). Recognising her as a “cosmic polity” (Sahlins 2017) signals one way to make the ethics and values of those who do the jungle relevant to the larger conservation movement. Chapters 1-4, taken together show how the legal, social, religious and economic cannot be separated out from that which is the political.

### ***Notions of a Sufficient Life***

Conserving Life has also been about trying to understand what people value most about their lives. As those who do jungle are enjoying a newfound prosperity from global demand for mud crabs. The crab boom has had modest but marked impacts on consumption. People are building brick homes, paying back debts, acquiring solar lights and fans, prioritizing on healthcare, and their children’s education. Some of these needs, especially healthcare and education, require a cash income instead of reliance on older systems of credit (see Servet and Saig 2013), and for the first time crab collecting households can act on their aspirations. Consumption patterns provide one window into the goods and services that the crab collectors value.

At the same time, fluctuations in the global market have not only shifted material wealth but challenged underlying value systems. Novel forms of consumption temper, justify, and remake well-defined notions of sufficiency. Reworking Galbraith’s essay (1958) titled “How much should a nation consume?,” Ram Guha (2006) asks “How much should a person consume?” As this thesis has attempted to show, Sundarbans residents have sophisticated answers to this question. Their specific vocabularies and categories of need [*aubhav*], greed [*lobh*], desire [*chahida*] and habit [*swabhav*] provide a clear sense of how much is enough, what Princen (2005) calls the principle of “enoughness.” These “notions of a sufficient life” emerge out of specific ways of relating to the forest and land, and are strongly influenced by religious and ethical proscriptions derived from Bonbibi.

These notions stand in contrast to how local conservationists view the jungle-doers’ livelihoods. They were often articulated in defence against accusations of greed levelled by the conservation movement. These accusations are underwritten by politics,

both the bio-moral politics of local elites defending threatened village hierarchies, and the larger constraints limiting the conservation movement's political power against industrial-scale threats to the environment. These notions of sufficiency also have entirely different rhetorical and substantive foundations than the entitlements championed by forests rights activists

People's own notions of what it means to live well and meaningfully also encompass values beyond their relationship to the forest. There were many unmet desires without their basis being in material wealth. These include norms and values around the household and family [*shonghsbar*] (Chapter 6). As for men like Rahim da, the duty to and the reproduction of *shonghsbar* lies at the heart of their relationship to their labour, and their choice to do the jungle. Life in the forest exists for the household. However, *shonghsbar* is increasingly contested and differently defined by wives and their husbands. Against background changes in the wider political economy, the changing desires of women have led them to re-examine values around the household [*shonghsbar*].

Drawing on the work of Holly Wardlow (2006), I show how wives are increasingly performing acts of "negative agency" that disrupt their role in social reproduction, at times even running away from their marriages and the village itself. Husbands, and the forums of village justice [*bichars*] they preside, want to conserve the gendered status quo involved in reproducing the household. While this struggle is easily consigned to the domestic sphere, it differentially shapes the values of those who do the jungle, what they want from the forest, and their notions of a sufficient life. Any form of forest governance grounded in the values of the jungle-doers will therefore have to pay attention to those values that lie beyond the *jongoler niyam*, including those surrounding *shonghsbar*. The *jongoler niyam*'s own gendered inequalities reinforces this point: as a particular set of values, the *jongoler niyam* are themselves co-constituted by and situated within larger value systems. "Notions of a sufficient life" invites a more holistic understanding of people's broader needs, wants and desires that ought to be at the centre of conserving life.

### ***Intimate Antagonisms and Unlikely Friendships***

The "tiger" versus "the people" binary currently summarises conservation debates in the Sundarbans. My interest in this thesis has not been to disregard the political and rhetorical strength of this antagonism, but to shift the spotlight, and instead reveal other political fault lines within "the people." These at times are surprising antagonisms, or



unlikely modes of intimacy and friendship that blur the lines between the various camps. The contest in values between husbands and wives is perhaps the most intimate example of the ways that people, even households, in the Sundarbans are riven by internal politics.

There are several others which are more classically misconceived. Forest rangers, the most visible representatives of the state, are often vilified for oppressing those who do the jungle. This thesis disaggregates the Forest Department, and shows that senior forest bureaucrat's motivations, logics and influence are very different from those of the foot soldiers of conservation. Focusing on the relationship between the fishers and forest rangers reveals another side to the well-rehearsed story of state brutality and resistance. By drawing on scholarship that blurs the boundary between the state and society (Fuller and Harriss 2001; Gupta 1995; Tarlo 2001) and exploring the "thought-work" (Heyman 1995) that goes into bureaucracies, I have shown how a classically antagonistic relationship contains modes of conviviality and even intimacy (Herzfeld 1993; 2005; Bear 2015; Chandra 2017).

The relationship between rangers and fishers—state and society—is not characterized solely by violence but is better understood as an ongoing negotiation built on social relationships [*byabohar*] and mutual care [*khatridari*]. By patrolling with rangers and accompanying fishers, I explore the mundane aspects of work in the jungle, its boredom (Fassin 2017) and social alienation. In this setting, expected relationships of dependency are overturned, and while rangers wield power over fishers' access to the forest, the rangers themselves are also dependent on fishers for their own mental and material survival in a hostile landscape. I also reveal the ways in which these social relationships break down. At times intimacy translates into co-option, and fishers police their fellow fishers. Newly introduced technologies of surveillance have also unsettled or made impossible the usual relationships of care and understanding.

Where rangers are usually cast as antagonists to the fishers, rights activists are assumed to be their advocates. However, as the rights movement makes inroads into the Sundarbans, the idea of a universal, state-guaranteed entitlement to the forest sits uncomfortably with those who do the jungle. The language of rights does not capture the imaginations and vocabularies through which fishers make a claim on the forest. The jungle-doers believe the forest should only be for those who respect and need it in accordance with the *jongoler niyam*, and who have the courage to endure its hardships. Where rights are secular claims legally protected by the state, the jungle-doers enforce the rules of the jungle through their shared belief in, and social enforcement of, a form of

“divine and daily governance.” While activists promote rights as a tool for empowerment, they also carry the potential to erase current ritual, social, economic and ethical practices around the forest. At the same time, both traditions share underlying values such as a commitment to understanding people’s needs, and could usefully inform each other. The “common storehouse” of Bonbibí and perhaps her form of governance, with appropriate alterations, could act as an ally for fashioning future “subjectivities of protest” (Kurik 2016) and provide alternative political imaginaries locally embedded but with clear global resonances.

This thesis has also tried to highlight the segmentations between rights activists and unions, the other group fighting on behalf of the fishers. Union leaders who have vertically integrated their financial interests at multiple points in the supply chain adopt policies, particularly around the BLCs, that run counter to the interests of the rank-and-file union membership. This has driven civil society organisations promoting rights and the unions apart. Such conflicts on, what is ostensibly the same team, end up hurting the fishers. The fishers themselves, however, are no different. Infighting among the fishers often leads them to undercut others who do the jungle, and sometimes outwardly collude with the Forest Department. While these internal rivalries are exacerbated by increased surveillance by the state and new competitive pressures from the market, they also descend from more mundane rivalries, feuds and politics within the village.

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Through all my chapters, most of all, I have tried to show how those who do the jungle are deep thinkers. They contemplate their lives, their mortality, and what provides them vitality. They reflect deeply on their actions, and the ways their actions are circumscribed by larger forces. They think about what gives them dignity of labour. They think about how to live better, not what it means to merely survive. Through their thoughts, and the values their thoughts reflect, this thesis has tried to show the many ways of living and dying, and the choices we take to conserve life along the way.

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