

**PEOPLE AND TIGERS:  
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE  
SUNDARBANS OF WEST BENGAL, INDIA**

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### Abstract

This thesis examines how Sundarbans islanders living in the southern reclaimed islands of the Bengal delta both think about and ‘interact with’ the man-eating tigers of the region. The thesis classifies three broad occupational groups – forest workers, prawn collectors, and landowners – and discusses how they use different understandings of the tiger to draw distinctions between each other. It argues that the islanders’ interactions with tigers articulate both social practices and understandings of the social, and that attitudes to the forest/land opposition divide people into the distinct groups of *bhadralok* and *gramer lok*. These interactions are discussed in connection with people’s relation to their environment. The environment is understood both as a set of narratives – about humans and tigers sharing a cantankerous nature because of a harsh geography and of a common history of displacement – and as a practical experience – of working in the forest as crab, fish or honey collectors, especially by opposition to landowning cultivators. The thesis also looks at environmentalists’ perceptions of the Sundarbans as ‘tiger-land’ and the repercussions of such an image on state policies for the region’s people. This is undertaken through a discussion of how the portrayal of the Sundarbans as a wildlife area means that the Sundarbans inhabitants’ demand for a more equal allocation of resources between them and tigers is not seen as legitimate by outsiders. Thus this thesis, by engaging with the Sundarbans islanders’ narratives and daily experiences of living ‘alongside tigers’, addresses the Sundarbans islanders’ social relations as well as ideas of the social not just in relation to themselves and each other, but also in relation to their position as a ‘collective’ and their place in the realm of the politics of global conservation.

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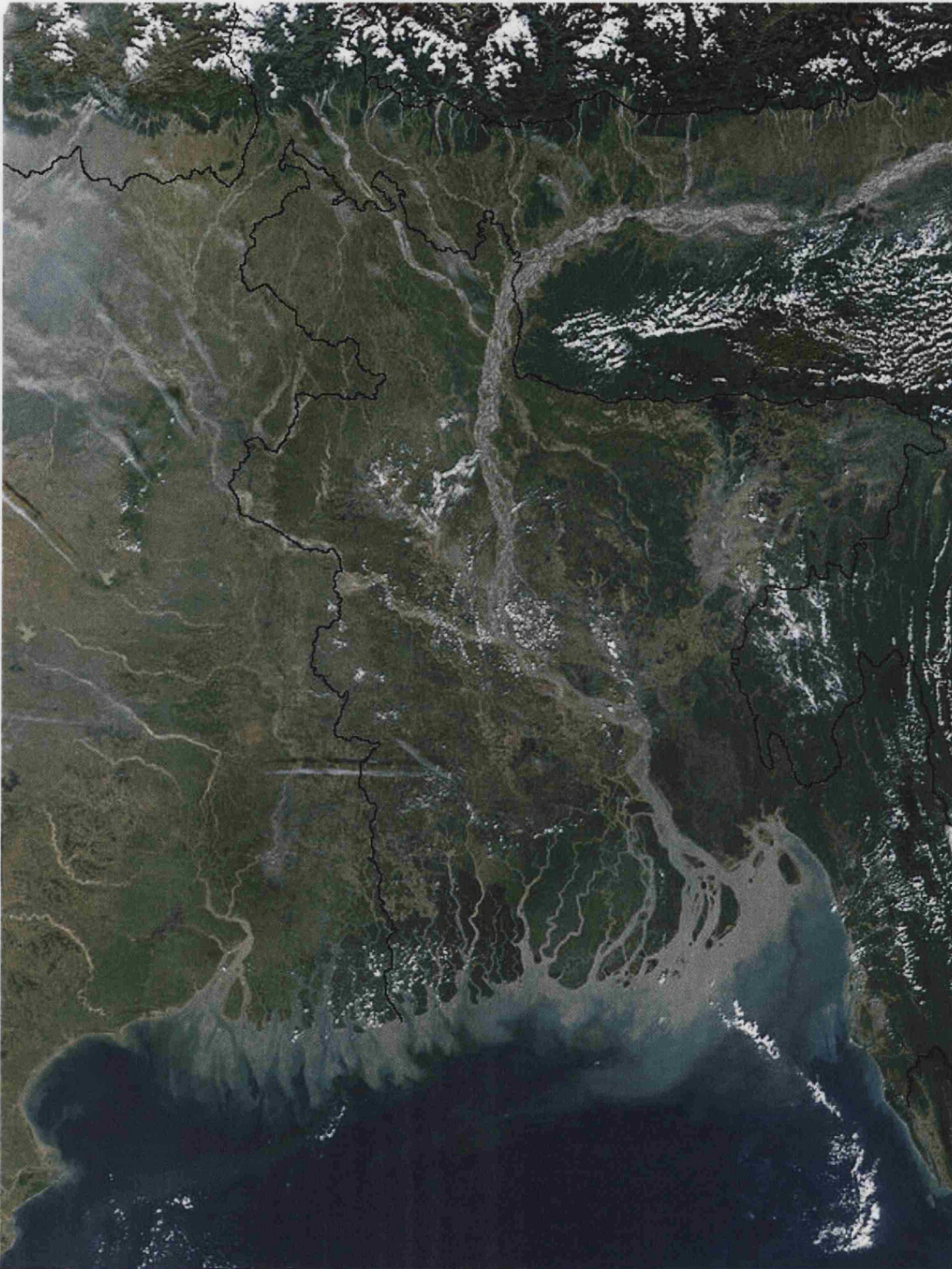
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### Note on transliteration

The language spoken in the Sundarbans is Bengali. Like most north Indian languages, Bengali is derived from Sanskrit and is written in a version of the Devnagari script. The vowel sound 'au' as in the English word 'austere' in most north Indian languages is retranscribed as 'a' but in Bengali it is closer to 'o'. Convention dictates that commonly used terms such as 'panchayat' and 'zamindar' be written in their anglicised version with an 'a'. However, these terms are pronounced 'pɔ̃nchayət' and 'jomidar', going by the International Phonetic Association (IPA) alphabet. But as these terms have found their way into the Oxford English Dictionary in their anglicised form, I have left them as such. I have, however, not been completely consistent with this system. For popular local terms such as *bādh* or *jōᅅgol* which have both been included in the English dictionary as 'bund' and 'jungle', I have preferred spelling the first as 'bund' while for the second I have alternated between 'jungle' and 'jongol'. Also, where I italicise local terms and give their phonetic pronunciation the first time they are mentioned, I have done away with both italics and phonetics the subsequent times and have provided their definition, along with that of acronyms, in the glossary.

I have avoided the usual use of diacritical signs when re-transcribing an Indian language. This is because even though some of the Bengali words derived from Sanskrit have kept a Sanskritic spelling when written in Bengali, they are nevertheless pronounced more according to a popular oral form. So, for example, even though the goddess of wealth has her name usually spelt as 'Lakshmi' and written with diacritic signs as 'Lakṣmī' by Indologists, the word in Bengali is pronounced as 'Lokkhi' – I have therefore preferred to write such words without diacritics and as close as possible, with simple roman alphabets, that is, to their local pronunciation. Also, even though I have kept to usual spellings in English when writing people's names, I have sometimes given a spelling phonetically closer to the islanders' pronunciation of the word. There are no capital letters in any of the Indian alphabets, I have, however, used capital letters for proper nouns. I have, however, tried to avoid adding an English 's' to denote the plural.



Satellite image of West Bengal and Bangladesh with the Sundarbans and the Bay of Bengal in the south, the rivers and fertile plains of Bengal in the centre and part of the Himalayas in the north.

(Source: MODIS Rapid Response Team, NASA/GSFC)

## I. 'IN THE SUNDARBANS, WE AND THE TIGERS CONNIVE TOGETHER'

The *shundorbon*, literally 'beautiful forest' in Bengali,<sup>1</sup> is an immense archipelago situated between the vast Indian Ocean in the south and the fertile plains of Bengal in the north. This archipelago, created by the confluence of the mighty rivers Ganges, Meghna, Brahmaputra and their innumerable distributaries, constitutes the southern end of both Bangladesh and West Bengal (WB). It stretches several hundred miles, from the shorelines of Orissa in the west to those of Chittagong and Burma in the east. This delta, the largest in the world, is animated by two opposing flows of water: fresh water coursing all the way down from the Himalayas towards the Bay of Bengal and salt water streaming up with the tide from the Indian Ocean into the Bengali hinterland. These fast-moving current-driven salty muddy waters are the locale of crocodiles, sharks, and snakes of the most dangerous variety and of thousands of mangrove-covered islands. Born of these rivers, these islands seem to cling on to their vegetation for their very existence. Sandbars, washed up into existence one moment, are immediately dispersed if left bare of trees. Along with their allies the tides and storms, the rivers continually redesign islands' topographies, destroying some parts, adding on to others, sometimes reclaiming them completely only to reassemble them a few kilometres away. These forested islands, taken together, cover around 10,000 square kilometres. However, the reason why the region is famous today is not so much because of this constantly changing environment and the way humans live with it, but the fact that it is, the largest remaining natural habitat of Bengal tigers, providing a home to nearly 550 of them. In fact, it is mainly because of the existence of tigers that the Sundarbans have gained renown and popularity; first in 1973 when 'Project Tiger' was launched and then again in 1985 when it entered the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resource's list of World Heritage Sites. Yet, the Sundarbans are not only world-famous forests or *jōngol* inhabited by tigers and other wild animals; it is also, though this is less well known, a region or *ābād* lived in by people.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Sundarbans' is the anglicised version of the Bengali *shundor* (beautiful) and *bon* (forest).

<sup>2</sup> Following common practice, when referring to the forest the plural will be used and when the region, the singular; *jōngol* means 'forest' or 'jungle' and *abad* the reclaimed Sundarbans islands. All foreign terms will be italicised only in the first instance; the meaning of those words appearing more than once has been included in the glossary.

## **I. 1. The Sundarbans: between land and water, a forest and a region**

The southern half of the delta of the Ganges (80,000 square kilometres) is indeed not merely an archipelago of forested islands. The northern fringes of these marshy islets were reclaimed, their perimeters enclosed by mud walls to keep the tidal waters out, and cultivated. These islands were peopled barely 230 years ago by populations from the tribal areas of Chotanagpur in the northeast, from Burma in the southwest, and from Bengali villages north of the region. Forest-clearers and agricultural labourers were brought here by the British to reclaim the Sundarbans' swampy vegetation for agricultural purposes. Before this period, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it seems that the Sundarbans rivers were inhabited in semi-permanent ways by fishers, wood cutters, pirates and salt-makers who lived on boats. It is believed that this region has been settled, destroyed, abandoned, and resettled for thousands of years. If the first maps of the region inform us that the early inhabitants deserted the place due to the depredations of pirates, the most recent accounts are of Bangladeshi immigrants seeking refuge there in the 1970s. The total area of the Sundarbans – water, forested islands, cultivated islands and some part of the Bengali mainland – is 40,000 square kilometres. Of this whole area, the total land area of the WB Sundarbans is about 9,630 square kilometres of which nearly half is forested. When I refer to the Sundarbans, I am referring mainly to the WB part of the Sundarbans region unless specified otherwise.

What is characteristic of the basin-like inhabited islands on the margins of the forest, the ones I particularly concern myself with in this thesis, is that they, like the forest islands, seem to be animated by the tidal rivers of the region. At high tide, when the vast expanses of forest go under water, these inhabited islands come alive through communication with each other as sailing between them becomes possible once again. In contrast, during low tide, the forest re-emerges and many of the inhabited islands become isolated once again as riverbeds are left with insufficient water for boats to ply. There are no bridges between islands and commuting between them is possible only when the winds and tides permit. Even travelling and living within the islands is difficult; brick roads are few and far between, electricity is practically non-existent and drinking water rare. The ever present threat of salt-water rivers reclaiming entire villages in a question of minutes, the regular occurrence of storms

and cyclones which are usually accompanied by huge tidal waves called 'bores', some of which are known to have risen to seventy-five metres, cause much loss of life and damage to property (Lahiri 1973). The long monsoon months bring a complete halt to social and economic activities and the constant fear, for many villagers living on the islands nearest to the forest, of being killed by a tiger or a crocodile, makes them one of the more inhospitable terrains on the globe.

This region, however, forms the maritime as well as the agrarian frontier of Bengal. From 1200 AD, Sufi holy men cleared the forests in the northern and eastern parts of this region and introduced agriculture, an activity which came to be intimately linked to the spread of Islam in Bengal (Eaton 1993:310). Recorded history informs us that the area was, before the thirteenth century, a thriving place with small but wealthy kingdoms, visited by ships trading with South-east Asia and the Middle East (Chattopadhyaya 1999:17-19). However, this tranquillity was soon broken and we come to know through maps and travellers' accounts that the Portuguese, who had started as traders in the region's riverside markets in the 1520s, were soon infamous, along with the Arakan/Marma from Burma (they are also referred to as *Mag* – though this word, which also means 'pirate', is derogatory) – for their brutal piracy.<sup>3</sup> The population was terrorised into leaving and the region fell into obscurity. All through the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Sundarbans came to be infamously referred to as a *moger muluk* – a term which translates more widely into 'anarchic place' from its literal meaning of 'pirates' den' – due to the lawlessness and violence that characterised it.

The more recent large-scale transformations occurred after 1765, when the East India Company acquired the civil administration of Bengal. Groups of landless labourers and forest-dwellers were brought in first from far-flung places such as Chotanagpur, Hazaribagh, Manbhum in present-day Jharkhand, and later from Balasore in Orissa and the Arakan coast in Myanmar, and from different districts of Bengal such as Bankura, Birbhum, Midnapur, Nadia, Jessore (Chattopadhyaya 1999:14; 1987:59-60).<sup>4</sup> A lot of these people settled here after clearing the forest and reclaiming the

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<sup>3</sup> Rennell in his *Atlas of Bengal* (1761 – sheet no. XX), marked the entire part of the Bakarganj district as a country depopulated by the Mugs (alternate spelling of 'Mag'). Bernier, in his travels through the Sundarbans, mentions them as the 'Corsaires Franguys de Rakan' (1891:442 [first written in 1668]).

<sup>4</sup> In 1865, F. Schiller, even offered to import labour from China, Madras and Zanzibar to reclaim all the remaining wasteland of the Sundarbans (De 1990:17).



islands for agricultural purposes. Many others continued to come annually, as they had always done, for fishing, collecting forest produce, cutting wood and sowing and reaping paddy. No population estimate is to be had for this period. Mention of the Sundarbans population does not even appear when the first census was taken in 1872. This was because the Sundarbans region was partitioned and assigned to the districts of 24-Parganas, Jessore, and Bakarganj. Unfortunately, even though some gazetteer writers did leave a little historical data on the progression of Sundarbans reclamation, practically nothing has been written on the social history of those who were either brought there or those who were living in the vicinity of the forest prior to the coming of the British. There are no records of the first hundred years of reclamation and the later snippets on the population provided by the gazetteer writers Hunter (1875), Pargiter (1889), Ascoli (1910), and O'Malley (1914) are frustratingly brief. These authors were more interested in drawing long lists of wildlife than documenting people and their origins, religion or occupation. The Sundarbans thus has two parallel but segregated histories, one concerning people and the other relating to wildlife and the transformation of its forested landscape into a cultivated one.

According to Greenough (1998:240), this division originated in the portrayal of the Sundarbans by the British gazetteer writer W.W. Hunter (1875). Hunter even devotes an entire book to the Sundarbans where, after writing at great length about the forest and wild animals, he only mentions the people in passing, referring to them as a 'few wandering gangs' and classifying them after long lists of wild animals and plants (1875:317). The void left by the absence of humans in official documents contrasts sharply with the literature available on the forest and its biosphere.<sup>5</sup> Present-day studies of the Sundarbans follow a similar lopsided dichotomy: fascination, on the one hand, with the natural aspects of the Sundarbans, and on the other, an unsettling silence on the social and human facets of the region.

There are two kinds of inhabited islands: those closer to the mainland which were reclaimed largely between 1765 and 1900 and those on the fringe of the mangrove

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<sup>5</sup> See the book by Nandi and Misra (1987) devoted to the bibliography of the Sundarbans, where most of its entries are in reference to flora and fauna. Notable exceptions to this trend are Kanjilal (2000); Banerjee (1998); Niyogi (1997); De (1990); Mitra (1963); and the conference organised by the Smithsonian Institute on the Bangladesh Sundarbans (1987).

reclaimed between 1900 and 1970. The geography of the former islands is distinct from that of the latter ones. The former, located to the north and west of the region, are bigger, have an elevated ground level and are thus safer from the vagaries of storms and tides. These are part of the stable delta and have fertile soil well irrigated by canals which are not as broad, nor as saline, as those of the southern islands. These islands, being nearer the mainland, also have better access to the facilities offered by the city of Kolkata. The islands on the fringe of the forest, in contrast, are characterised by raised mud quays called ‘bund’ (*bādh*), which protect them from the saline tidal rivers and hold back their twice daily high tides. Taken together there are about 3,500 kilometres of ‘bundings’ – the process of enclosing an island with a bund – around many of the inhabited islands of the Sundarbans. (See bottom photo on page 220 for example of bund).

These two sets of inhabited islands have not only geographic but economic and social variations as well and are referred to by the Sundarbans islanders as the ‘up’ and the ‘down’, even though the Sundarbans as a whole is popularly called a ‘down region’.<sup>6</sup> These roughly correspond to the stable and active delta respectively. The stable delta, just south of Kolkata, has agglomerate, compact settlements that contrast sharply to the semi-nucleated, dispersed settlements of the active delta (Bannerjee 1998:184). From the most ‘top up’ places, meaning the areas nearest Kolkata, people living in the Sundarbans will list islands in order of preference, the last being the ones furthest south and directly opposite the forest. These islands are also referred to as those at ‘the gate of the tiger’s lair’. Counted amongst such islands are the ones of the Gosaba Block, of which Satjelia island – the island where I did most of my fieldwork – was part. (See maps on pages 216 – 218).

There are great differences between the stable and the active delta. In the stable delta the prevalent modes of transport are *autos* (motor-driven three-wheelers which operate as shared cabs), rickshaws, buses and trains. However, in the active delta, or in the ‘down’ islands, the only modes of locomotion are mechanised boats, locally called *bhatbhati*, and simple country boats called *nouka* or *dinghy* and rowed with

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<sup>6</sup> The Sundarbans are often called *tatbhoomi*: *tat* refers to the bank of a river or sea, and *bhoomi* to the earth or land; in the local dialect it means ‘sunken land’ or the ‘land of the sea-coast’; it is also called *atharo bhatir desh* – the land of the eighteen ebb-tides – and also *bhardesh*, *astadash*, *rashatal*, *patal*, *paundrabardhan*, *gangaridi*.

oars. On those islands which have proper roads, three-wheeled cycles with raised platforms carry goods and people – these are called *cycle-vans*. Most products like kerosene oil (which is widely used for lighting purposes as there is no electricity), cooking oil, bricks, cement, paddy, vegetable, fruit, are brought by *bhatbhati*. In many of the islands furthest south, land cannot be cultivated more than once a year due to lack of fresh water. The river water is salty and of no use for drinking or for irrigating land. Often the only fresh water, other than the rainwater collected in ponds (and which is commonly drunk), has to be fetched by boats from islands which have tube-wells. Also, bunds frequently break. This causes the river to engulf houses and cultivated land. When lucky, the villagers are able to reclaim the drowned land back from the river by rapidly erecting, during low tide, a bund around the newly submerged area. However, even when such land is recovered from the river, it remains barren for at least three years. More often than not, it is impossible to retrieve the sunken land and each year hundreds of people lose their homes and fields and are left to seek refuge elsewhere. The geography of these southern islands is literally ‘on the move’, with the relatively frequent breaking of bunds and disappearance of land on the one hand, and the deposition of silt and appearance of mud sandbars on the other.

This peculiar geography is often cited as an excuse for the lack of effort on the part of the government to improve the material condition of the islanders through programmes such as strengthening bunds, building roads, or installing electricity. This is not only because such ventures are costly and difficult to implement but also because of the widespread belief that these islands are best ‘left to nature’. It has been argued that the rivers’ increased salinity, as well as their encroachment of the islands, is the result of bunding. It is known, however, that tectonic movements between the twelfth to the sixteenth century initiated a west-to-east tilting of the Sundarbans causing the greater part of fresh water to be diverted towards the east. The growing brackishness of rivers is a direct threat to the livelihood of those who depend on the rivers as it means a significant decrease in crab, prawn seed,<sup>7</sup> fish and

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<sup>7</sup> This refers to the hatchlings of ‘tiger prawn’ – scientific name *Penaeus monodon* – which is the most delicate in taste and largest Indian marine penaeid prawn to be farmed. It is called *bagda* in Bengali. To facilitate reading, I shall refer to the tiger prawn hatchlings (which are usually at the postlarval stage PL 20, 9-14 mm) as ‘prawn seed’, even though the literature also refers to them as ‘shrimp’, ‘post-larvae’, ‘juveniles’ or ‘seedlings’. I also use ‘shrimp’ and ‘prawn’ interchangeably.

certain types of wood.<sup>8</sup> The conclusions of scientists are that these islands should never have been reclaimed in the first place and that strengthening the existing bunds will only cause greater environmental degradation. This view suits the various administrative bodies who hope that, by leaving these islands underdeveloped, the inhabitants of the 'down' islands will be encouraged to seek refuge elsewhere. Even people deeply committed to working for the welfare of the underprivileged of the area believe that they are fighting a losing battle and that the Sundarbans is best 'returned to tigers'.<sup>9</sup>

The political situation of the region is violent. It is one of intense infighting between the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), the Congress, the recently formed Trinamool Congress (TMC), the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPIM), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The RSP, a party which has a very strong base in the Sundarbans, is a part of the WB 'Left Front' government. The Left Front is a coalition of left parties of all hues and colours. Even if the RSP forms part of the Left Front government at the state level, it is the arch enemy of the government's ruling party, the CPIM, in the Sundarbans. The CPIM is the biggest party of the Left Front which forms the WB government and in the rural sector the CPIM is well known as the party of the middle peasantry (Basu 2001). The fights between parties often revolve around land control. Scores are settled through the setting on fire of ripe paddy and the digging of breaches in bunds so that fields get submerged by salt water. In their intense fight for votes, the RSP and the CPIM settled Bangladeshi migrants on private property in the southern islands of the Sundarbans in the 1970s and 1980s. These events have remained a source of violence. The violent political situation is one of the main reasons why those who have the means – school teachers, doctors, politicians, NGO workers and businessmen (especially ration shop owners, who work mainly as kerosene retailers and prawn seed fishery owners) – try to leave the place. Instead of investing in the region, they buy plots of land far from the 'down' islands of the Sundarbans and as near as possible to Kolkata.

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<sup>8</sup> The most famous example being the near disappearance, especially from the WB part of the Sundarbans, of the *sundari* tree – the tree, which many believe, has given its name to the Sundarbans.

<sup>9</sup> Even Pannalal Dasgupta (pers. comm. May 1996), a highly esteemed leftist activist turned Gandhian, who devoted most of his life towards improving the conditions of the poor, voiced such ideas.

There are no cottage or small-scale industries apart from the ones offered by the few NGOs that have the means to do so. The principal economic activities are agriculture and fishing. Fishing is carried out both for prawn seed (largely by women) and for crab and river or sea fish (by men).<sup>10</sup> A large part of the fishing – both for prawn seed as well as for crab and fish – is done in the forest. Working in the forest is not only physically demanding but also dangerous, as tigers, crocodiles, venomous snakes and sharks regularly attack and kill those who work there. The Range Officer of Sajnekhali for the WB Sundarbans estimates that there are 150 people killed by tigers and crocodiles each year. The estimate is the same on the Bangladesh side.<sup>11</sup> This is without mentioning the equal, if not greater, figure of people killed or maimed by snake- or shark-bite. The causes of violent mortality are not only wild animals, but also political party rows, armed robbers, failed abortion operations, diseases, and suicides.

There are 4.5 million people living in the entire WB Sundarbans today, of which roughly 2.5 million live in the southern or the ‘down’ islands. Some 35,330 people work in the forest annually, of which nearly 25,000 are fishers, 4,500 collect timber and firewood, 1,350 collect honey and 4,500 are involved in other activities (Chakrabarti 1986). The 1971 census shows forty-eight of the state’s fifty-nine listed Scheduled Castes (SC) represented in the Sundarbans and 70%, numbering approximately 140,000 people, belonging to Scheduled Tribes (ST) or Adivasis of WB live in this region (Townsend 2000).<sup>12</sup> 44% of the whole population of the Sundarbans belong to SC and ST communities as against 25.5% for the whole of WB. In the Gosaba Block – which comprises the islands of Satjelia, Rangabelia and Gosaba – nearly 65% of the population is SC, 8.5% ST, nearly 20% Muslim, and 5% Christian (Banerjee 1998:230).

The Sundarbans area divisions are called ‘lots’ and people generally refer to their ‘lot number’ rather than the name of their village. Also, the village is usually more of an

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<sup>10</sup> Strikingly, 98.5% of the delta villages do not have access to fish preservation or processing units (Banerjee 1998:247). There is not a single ice plant in Satjelia.

<sup>11</sup> This information was corroborated by Tessa McGregor (pers. comm. July 2002), a geographer and biologist who worked in the Bangladesh side in 2000-2001.

<sup>12</sup> In WB, ‘SC’ and ‘ST’ are now commonly used terms that replace the often derogative traditional caste names.

administrative unit than a social one.<sup>13</sup> I conducted fieldwork on the island of Satjelia, and more specifically in the village of Toofankhali – generally referred to as ‘number eleven’ (see map on page 218). The people of this village were mainly Bengali Hindus whose forefathers had come from the Koyra-Bedkashi region of the Sundarbans in Bangladesh in the late 1920s and the 1930s. This island is therefore one of the last southern islands to have been inhabited. I lived in the Garjontola locality of Toofankhali (see map on page 219). Garjontola, which takes its name from one of the most common trees of the Sundarbans forest, the Garjan, is located directly opposite the forest. I conducted fieldwork on a more or less continuous basis for nineteen months between August 1999 and February 2001 and again briefly in December 2002. I lived in a hut next to the river and as a member of Maloti and Hori’s household.<sup>14</sup> Maloti worked as a health worker at an NGO and received a salary equivalent to that of a forest worker’s and Hori, who previously worked in the forest, during the time I did fieldwork looked after the house and cooked for his three teenaged sons. Their relatives – both kin as well as elected – included landowners, forest workers and prawn collectors and greatly facilitated my study of these three main occupations of the Sundarbans.

## **I. 2. Description of the village and the people**

Toofankhali is a village of about 3,500 inhabitants in the heart-shaped island of Satjelia which nestles between the islands of Kumirmari in the east and Gosaba in the west. The island is directly opposite the forested islands which are part of the famous Sajnekhali wildlife sanctuary (see map on page 218). As in most parts of the ‘down’ islands, the rivers are the primary mode of locomotion. The Pathar river, flowing along the south of Garjontola, connects the villagers to the more important channels of communication, which are the rivers Raymangal, Bidya and Matla. Garjontola is served by a bhatbhati which carries both people and merchandise daily to and from Gosaba (see top photo on page 220). It leaves every morning at 6 a.m. from the extreme end of the island, Lahiripur in the east, to go to Gosaba, the island

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<sup>13</sup> Ensign Prinsep, in 1822–23 surveyed the forests from the river Jamuna to the Hooghly, divided them into ‘blocks’ and numbered them. This was the beginning of the ‘Sundarbans lots’ (De 1990:15).

<sup>14</sup> I use pseudonyms for most names.

which houses the administrative headquarters of Gosaba Block in the west. The boat reaches Gosaba at noon and takes the reverse route home each evening.

### **I. 2. a. Garjontola**

Garjontola, like many hamlets of the 'down' islands, stretches in a more or less horizontal line along the Pathar river. Houses are not situated in groups but linearly along the banks of the river and the pathways which lead into the interior of villages. Three-fourths of the houses of Garjontola are situated along the Pathar river's edge, and one-fourth lie scattered along the three other pathways which encircle the village. The brick road which flanks the western end of the village leads perpendicularly from the river's jetty to the school. The houses along this road belong to the wealthier people of Garjontola and the agglomerate they form is referred to as 'Schoolpara'. Beyond this road, to the west of the village lies Annpur, peopled chiefly by East Bengalis of the fisher caste Malo and by Adivasis. The mud track on the east of Garjontola runs parallel to the Duttar canal, which enters deep into the island. On the eastern side of this track lies Duttapara where many relatives of the inhabitants of Garjontola live along with Adivasis. The mud track to the north of Garjontola separates the area from Mriddhapara, a locality composed mainly of landowners. This track leads to one of the more important commercial centres of the island called Hatkhola. It is a place with only about twenty shacks and shops, a couple of doctors' surgeries, but no houses. If dead for most of the week, Hatkhola suddenly teems with excitement on Fridays, the weekly bazaar day when people throng in from kilometres around.

The disposition of the houses of Garjontola – along the river in the south, along the road leading to the interior of the island in the west, those along the bazaar road in the north, and those to the west of Duttapara in the east, form a rectangle. The whole rectangle represents 975 people and 209 households. Garjontola thus forms a rectangle which is inhabited only along its edges, with the centre left bare, with fields and some small water tanks (See map on page 219 – the blue circles are water tanks, the red dots Bonbibi shelters, the crosses stand for households).

### I. 2. b. The Garjontola islanders

About half the households of Garjontola consist of only four or five members and nearly a fourth consist of only one to three members. (See Tables I. a. and I. b. in Appendix I on page 212). Even if different households sometimes live on the same broad homestead or *bhite*, they are usually nuclear. The marriage pattern is virilocal. However, young men, once married, rarely share the same cooking units as those of their parents or brothers. The only two generations that usually live together are those of parents and their yet unmarried children. People who become single due to unforeseen circumstances usually live alone. In certain situations, however, a family unit is recreated along the lines of the following example. When I was in Garjontola a widow in her early thirties was sharing the same hut as her brother-in-law who was unmarried and had a leg affected by polio. He supported her and her two school-going teenage children by organising private tuition classes for the neighbouring children and she cooked for him. Sometimes also old people live with their grandchildren or great-grandchildren to ‘give them company’ while they are still childless. Old or widowed people, young married couples, divorced or separated men or women who elsewhere in rural Bengal are usually attached to a household headed by a male figure, in the ‘down’ islands of the Sundarbans both cook and live in their own hut.

Most children below the age of ten go to primary school. At secondary level, half of them drop out of school to work as prawn seed collectors or in people’s fields – at this age they rarely work as forest fishers. Marriages take place around the age of sixteen for women and eighteen for men. One of the important conditions when marriages are being arranged is that it should be with someone not living in the same village. Marrying somebody from within the village is seen as incestuous and is usually avoided. Young women work as prawn seed collectors both before and after their marriage. The young men work either in the forest, or in big landowners’ fields, or leave the village to work as labourers in the suburbs of Kolkata, North 24-Parganas, or Uttar Pradesh, and some even go as far as the Andaman islands. These migrations are usually undertaken for six to eight months, and often over a period of two to five years. When the men come back (usually with money), they get married



and construct their own boat, invest in big nets for prawn seed collection, build their own hut – either on their parents' homestead, or on that of a neighbour or an 'elected kin' (more on this in Chapter IV). Most young married couples do not have automatic access to their parents' land. They have to help in the process of sowing and reaping for a share of the crops, so usually the main part of their income is made from prawn seed collection/dealing or, for the more intrepid ones, the forest.

If the vast majority of the inhabitants of Garjontola are, as they prefer to call themselves, 'SC', the other communities they are brought to closely interact with are the 'ST', Other Backward Castes (OBC) and Muslims. The SCs are mainly of East Bengali origin and belong to two of the lowest castes: Pod and Namasudra. The STs are mainly of Oraon and Munda origin from Chotanagpur and the OBCs of Midnapuri origin. The villagers understand these categories as based on *jati* and usually maintain them through separate religious customs, food habits, house architecture, and marriages, which are usually between people of the same caste and socio-economic level. The Bengali *jati* is especially used, like 'caste', to mean 'genus', 'kind' or 'ethnic groups'. It also provides room for other collective identities such as those established along the lines of religion, regional affiliation and gender.

Social hierarchy however, allies *jati* differences with those of economic and social status. Economic status, in the Sundarbans (like probably in most parts of rural Bengal) is mainly derived from land and/or (usually one accompanies the other) from holding a government job. Generally landowners have the means to pay the heavy bribe needed to get their sons or daughters a government job as a school teacher or a clerk and those who get such jobs receive salaries which permit them to buy land. Social status is conferred by one's level of education. Landowners and service holders are usually educated as they have the material means to obtain the requisite schooling. The prawn businessmen, even though they increasingly have money, lack social status because they are seen as 'illiterate' (*ashikkhitto*). Those who are the lowest on the scale of both economic and social status are those who work in the forest. In Toofankhali, the majority of the islanders are roughly from the same castes.

If people of different castes at times live alongside each other, there are very few instances of people of varying economic and social statuses living together. The

salaried, businessmen and landowners who are SC, ST, OBC, Brahmin and Muslim and who live on the school road of Garjontola, for example, participate in each others' religious ceremonies but are reluctant to attend the ceremonies organised by their poorer relatives who live beside the river. Nor do they live next to those who work in the forest even when they are from the same blood family. The village is divided into two main socio-economic groups – those living in the south on the edge of the river and who work as forest fishers or in the prawn industry (collectors, dealers and businessmen), and those who live along the road which leads to the school and are landed and wealthy. I will often refer to them as the 'riverside people' and the '*bhadralok*' respectively.

### I. 2. c. The *bhadralok* versus the *gramer lok*

The *bhadralok* ('gentle-folk': from *bhadra*, which is translatable as a mix of 'polite', 'civil', and 'cultured' i.e. bears resonances of middle-class sensitivity to culture and refinement, and *lok* which is 'group' or 'people') carries connotations not only of landed wealth but also of education, culture and anglicisation and of upper caste exclusiveness (Chatterji 1994:5). Shunning manual labour, the *bhadralok* maintain their status by keeping a careful social distance between themselves and the *nimnobargo* (social inferiors) or the *nimnobarno* (literally meaning 'inferior caste'). The *nimnobargo* or *nimnobarno* denotes those belonging to occupational castes considered of low status such as leather workers, liquor dealers, boatmen or fishermen, i.e. those who were classified as 'Untouchables' in British Bengal and those today referred to as the 'illiterate'.

The village *bhadralok*, however, do not refer to the fishers with these class- and caste-connoted terms but with the neutral term of *gramer lok* – 'villagers', literally 'village people'. This latter term, when used exclusively for one's non-literate counterpart, is a demonstration both of one's superior learning or education and one's distance from what are seen as those involved in 'rural occupations' such as river or sea fishing, or working as a cultivator or in the forest. The educated and landed elite are usually addressed by the title *Babu*, seen as a badge of *bhadralok* status and commonly used as a term of respect all over WB when addressing a social

superior. The riverside people usually add Babu to the first names of the male school teachers as a sign of respect; however, they call the women of these households by customary kinship terms used all over Bengal for non-kin people.

The terms *gramer lok* and *bhadralok/babulok* are never used in direct address between the two groups, nor do they refer to themselves in these terms. However, when talking about the other group, especially when derogatorily, they use these terms. Otherwise they talk of each other as *nadir kuler lok* (people from the river's edge), and *skoolparar lok* (people from the locality of the school). I also often heard people refer to these two groups as those who live *nadir dhare* (along the river) or disdainfully as *charer lok* (people from the sandbars) versus those who live *bhetore* ('inside' i.e. meaning in the interior of the island, where it is safe). So social hierarchy in Garjontola is mainly along the lines of whether one is, on the one hand, a forest worker or prawn seed collector or, on the other hand, a landowner and/or government service holder.

To conclude, in Garjontola, the framing of community consciousness is articulated mainly along a *gramer lok/bhadralok* divide – a divide which, as we shall see, is expressed through local narratives of tigers and rooted in practical experiences of the forest. In other words, what I seek to demonstrate is how economic and social differences are linked to occupations which have different socio-religious worldviews as well as experiences of forest and land. Here the villagers imagine their interactions with each other around the symbolisms of land and the forest through narratives about tigers. To set the background for this argument, in the next section I shall give a brief description of this land/forest opposition and then highlight what distinguishes occupations from one another in these terms.

### **I. 3. Introducing the three main socio-economic groups**

The nature of the distinction between forest and land relates to the fact that those islanders who work in the forest and along its rivers risk losing their life to wild animals: tigers, crocodiles, sharks, snakes. Those who are landowners, on the other hand, remain relatively safe from these animals as they rarely go into the forest.

Moreover, the distinctions are also of a symbolic order. Land, argue the islanders, especially the riverside people, leads to hierarchical relations and divides people. In contrast to land, the precepts of the forest are seen as instilling ‘an ethos of equality’ between humans and animals, men and women, Hindus and Muslims, rich and poor. In describing the islanders’ relationship with these two entities, the land and the forest, I argue not only that social relations in the Sundarbans are perceived along the lines of whether one’s livelihood depends either on the forest and rivers or on agricultural land but also that this distinction forms the basis for all social relations in the Sundarbans. In other words, the way in which the villagers negotiate their interactions with each other has more to do with the way they perceive their ‘personhood’ in its connection either to land or to the forest.

This is not to suggest that the villagers do not use conflicting explanations. In fact, they all possess, in varying quantities, access to both land and forest and draw sustenance from both spheres as well as sharing cultural repertoires which overlap. My schema is therefore merely a starting point and not to be understood as identifying watertight sociological compartments. I propose this socio-ecological continuum not so much to distinguish various groups’ means of establishing community identity but to focus on their elaborations about their understanding of self and interactions with others based on their experiences of the forest and of tigers. The plurality of representations that such a continuum reveals about tigers and the forest also leads me to explore how the islanders perceive and practice relatedness in a world where they have to juggle between adhering to the communitarian identities of religion, caste and ethnicity, on the one hand, and to the differences construed along the lines of their occupations’ respective cosmologies, on the other. Briefly, the three major socio-economic groups of Garjontola are the: (i) forest workers, (ii) prawn collectors and (iii) landowners. What I shall argue is that the three groups’ different socio-religious understandings of the forest and of tigers has to do both with local interpretations of the forest and of tigers as well as very different practical relations to these two entities.

### I. 3. a. The forest workers and poachers

Those who work in the forest can be divided into the following groups in relation to the approach they have to the forest. Roughly, these are (i) the ‘forest fishers’, who catch crabs and fish and who see themselves as entering the forest with ‘peace’; (ii) those who ‘do the forest/jongol/jungle’ and work primarily as honey collectors and woodcutters, as well as those who work as poachers and are called ‘black parties’.<sup>15</sup> Although they work in the forest, the poachers are ideologically similar to prawn collectors in that they do not see themselves as having to adhere to ‘the rules of the forest’.

#### (i) The forest fishers

The forest fishers leave home for about ten days about twice a month in groups of three to five. Even though they mostly catch crab and fish, they also occasionally collect honey and wood. However, the difference from those who ‘do the jungle’ is that they are seen as collecting honey and wood only on an occasional basis and therefore not with the same disposition as those who do so on an occupational basis. The forest fishers enter the forest under the protection of the forest goddess Bonbibibi and explain how their line of work ‘respects’ the forest as it neither ‘depletes’ nor ‘disturbs’ it. By contrast to their own work, they see the activities of prawn collectors and honey and wood collectors (used alternatively with ‘wood cutter’) as troubling wild animals, especially tigers, and as exhausting the forest. They explain how they respect the forest because, as opposed to prawn collectors, poachers and honey and wood collectors, they, as forest fishers, enter the forest ‘with peace’, consider tigers ‘brothers’ and consequently share the products of the forest equitably between wild animals and themselves.

#### (ii) Those who do the forest

The honey and wood collectors portray themselves as ‘violent’. Even if occasionally they also work as crab and fish collectors, they are seen by the other villagers as being threats to the forest animals and therefore bringing upon themselves forest animals’ wrath. Sometimes, they also work as poachers. Honey and wood collection,

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<sup>15</sup> *Mach-kankra dhorar lok* ‘people who catch fish and crabs’ for fish and crab collectors, *jangol kora lok* ‘people who do the forest’ – this essentially refers to wood and honey collectors, and *black partyr lok* ‘people who do black’ which refers to poachers.

along with poaching, are seen as high-risk, high-gain occupations, thus going against the principles of peace and equality associated with the forest. It is believed that those who undertake these occupations either lose their lives or 'make it big'. Usually the poachers, the more daredevil, worship the goddess Kali. Kali is perceived in the Sundarbans, as in many parts of WB, as the deity most appropriate for violent and bloody occupations, which are listed as police, taxi-drivers, poachers, and local thugs who operate as dacoits<sup>16</sup> and stave-wielders (*lathiyal*).<sup>17</sup> Those who 'do the jungle' are composed of people from varying socio-economic backgrounds. These are the marginalised and landless, such as the Bangladeshi refugees from the 'down' islands as well as rich landowners from 'up' islands who possess fire-arms and are in search of cheap thrills. The stereotype, however, is that it is the Muslims and Bangladeshi refugees who have the nerve to flout the laws both of the forest and of the state.

### I. 3. b. The prawn collectors

The second major socio-economic activity cum corresponding cosmology involves working as a tiger prawn seed collector, either from one's boat or by pulling a net on the banks of both the forest and the village to catch the delicate tiger prawn seeds. This occupation became very popular in the 1970s; it pulled the poorest of the region out of stark poverty and has given women greater financial security. The income made through prawn collection is not, like that of the forest, shared between different team members, and is thus the individuals' to dispose of as they wish. Those who have the means either fish from their boats by installing huge nets at the confluence of large rivers – either in the forest area (when permitted) or, as is most often the case, in the rivers not very far from the village. The more popular way of fishing prawn seed is practised by women who pull nets on the banks of the village islands or sail off (usually in groups of four to eight) to fish on the banks of forested islands. This mode of fishing consists of pulling a mosquito net behind oneself with

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<sup>16</sup> Dacoits are infamous as armed robbers or pirates who not only plunder and loot but also perpetrate atrocious cruelty, defy local authorities, rob entire villages, and sometimes even murder their victims. They are notorious in rural Bengal.

<sup>17</sup> In the political history of Sundarbans villages, many landowners and political leaders traditionally depended on the militancy of lathiyals to intimidate opposition, rivals and rebel subjects.

one's body submerged in chest-deep water. Those who practise this form of fishing, most of them women, face the greatest threat from sharks, crocodiles and tigers.

The prawn collectors usually demarcate themselves from forest fishers, arguing that prawn collection is more akin to a 'business' and that committing themselves to the protection of the forest deity Bonbibi (as the forest workers do) might not serve any purpose. Unlike forest fishers who can sell their crabs and fish to whomever they chose, the prawn collectors have to depend on the fluctuating prices of prawn dealers and businessmen to make a living. They therefore consider their job a 'lottery' – which can either 'make them' or 'break them'. This occupation is very popular as both women as well as men can take it up with very little prior investment (unlike poaching, which requires people to have rifles, cartridges and powerful torches) and because it can be carried out during one's free time. Even so, their livelihood provokes the anger of many. The forest officials as well as the forest fishers accuse the prawn collectors of poaching. Their odd hours of work, 'which know neither day nor night' (as their work requires them to work at night too), as well as the entry of women and children into the forest, are considered by the forest fishers to be 'disturbing tigers' and defiling the forest, turning it into a riskier place. The landowners and service holders too are against this occupation as prawn businessmen who become rich in short periods of time increasingly threaten their money-lending activities.

### I. 3. c. The landowners

The third group comprises agriculturalists or, more specifically, landowners. They are usually the educated. They are also very often 'service holders' working as schoolteachers. One result of the vast increase of village primary schools in the 1960s and 1970s<sup>18</sup> has been the blending of many elements of the bhadrak model, including literary pursuits and political leftism, with the agrarian landlord's lifestyle (Ruud 1999a:258). Some of the people belonging to this group are from 'up' places posted there by the WB state-regulated School Service Commission. The minimum salaries are four times higher than the earnings of the average fisher. It is this group

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<sup>18</sup> Primary schools in WB, grew from 14,700 in 1950–51 to 50,000 by 1980–81 (Acharya 1985:1785).

that spends a substantial part of its salary in acquiring plots of land in the suburbs of Kolkata where they hope to settle when they retire. While still in the village many landowners hold, the strings of political and economic power along with prawn businessmen and shopkeepers. They are also the ones who, on the whole, own the most land (see Tables III. a. and III. b. in Appendix III on page 214). Their houses, built high and with thick mud or brick walls, are often the target of armed robberies.

Increasingly doctors, shopkeepers, prawn businessmen and dealers are starting to match the landowners' economic power; however, the landowners hold the moral high ground as possessors of education and 'sophisticated culture'. This group, the *bhadralok*, share the forest officials' concerns for wildlife and tigers. The essence of their *bhadra* identity is often revealed through their romanticised vision of nature. *Bhadralok* sensitivity to the Royal Bengal tiger, with its association with both the regal and colonial images of hunting as well as its current position as national animal, is often deployed by this group to highlight the Sundarbans as a 'World Heritage Site' and thus reassure themselves about living in not such a bad place after all.

### **I. 3. d. Concluding remarks on the groups' interactions with land and forest**

The main division between these three groups of people remains an ideological one: that of the division between riverside people and the *bhadralok*. This is clear especially in the approach these three groups have to the forest and to tigers. What is interesting is that the distribution of these three occupations is also connected not only with gender but also with age. Old people and young couples usually practise prawn collection, while middle-aged men work in the forest. This is because, once young couples have made some money working as prawn-collectors or labourers, or once their parents die, they start owning a small patch of land which they also cultivate (see Tables II. a. and II. b. in Appendix II on page 213).

By conclusion to this section I would like to highlight how the division between these three groups is especially clear in the narratives they have of tigers. The anthropomorphisation of tigers by landowners into *bhadra* ones, for example, is



questioned by the riverside villagers through their presentation of another image (also anthropomorphic) of the tiger. Shrugging off the colonial and national drape from this *bhadra* tiger, in this image portrays the tiger has seen its gentle inoffensive nature irretrievably transformed into that of a man-eater largely due to the harsh environment of the Sundarbans and the bloody events witnessed by the region. That tigers have grown to see poorer people as ‘tiger food’, while tigers themselves have become ‘first-class citizens’, are narratives often used to highlight social discrimination in the Sundarbans. Through the riverside people’s rejection of the ‘tourist tiger’ and the voicing of their own narratives, dilemmas and arguments in terms of ‘*their* tigers’, they express their understandings of sociality and feelings of marginalisation. Highlighting this transformation of *their* tiger is also a way, for the riverside islanders, of reclaiming the forgotten pages of a history which has relegated them to oblivion, an injustice they feel they have been done by the urbanised elite who believe tigers are more precious than them, the *gramer lok*.

#### **I. 4. Approaching the Sundarbans through the forest fishers’ understandings of tigers**

A growing body of work shows how people’s interactions with animals forms the basis of both social practices as well as understandings of the social. In other words, such interactions are not only embedded in people’s relation to their environment as a practical experience but also as narratives, giving them scope to elaborate on their ideas of the social (Franklin 2002, 1999; Rival 1996, 1998; Bird-David 1992a/b, 1999; Descola 1992, 1996a/b; Ingold 1993). This thesis is both an engagement with the actual daily material ‘taskscape’ (Ingold 1993:158) which is an embodiment of the way people interact with the Sundarbans environment and an elaboration of how symbolic ‘representations’ (Descola 1996a:85) of tigers as ‘non-humans’ helps to explore social relations in the Sundarbans. I also dwell on how the portrayal of the Sundarbans as essentially a place for non-humans has been used to silence the Sundarbans inhabitants’ legitimate demand for a more equal allocation of resources between them and the wildlife of the region.

It is not my intention here to unpack and discuss the different approaches and theories that have been used to understand human/animal relations.<sup>19</sup> Nor do I look at all the relationships people in the Sundarbans have with different kinds of ‘non-humans’, a group which, for the Sundarbans villagers, is vast and includes crocodiles, snakes and a wide range of spirits and demons. I look at people-tiger relations more as a tool to understand social relations rather than to focus on how tigers are and have been appropriated into a range of issues; i.e. I am not so much interested in the use of the image of the tiger in colonial times by the British to highlight the superiority of their own emblematic animal the lion. Nor do I look at stories of hunting and their positions as a signifier of taste, belonging and distinction for the colonial as well as Indian elites or the uses of the image of the tiger in the establishment of Indian nationalism. Today, the tiger’s image is used to frame moral and ethical debates around the issue of wildlife parks by various trans-national animal-based charities and development agencies like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) or the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in bids to obtain funding. Instead of looking at these ‘dominant symbols’ of the tiger, or instead of focusing on the semiological and ethical aspects of tiger symbolism, I focus instead, following Rival’s work on trees, on the practical knowledge of living with tigers which the villagers have an intimate knowledge of (1996:145-46).

The questions raised will identify how the changing nature of present-day human-tiger relations in the Sundarbans, especially as experienced and perceived by the different socio-economic groups I introduced, is having an impact on the way these groups both live and understand relatedness with each other. Inspired by Descola’s (1996a/b) symbolic approach and Latour’s (1993) political angle to the non-human, this thesis identifies how economy, religion and politics bring about conceptual and ethical changes in the Sundarbans villagers’ multiple understandings of tigers. I also look at how such conceptualisations are intimately linked to ideas of ‘self’ and ‘other’ by outlining some of the diverse and contrasting ways in which the Sundarbans islanders relate to tigers: for example, how they perceive tigers as competitors in relation to forest products; how the image of the tiger is deployed to

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<sup>19</sup> The different approaches reflect key trends in the study of social analysis: these include concerns such as the relation between anthropology and colonialism and the construction of race, class and gender identities. See studies by Mullin (1999); Shanklin (1994); Ohnuki-Tierney (1987); Ritvo (1987).

give a particular version of the past; how the media's presentation of the tiger as the sole legitimate claimant to the Sundarbans forest is challenged, etc.

Deeply entrenched in the way people understand their relatedness to animals is the way they situate themselves in their environment. The inhabitants of the Sundarbans are environmental determinists in their belief that the environment affects them. The relative barrenness of the land, the constant threat of losing land and homestead, the violent cyclonic storms, and the lack of potable water, they explain, adversely affects them all and transforms them into short-tempered, irritable and aggressive people. What is interesting, however, is that it is not only that the environment is seen as having the potential of acting on the islanders. They also see themselves as similarly endowed with the capacity of affecting the environment and tigers' natures. For example, the villagers argue that poaching and violent political dealings 'pollute' and transform the forest into a violent place. Similarly, tigers' natures are said to have changed after the perceived betrayal of the WB government of the poor and marginalised.

I will draw on Ingold's notion of 'dwelling' (2000:185), through which he sought to move beyond the sterile opposition between the naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral external backdrop to human activities and the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space. In this 'dwelling perspective' the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of, and as bearing testimony to, the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it and, in so doing, have left there something of themselves (Ingold 2000:189). To adopt a perspective of this kind means bringing to bear the knowledge born of immediate experience by privileging the understandings that people derive from their lived, everyday involvement in the world. This is why, in my work, I will concentrate as much on the 'physicality' of dealing with the Sundarbans environment and forest as I do the cultural representations of tigers.

As mentioned earlier, the media's glamorous portrayal of the Sundarbans forest is seen by the villagers as jeopardising any wishes they might have to develop the place. I will address this question especially in the last two chapters of this thesis (Chapters V & VI) when looking at (i) how prawn collecting activities are seen as the

main cause for environmental degradation in the Sundarbans; (ii) how the very presence of people in the region is seen as a hindrance to its proper development as a 'natural' haven for wild-life; and (iii) how the Sundarbans tigers are constructed as man-eaters. I will approach these questions by asking how biologists' and naturalists' observations on the Sundarbans compare with those of a forest fisher. In other words, to what extent are scientists' depictions of the Sundarbans tigers' nature, for example, in accordance with the Sundarbans' villagers representations of it? In understanding sociality in the islands of the Sundarbans nearest the forest, the perception of one's inherent situatedness (or non-situatedness) within the environment of the Sundarbans thus constitutes an important part of my work. This is developed not only through the way people talk of tigers and how they experience real-life interactions with them but also through the ways in which they talk about their environment. I will do this by using the contrasts which were drawn between agricultural land and the forest and the livelihoods linked with either, as well as in using the narratives around the forest as the canvas for understanding sociality.

To briefly conclude, I believe that we have to use both Ingold's approach of looking at how animals are 'good to relate to' as well as Descola's structural interpretation which, shorn of Lévi-Straussian dualisms (nature and culture; animality and humanity; intellectuality and affectivity), offers a much more stimulating way of looking at how non-humans may be 'good to think with'. Thus this work is both an engagement with the actual daily material 'relating to' tigers as well as an elaboration of how a 'representation' of non-humans leads me to explore social relations in the Sundarbans. Concretely this means grounding an analysis of social relations through a study of the symbolism surrounding the forest by using the tiger as the link between the different sections of this thesis. Taking the tiger as my focal point enables me to connect the relationship between tigers and people in the Sundarbans in history as well as in space and will be used to:

- (i) Highlight the narratives around the differences between agricultural land and forest as ways of speaking about and situating 'self' and 'other'.
- (ii) Use the symbol of the tiger to draw on distinctions between people (instead of using categories of religion or caste) to show the complexities linked to understanding social relations in the Sundarbans.

(iii) Critically evaluate environmentalists' perceptions of the Sundarbans as 'tiger-land' and the repercussions of such an image on state policies for the region's people.

### **I. 5. Entering the field (and the forest)**

My first encounter with the Sundarbans occurred when I was eight. My mother had taken us to meet friends who lived on the island of Basanti – the most important of the 'down' islands where in those days there were a few training centres, high schools, and a hospital. The family we stayed with consisted of a grandmother, her two sons and her two daughters-in-law (one was my mother's friend) and their respective daughters, who were my age. We had come for the whole winter break and I remember, apart from being able to run wild, play and swim along with the other village children, spending many evenings and nights watching various theatrical plays. The ones I remember best were those which concerned the story of a goddess or god coming down to earth to get worshippers and the tribulations they faced in the process. There was Bonbibi, the deity of the forest, and Manasa, who protected against snakes, as well as stories from the Puranas and the Bible which were sung when a person died and were called Hori-nam or Jisu-kirtan respectively. I remember that a part of the family of our hosts were Hindus and the other half Christians. I never asked why that was so or how that had come about; all I remember was that during the big religious occasions, the whole family celebrated whatever the deity was being honoured. These memories started to stir up questions only years later in 1996. Then, while studying Bengali literature at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) in Paris, I was shown a text on *Dokkhin-Ray ar Ghazir pala* by my professor, France Bhattacharya. It was a text which urged people to worship the Hindu Dokkhin Rai and the Muslim Ghazi Khan together. In the context of the Ayodha riots and the dangerously growing communal riots which I had left behind, my childhood memories started engendering probing and unsettling questions.

For most of my childhood, I had lived in the professionally and economically mixed locality of Howrah – which is located on the opposite side of the river Hooghly from Kolkata. Some of our neighbours were fishers, and many of them were from the

Sundarbans. One of them was a member of a fishing team working in the Sundarbans and from him I came to learn about tigers and life in the Sundarbans forest. Sometime in 1982, his nine year old nephew Toofan came to live with this fisherman and his family. Toofan and I became playmates as we were of the same age. I eventually came to know of how his uncle had adopted him, as his father had been killed by a tiger and his mother had died in the violent cyclone of 1981. From them and my father and his colleagues who were involved in building flood shelters in the Sundarbans, I heard about the island of Marichjhapi and how the refugees who had gone to settle there had been ruthlessly evicted on the grounds that they were contravening the Forest Acts. It was my neighbour who had first said, 'you know, tigers seem to have become more important than people in the Sundarbans.'

All through my growing years the Sundarbans would appear from time to time in newspapers. Always in the form of a tiny snippet: a woodcutter who had been killed by a tiger (those killed by crocodiles, sharks or snakes were strangely never mentioned), an area destroyed after it was hit by a cyclone, the collapse of a bund or an embankment and how this had caused the homelessness of a few hundred families. I remember receiving a book published by the Children's Book Trust called *The man from Sundarbans*. A more apt title would have been 'The *wild* man from Sundarbans' as this book was all about what I understood by 'savage': a naive and courageous man from the Sundarbans who, after having been saved by a forest official, had shown his gratitude by becoming his man-Friday. After a few episodes in Kolkata where he was duped into parting with his money on his way out to shop and into believing that the Victoria Memorial was Indraprastha (the city of the gods) and the women he saw there *apsaras* (nymph-like semi-divine creatures found in the city of the gods), he accompanied his master back to the Sundarbans where he helped him expose an evil tiger-charmer and saved his life from a band of poachers. His debt to civilisation now paid and, unhappy with city life, he returns 'to the forest unable to resist its call'. For a Calcutta (now Kolkata) kid this was as exotic as it could get and as a child I imagined that beyond the island where I had spent my holidays lay the 'wild' people this book depicted.

All through the 1980s, articles by various experts were published in the leading Kolkata dailies which debated whether the Sundarbans tigers were 'natural' man-

eaters.<sup>20</sup> The high numbers of villagers killed by tigers was a fact no one could ignore. But the reasons why tigers were seen preferring humans to animals like deer and monkey in the Sundarbans were the subject of long, acrimonious debates between natural scientists, various experts and wildlife conservationists from all over the world. Here it was not Jim Corbett's old man-eaters of Kumaon<sup>21</sup> attacking humans out of desperation, but young tigers seeking out humans by swimming over to villages and lifting people off boats. Some experts argued that the Sundarbans tiger's man-eating propensity was caused by the increasing brackishness of the rivers. They argued that this transformation forced Sundarbans tigers to depend on the 'sweetness' of human blood to obtain a certain dietary balance. Others added that, because the tide washes away the boundaries of the territory that the tiger marks with its urine, the Sundarbans tigers have no idea what constitutes a specific territory and that this is why they swim into villages and kill people and cattle. The inordinately aggressive character of the Sundarbans tigers, still others had maintained, might also be because they have to keep swimming for hours to stay afloat when the tide is in. The difficulty I had in those days in trying to separate reasons which were 'natural' from those which were 'unnatural' has remained to this day.

In the late 1980s, I had occasion to visit the Sundarbans again. This time it was while attending a 'Nature Study Camp' with my class as a high school student. We lodged in the only tourist spot of those days, which was the government-run Sajnekhali Guest House on the forested island of Sajnekhali. In those days, in order to combat the tiger's predilection for human flesh, the government had devised ruses such as electrified dummies placed in strategic spots in the forest, digging fresh-water ponds deep inside the jungle (to 'sweeten' the nature of tigers) and issuing masks free of charge to the villagers. The masks were given on the assumption that, as the tiger normally attacks from behind, they should be worn on the back of the head: this would puzzle the tiger who, seeing another pair of eyes peering out at him, would abandon the idea of preying on humans. Their foolproof status was guaranteed by

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<sup>20</sup> Chowdhury & Sanyal (1985a/b), Chakrabarti (1986), Rishi (1988), (to name a few) who all accept the findings of the first study of its kind which was undertaken by Hendrichs in 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Jim Corbett (1875–1955) was a famous hunter turned conservationist who wrote many exciting accounts of tracking and hunting man-eaters in the Kumaon region of the lower Himalayas. In his famous book *Man-eaters of Kumaon* (1946) he argues that tigers are never born man-eaters but only become so with age or when struck with a disability.

scientists, who commended the government highly for its widespread distribution of masks to the villagers. I remember the guards enthusiastically showing the masks to us while enumerating their merits. Intrigued by them and already convinced of their infallibility, a friend and I had asked if we could venture out of the tightly-fenced sanctuary wearing such masks to watch 'wildlife' 'out in the open'. The only places we had been allowed entry were the watchtowers high above the ground. The sanctuary itself was enclosed within gridded netting, like a big cage with an open sky, only it was we who were within the cage.

Slightly surprised by our keenness to explore the forest with the masks on, the forest guards explained that the forest was forbidden to us and that there was no question of us stepping out of the sanctuary without a dozen guards armed to their teeth. We argued that we had been told by the experts that the official thirty or so tiger victims of the previous year had all been villagers who had been too superstitious to wear the masks and that we should be allowed out as we weren't superstitious. Suddenly realising that the guards never moved without their rifles and thick plastic shields, even when straying barely fifty metres away from the gates of the sanctuary, my friend cheekily suggested that they should start wearing masks and pointed out how that might convert the villagers to accepting them. Their explanation that the masks wouldn't work, either for us, as we were 'healthy' kids, or for them because tigers were so used to seeing them with rifles that they wouldn't fear them if they wore masks, may have triggered my first tentative steps towards questioning the validity of a 'scientific mask' which is supposed to work for the gramer lok but not for forest guards and healthy Kolkata high school children.

A few weeks after this trip, on 29 November 1988, the Sundarbans was affected by one of the strongest cyclones ever to hit the place. This cyclone officially killed at least 500 people – the majority of them from the southern islands of the Sundarbans – and damaged crops worth 830 million rupees. Some people I had met on the Nature Study Camp and the Vice-director of the Tiger Project, Barun Sengupta, whom we had met and who had gone there for the tiger census (which takes place every second winter), were killed. Afraid of being swept off, those who had been taken by surprise by the cyclone while still outside had crawled back home or had held on to trees; those who hadn't were blown or swept away. The next day the few branches of those



trees which were still standing, and the rivers, were littered with corpses of humans and animals. The houses seemed to have been cut horizontally into two, the top half lying miles away.<sup>22</sup> As I had been there barely a few weeks before, the violence with which this cyclone had struck and the devastation it caused remained deeply etched in my memory. What was even more shocking was to see how, even after this disastrous cyclone, the Irrigation Department, the government body responsible for the condition of embankments and bunds, subsequently did not bother to devote a single page of the budget proposal to the problem of bunding or of land erosion in the Sundarbans. In October 1999 I witnessed similar indifference when, a couple of months into my fieldwork, a ‘super-cyclone’ was announced to be heading towards the Sundarbans. The only precautionary measures the government undertook were to dispatch three motorised boats to Sagar island – one of the more prosperous islands – as relief. The cyclone got deflected to Orissa and killed 20,000 people there.

Katy Gardner, in her narrations of field-work experiences, highlights how fieldwork, usually in some far-flung location, is Anthropology’s centrepiece, the ultimate transformative experience through which the students of the discipline must pass if they are to call themselves anthropologists (Gardner 1991:49). Though the island of the Sundarbans where I went to live for my fieldwork was in a far-flung location, the place had a certain air of familiarity – that had started in my childhood. I not only spoke the language and knew the codes of proper behaviour but often met people who had known me as a child. Thus fieldwork in the Sundarbans was far from being the ‘ultimate transformative experience’ and was rather more like a ‘return’ to a familiar landscape and known people.

Buoyed by Guha (1989a, 1989b) and Peluso’s (1992) writing I was keen to learn about resistance to state policies on conservation. I had many questions: how did the islanders make a living? What were the reasons for the shared cults in relation to the forest? I was also very keen to learn, after all these years, what had been the reasons behind the villagers’ refusal to wear the masks that had been so generously issued by the government. This study, is therefore, not only a record of ‘dialogical’ encounters; it is also to a certain extent based on a childhood fascination for a region sustained by

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<sup>22</sup> I am very grateful to Nazes Afroz, who was then present in the Sundarbans to report on the progress of the tiger census, for having shared these first-hand experiences of the cyclone and its aftermath.

years of patient collection of newspaper articles and bits of information from people who had links to the Sundarbans.

When I went to do fieldwork, the island where I had spent some of my childhood holidays had become an 'up' place where people were not going to the forest on a regular basis. My mother's friend had moved away from there and had settled, like many successful Sundarbans islanders, in the suburbs of Kolkata. I did not want to do fieldwork there. In the first month of fieldwork, while I was still in Kolkata, I came across a weekly column called 'Gramer diary' (village diary) on life in the Sundarbans written by Tushar Kanjilal and published in a Bengali daily called *Aajkaal*. Tushar Kanjilal was famous for having started, with his wife, an offshoot of the NGO Tagore Society for Rural Development (henceforth TSRD) in the Sundarbans in the late 1970s. When his wife was still alive they had both been living and working there as school teachers. I was very eager to meet him. He generously invited me and suggested that I meet his health workers who came twice a month to his NGO on the island of Rangabelia and who were from the villages situated 'at the tiger's lair'.

The first women's health meeting after my arrival happened to take place in Garjontola. I accompanied a group of women from Rangabelia. We arrived at one of the NGOs' health-workers' houses situated directly opposite the forest. Our hostess Maloti was the contact point of the NGO for that area. Her husband Hori soon returned from the forest laden with crabs and Maloti proceeded to cook them. As the fragrance of the food wafted in, I was suddenly filled with a deep calm and a conviction that I had reached the place where I should be doing fieldwork. On my way back, reminiscing over the delicious meal, the confidence and unassuming way with which our hostess had spoken to her neighbours who had gathered for the meeting and the ease with which she had included me in her distribution of household tasks, I asked the two women I was accompanying if they thought Maloti would be terribly inconvenienced if I were to settle in her place for a few months. When I returned, I found to my delight that the little hut I had sent some money for was built. I started living with my hostess Maloti, her husband Hori, and their three teenaged sons Robi, Ranob and Rothin.

I couldn't have chosen a better place to stay. Maloti, around thirty-five years of age, soon adopted me into her family as a younger sister and this made me free to enter the vaster web of kinship with the villagers and the more specific responsibility of being an 'aunt' to her three sons. As she worked for the TSRD as a health worker she regularly conducted surveys in her village as well as on other islands. While I lived there, cut off from the world except for a radio (which only gave Bangladesh or Kolkata news), she would be the one updating me on what was happening in the '*desh*' – the 'country' by which she meant the Sundarbans islands. Her confident yet non-obtrusive health advice made her a very popular person in the village and I benefited enormously from her comments and the many long nights we spent talking about our respective lives.

I initially eased my way into Garjontola 'village life' by offering my services at the local school. The local high school's English teacher had just left for a few months' training and the headmaster saw me as god-send. I taught there twice a week for three hours for about six months. This work plunged me into being a person with bona fide reasons to be in the Sundarbans instead of the detached, impersonal anthropological scholar I might have been. Soon however, it brought on all sorts of contradictory personal commitments (in relation to how my allegiances towards the riverside people could be misconstrued by the school people and vice versa) and, half-way through fieldwork, when the missing teacher returned I was happy to spend more time accompanying the forest fishers and prawn collectors on their forays and Maloti on some of her visits around neighbouring islands. I also joined in a few of the TSRD NGOs' activities. Seen as educated, I was invited for various literary meeting where I read out papers I had written. I also got involved in demonstrations against the WB government's proposed locating of a nuclear power plant in the Sundarbans and in general became the sort of 'circumstantial activist' who is always questioning and renegotiating identities in different sites (Marcus 1995:115).

Very early in my fieldwork I started a house-to-house survey. This made me attentive to the different groups of villagers and their different beliefs in relation to the forest. I would set off in the mornings with my list of questions and diary and stop by someone's house. Depending on the situation I would either conduct lengthy detailed interviews (often when there was only one person home) or try to get

different family members to comment on what they thought about an issue. I often launched on the subject of 'elected kinship' – a subject which always made family members talk and argue about individual relationships (developed in Chapter III). This is when I noticed that the justifications for people's arguments would invariably turn to tigers and the forest and how they situated themselves within it all.

The data I gathered was diligently recorded in notebooks and the act of recording was, thankfully enough, rarely seen as an intrusion. Actually my presence soon ceased to be seen as a novelty and people were keen that I should accomplish my dual mission of writing a book about their life and passing my PhD. Having a pen and paper were soon considered as necessary extensions of my 'legitimate' work and also tacitly sanctioned many of my trips and conversations. If it gave me urgency and purpose, it also often made the villagers feel self-important. And they very often freely reprimanded me for not writing down what I was being told as this was seen as shirking work. It also permitted me to find out what the villagers thought was important enough for me to write down and what they thought I shouldn't.

I am aware that the practice of observation as a method of recounting people's lives has come under close scrutiny (Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986) and have tried as much as possible to remain sensitive. The villagers soon roped me into various village activities and made me contribute to them. In a way, the mutuality of our 'observations' did not very much contribute to the distancing of a 'me' from a 'them'. If I learnt a lot about certain individuals, many learnt just as much about me and the curiosity we had for each others' 'lifeworlds' was often mutual. Can there be a universal agreement on ethics which would guide anthropological research? Even if one might be found, whose interests would it serve? I trust that in this study some of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans are allowed textual space where their voice may be heard. Yet in no way do I see myself as a medium – there are already many people from the Sundarbans writing histories and ethnographies of the region. Also, I have not explicitly attempted to give the Sundarbans people 'one voice', as such an endeavour seems to me somewhat impossible, generalising, and unnecessary. I have therefore tried to interconnect these different viewpoints and draw on narratives to give an interpretation which remains my own.

## I. 6. Thesis structure

This thesis is divided into six chapters, including this introduction. In the next chapter I will concentrate on the specificity of land in the Sundarbans and illustrate how it is seen as the locus of status where power relationships are played out. I will introduce the four main communities: Midnapuris, Muslims, East Bengalis and Adivasis of the 'down' islands, and their interactions with each other around the question of land. This will lead me to look at social differences at the village level: those of 'jati and 'dharma', those between forest workers and landowners and between the gramer lok and the bhadrlok. I will mention how the distinctions between people are reflected in the kind of islands and localities they live in and distinguish what is meant by 'up' and 'down'. I will also discuss how Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scotsman, tried to establish a co-operative society in three of the 'down' islands at the beginning of the twentieth century. What is interesting is that the forest fishers of Garjontola saw Hamilton's ideals of a classless society as doomed to fail because it was based on an economy of land – land being seen as inherently corrupting. In relation to this idea, how do questions around land get reflected in the way people understand sociality in Garjontola?

Chapter III will be about the forest and about the ways in which the ethos of the forest is lived out in day to day life. I shall discuss how forest fishers see themselves and tigers as children of Bonbibi. I will also discuss how they see the forest as the realm of Islam and how they explain that the forest products have to be equitably distributed amongst all. I will also look at work relations and how they are seen as equal when centred around the forest and hierarchical when around land. I will discuss how the villagers believe that their aggressiveness is to be blamed on the harsh environment of the Sundarbans and how this environment is seen as bringing about an element of 'complicity' between people and tigers. This connivance is expressed in the way tigers are seen to be invested with human attributes (emotions, feelings, social organisation) and in how the humans of the Sundarbans are seen as sharing the 'cantankerousness' of tigers. I have decided to use the somewhat archaic term 'cantankerous' to sum what the villagers meant when they explained how they

were easily annoyed, bad tempered and aggressive. In Bengali, the words used were *khitkhite* - 'short tempered', *hinshro* - 'aggressive', *ragi* - 'easily angered'

This sharing of a common 'cantankerous' nature will also permit me to look at forms of 'relatedness' popularly described as 'fictive' kinship. I will highlight the interpersonal relations of this system, a system which overrules religious and caste affiliations. I refer to it as 'elected' kinship. I also follow up on the argument about how the 'cantankerousness' which is believed to develop when living in the hostile surroundings of the Sundarbans is seen as an element of 'complicity' between the islanders and tigers. To what extent is this 'complicity' a reflection of how the islanders, especially the fishers, perceive the importance of a shared history and geography, and an 'elected' relatedness in the constitution of social relations with other fellow humans?

The objective of the first part of Chapter IV is to situate the history the islanders believe they share with tigers. Tigers have changed from being meek to being ferocious animals, argued the villagers, not only because of the harsh environment, but also because of the history they have had to go through. I shall develop how the narration of tigers' history of migration is a way for the villagers of talking about their own history. This leads me to explore how the forest's position as the domain of Islam can be interpreted in relation to historical records about Sufi saints and their 'symbiotic' relations with tigers. In the second half of this chapter I will develop the ways in which scientific knowledge has been deployed by state officials to prevent villagers from being killed by tigers. I look at the implications of these results on the way villagers, especially those who 'do the jungle', perceive the relationship between humans and tigers as changing. It also leads me to challenge the 'scientificity' which bases the identity of the Sundarbans tiger as 'man-eater' and ask to what extent 'science' is used as an instrument of rule.

Following on from Chapter IV, in Chapter V I will look at how the villagers situate themselves within the tension between, on the one hand, trusting Bonbibi and tiger-charmers and, on the other, trusting in the state's powers of protection. I will do this by discussing the prawn collectors' perceptions of their position vis à vis the forest. Unhappy with the ethos of the forest elaborated by the forest fishers who are

predominantly male, the prawn collectors, both male and female but more the latter, have taken up the worship of Kali as they see in her a deity more appropriate to be the patron of their violent occupation. I will develop the contrasting versions of the appropriateness of cosmologies by elaborating on a mixed Hindu-Muslim marriage and how it was perceived by the villagers.

In Chapter VI I look at how representations of the Sundarbans which portray it as a biosphere reserve fit only for tigers is challenged by the villagers. For them, such an image is propagated to jeopardise any real commitment on the part of the state, well-wishing NGOs or *bhadralok* citizens to recognising that the *gramer lok* might have aspirations for greater social justice. I will discuss how the riverside islanders feel that they are wrongly blamed for the environmental ills of the Sundarbans. In this context I will give the villagers' versions of the bloody story of Marichjhapi and how they believe that tigers had radically changed after this episode and had become 'uncontrollable' man-eaters. I will also highlight how, through this narrative, the villagers voice their fears about being, for the state, mere 'tiger food' – i.e. dispensable citizens – while tigers have become, through the various programs on the part of the government to increase their numbers, 'first-class citizens'.

The conclusion explores the web of connections between the processes of 'scientific' knowledge formation and its use by state officials, both colonial and contemporary. I contrast the images between the Sundarbans as a place 'not fit for humans' versus one which portrays it as the kingdom of the Royal Bengal tiger. I look at the contrast and the implications of these two images for the villagers. This leads me to challenge the 'scientificity' which identifies the Sundarbans tiger as a 'man-eater' and to ask to what extent 'science' is used as an instrument for establishing both state rule and international conservation agencies' hegemony, especially when 'scientific reasons' are comforting justifications for the lack of any master plan for the Sundarbans that supports people living there.

## **II. JUGGLING WITH TERRITORIES AND IDENTITIES: THE VILLAGE AND THE FOREST**

Garjontola, like many of the villages of the 'down' islands, stretches in a more or less horizontal line along the bund which serves as pathway and perimeter separating Satjelia island from the Pathar river. Breaking off in horizontal lines from the bund, at intervals of about a kilometre, elevated mud tracks pass through the interior of the island, bridging one end of the island to the other. Thus surrounded by a bund joined north to south and east to west by brick paths and intersected by innumerable mud tracks, this basin-like island from a bird's eye-view has the appearance of being held together by a loosely spun flimsy net. Houses, especially those of forest fishers and those who work in the prawn industry – collectors, dealers and businessmen – lie scattered lineally along the bund, whereas the houses of those who own land are neatly lined along the brick paths. The brick path, pride and joy of the villagers, all over the Sundarbans stands as the symbol of progress, status and political clout of the village, and particularly of its landed elite. It starts as big cemented blocks placed to serve as a jetty along the river-bank and strings along its way the houses of the elite of the village who thus do not have to get their feet muddied like those who use the dusty, smelly and rickety bund-paths to get to their homes. As mentioned earlier, the greatest socio-economic distinction in the Sundarbans is based on whether one is a landowner or a fisher and this is reflected not only in the kind of locality where one lives, but also in the distinctions between the geographies one uses. In this chapter, I will look at the symbolic import of land and agriculture, at the geographies of 'up' and how one becomes a *bhadralok*, by contrast to the locus of the forest, and to the geographies of 'down' and how one remains a *gramer lok*.

Agricultural land in the southern islands of the Sundarbans, very much as in the rest of WB, is the locus of violent and hierarchal relationships. However, if land is seen as, and in effect is, the greatest cause of acrimony amongst blood relatives and the primary boundary between the affluent and the deprived, it does not necessarily lead to the kind of exploitation seen in other parts of South Asia (such as in neighbouring Bihar or Uttar Pradesh). This is partly because fortune in the 'down' islands is easily made or lost through natural calamities such as storms or the constant shifting of the



course of rivers. When rivers shift course, they tear through bunds and reclaim land, leaving people suddenly landless from one day to the next. Shifts of fortune also arise from the introduction of new occupational activities, such as prawn seed collection and prawn farming, which enable the islanders, within a short time, to become relatively wealthy. The introduction of tiger prawn seed collection in the late 1970s and the mushrooming of aquaculture farms to the north of this region greatly reduced the exploitation of the landless by the landed and gave some security to the poorest and most marginalised. Prawn seed collection is an interesting activity because, while lucrative, it is of low social status. The village elite therefore neither practise nor invest in it and, consequently, their economic status has become somewhat threatened by successful prawn dealers (more on the prawn industry in Chapter V). The other factor which has contributed to the relative lack of land-related exploitation is the history of the Gosaba islands, and the fact that they were, as mentioned in Chapter I, bought by a Scotsman keen on developing a co-operative society.

Being a well-endowed landlord or a 'service holder' (as referred to in Chapter I) confers social status. This is the reason why those who come to the island to take up government jobs, such as school teaching, quickly invest in land. Even if a large part of their salaries gets diverted towards building a house or flat in the suburbs of Kolkata where they plan to retire, school teachers buy land in the village and hire people to work it or lease it out for a share of the crops. The distinction between large landowners (and this naturally includes 'service-holders') and those who hold a little land but do not live off it and who work in the forest or rivers is socially very clearly marked. Indeed, one of the markers of bhadralok status in the Sundarbans is one's access to the city, as it suggests not only wealth but also power: wealth because travelling from Garjontola one-way to Kolkata or its suburbs takes nearly a whole working day which is something the villagers cannot easily afford and can cost up to 140 rupees for a return trip, which is equivalent to roughly one-fifth of what a forest worker makes per month; power because close ties to the metropolis or to city people such as NGO workers, doctors, and forest officials living in or visiting the Sundarbans means access to jobs, help in writing letters, advice in law cases, etc.

In Garjontola the other reason why there is less exploitation and disparity of wealth

between people is because the gramer lok are predominantly from Koyra-Bedkashi in Bangladesh and thus have kinship ties with each other: this somewhat inhibits them from marking their differences. This will become clear in the last section of this chapter where I will show how the villagers dealt with relatives who have become richer. The only outsiders to Garjontola, and therefore the only ones the riverside people did not press for advantages or help, are the secondary school teachers, from whom they keep a distance. Amongst the school teachers there are those i) who are recruited to work as primary school teachers and clerks and who are from the more fortunate households of the village – both riverside as well as interior, and there are those ii) who come there on temporary deputation to work as high school teachers and who have little initial link to the village, most of them being from other parts of North and South 24-Parganas. Because of the large size of their salaries (around five times that of the fishers), school teachers and clerks are the new landowners and, like the zamindars of yore, usually leave the village once they retire. Certainly, the agrarian structure of Bengal more widely has been characterised by the extra-economic coercion of landless labourers and marginal farmers (Cooper 1988). However, in the island of Satjelia, because the landless and marginal depend on the forest and on prawn collection, their land-based exploitation, even though very much a reality, is less important than in the other parts of Bengal. Even so, presumably, over time the inequality of resources will harden into more marked differences within the village.

The symbolism of land in the Sundarbans' 'down' islands, where the forest is such an economic life-saver, lies in its alienation from the poor. In contrast to land, the realm of the forest is seen as favouring the deprived. If land, the fishers argue, ultimately leads to hierarchical relations, the dual quality of the forest, being 'equalising' as well as 'unifying', is seen as ultimately 'levelling' people. The relatively easy access to the forest is contrasted to the restricted access to land. But, in a place where one's holdings are not secure and where one can easily lose land, how are social relations between fishers and landowners negotiated? How is social status played out between these two economic groups in an area where most people are of the same caste and part of the same genealogy? After giving a brief introduction to the history of land relations in the Sundarbans, especially that of the 'Hamilton islands' (i.e. Gosaba, Rangabelia and Satjelia), I will turn to the socio-

geographic distinctions of what I have called ‘up’ and ‘down’ and thus address how the location of one’s homestead, one’s choice of occupation, and the changing of surnames ultimately reflects the construction of the divide between the *bhadralok* and the *gramer lok*. Through laying out these differences, the purpose of this chapter is to explore the Sundarbans inhabitants’ perceptions of the locales of land and forest as symbolic entities that have an inherent impact on social relationships.

## II. 1. Land and its particular history in the Sundarbans

As mentioned in Chapter I, an important social status marker in the Sundarbans is whether one lives ‘up’ or ‘down’. This distinction is used to differentiate between living on islands nearer the mainland rather than on those further south, and living in Kolkata or even in the three towns of the Sundarbans (Taki, Joynagar and Canning) as opposed to living in the villages (see maps on pages 216 and 218 showing the ‘up’ and the ‘down’ islands [marked in orange and yellow respectively] and the location of places in the text. This distinction between locations is also extended to localities within an island. As previously mentioned, the ‘serviceholders’ and landowners generally live in the interior of islands, and the fishers on the fringes. The latter group is thus more exposed to the danger of embankments breaking, tidal bores, and attacks by crocodiles and tigers, whereas the former group is less threatened by these – though not fully safe from them. This positioning of locations along an ‘up’ and ‘down’ gradation highlights what the villagers see as differences not only in economic options but also status. The Sundarbans region as a whole is considered ‘down’ because notoriously it is one of the poorest and least well connected region of WB. Travelling to Garjontola takes about seven to eight hours from Kolkata, which is about 130 kilometres away. At Canning, when the tide is low, men have to strip waist down and women have to hitch up their sarees to their hips to cross the fast-flowing river Bidya. It is understandable why the objective of those who are successful is to move to the next stage of ‘up’ from wherever they live. Those who, like the school teachers, have a salaried job buy a plot of land in the suburbs of Kolkata; the others content themselves with buying land ‘inside’ (*bhetore*), either the interior of their own island or on another one. The first indicator of social status in the Sundarbans is therefore where one lives. As I mentioned in

Chapter I, in the hierarchy of geographical locations the worst place one can live in is the periphery of islands adjoining the forest, in the 'down of downs' or at the 'gate of the tiger's lair'.

According to the 2001 census, WB is the most densely populated state of India with a population of 80 million, which means 904 people per square kilometre. There are nearly 4.5 million people in the WB Sundarbans region. The local government bodies are elected at three levels, namely Zila Parishad at the district level, Panchayat Samiti at the Block level, and Gram Panchayat at the Village level (i.e. one Gram Panchayat for about ten villages). The region is composed of thirteen Blocks of South 24-Parganas District and six blocks in the North 24-Parganas District;<sup>23</sup> each Block is represented at the Zila Parishad. The South 24-Parganas District headquarters – the offices of the Zila Parishad and that of the District Magistrate – are in Kolkata (at Alipur), and this further accentuates, for the islanders, the feeling of the marginalisation of their region.

The Left Front government came to office in 1977 after the culmination of a long process of regional agitation which started in the 1920s (Chatterjee 1997:67). Upon coming to power, the Left Front government was keen to implement the famous WB Land Reforms Act of 1955, which it subsequently further radicalised through the involvement of Panchayat bodies and the introduction of the Barga system. This system ensured that share-croppers got tenancy rights to the land they cultivated, while landlords only held the title deed. The specific land reforms: (i) guaranteed that the rights of sharecroppers were protected so that they got two-thirds of the produce and could not be evicted by force; (ii) enabled the government to take possession of surplus land and to undertake its distribution among the landless;<sup>24</sup> and (iii) provided housing sites to the homeless in the countryside (Siddiqui 1997:42). Thus agriculture, in the Sundarbans as in the rest of WB, is dominated by small and marginal farmers, who work more than 68% of the total cultivated area of the state. Besides,

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<sup>23</sup> South 24-Parganas: Canning I, Canning II, Joynagar I, Joynagar II, Mathurapur I, Mathurapur II, Kakdwip, Namkhana, Pathar Pratima, Sagar, Gosaba, Basanti, Kultali; North 24-Parganas: Sandeshkhali I, Sandeshkhali II, Hoara, Hingulganj, Minakhan, Hasnabad.

<sup>24</sup> One of the more drastic land reforms in WB has been the provision of rural homesteads to the rural poor. There have been two pieces of legislation following the WB Land Reforms Act: (i) the WB Acquisition and Settlement of Homestead Land Act 1969; and (ii) the WB Acquisition of Homestead Land for Agricultural Labourers, Artisans and Fishermen Act 1975. This latter Act transferred the ownership of homesteads (up to a limit of 1.08 acre and built before June 26 1975) to the rural landless poor who had occupied someone else's land (Bhaumik 1993:45-6).

redistribution of powers and functions at the local level, and especially amongst the most deprived groups, is at least in theory seen as necessary. In 1992, the 'party' (a term commonly used to refer to the Left Front government, whose biggest party is the CPIM) further amended the Panchayat Act of 1973, which made provision for the compulsory reservation of seats for members belonging to the SC and ST communities in all the three tiers of local government so that they would now be proportionate to the percentage of the population of these communities in the three respective tiers. Similarly, provision was made for the compulsory reservation of at least one-third of the total seats for women candidates.

The total population of the island of Satjelia where I did most of my fieldwork is 42,000 and its area 152,000 acres (about 240 square miles). It is composed of two regional (*anchal*) offices. The regional office has under its jurisdiction fifteen villages, of which Toofankhali is one. The Gram Panchayat, when I was there, was made up of nine RSP, eight TMC, and one CPIM members. The members of the Gram Panchayat held jobs as cultivators, school teachers, doctors (mostly formally unqualified), kerosene dealers, tourist guides to the Sajnekhali sanctuary, or the wives of those who held such jobs. It is interesting to note that there was not a single elected leader who was a jungle worker or a prawn seed collector or dealer even though the prawn dealers and businessmen actively engaged in politics.

The landed gentry, constituting 2% of the population, own per household unit between seven and sixteen acres (still very much within the twenty-five acre ceiling imposed by the 1955 Act). Even though in Garjontola these people hold about 30% of the total land; and even though the statistic for the landless is assumed to be 50% for the whole of the Sundarbans, the number of landless households in Garjontola is not as high (refer to Table III. a. in Appendix III on page 214). The landless are often young couples who have broken off from the larger household unit and who work on other people's lands or in the forest. Land is a constant cause of dispute both between and within household and families as well as between political parties. The Panchayats in the rural areas have the de facto power of playing an adjudicatory role in land disputes. However, the affluent prefer resorting to the more costly judiciary courts rather than the interventions made by these popular institutions. Endemic political rivalries, especially between the CPIM and the RSP, endlessly offer

obstacles to amicable settlements at the village level and so land disputes often lead to forcible harvesting or burning of fields of ripe standing crops and to violent murders.

## II. 2. The peculiar history of the Hamilton islands

It is important to note the special history of the Gosaba Block of islands. The three islands of the Gosaba Block were bought by Daniel Hamilton in the early 1900s and settled between the first and the third decades of the twentieth century. Hamilton was the senior partner and chief executive officer of the important Mackinnon Mackenzie & PNO Shipping Company. He bought these islands in a bid to show the British government why and how it should implement the co-operative system in rural India. To fight against the indebtedness of the rural cultivators, Hamilton invited indentured labourers to the islands by leasing out land to them on condition that they not alienate it. These people came from remote places such as northern Orissa, the highlands of Bihar, Midnapur and Khulna in Bengal. Bunds were erected, a distillation plant set up to convert the salty river water into potable water, and public water tanks, dispensaries, schools, and granaries were built. Hamilton laid out his own set of rules for these islands: land could not be bought or sold; it had to be cultivated by oneself; and the inhabitants were not allowed to gamble, drink, or maintain differences of religion or caste. Gosaba island became the headquarters of Hamilton's estate and his three islands were together referred to as 'Hamilton abad' and Hamilton, like a true zamindar, started naming the new villages which sprouted on these islands: Emilybari, Luxbagan, Annpur, Jamespur after family members.<sup>25</sup>

Hamilton however, was a different kind of zamindar. Hamilton's motto was 'honest labour makes an honest man' and he held that that 'credit worthiness' was determined by labour: he therefore decided to capitalise on labour and leased out twenty-five bighas of land and a loan of 200 rupees to each cultivator. Gradually, these programmes made the cultivators solvent. When the ex-money-lenders came chasing after them with legal documents in order to seize their new-found land and

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<sup>25</sup> Emilybari got its name from Hamilton's aunt; similarly Jamespur was named after Hamilton's nephew, Annpur was named after James' wife, and Luxbagan apparently after Hamilton's sister Lux.

paddy, Hamilton started his 'loan redemption scheme' in order to help the cultivators repay their money-lenders through long-term loans from the co-operative. He was so convinced that his system could sustain itself that he printed his own one-rupee currency, which was widely circulated in the three islands. The villagers had to repay the 200 rupees lent to them by selling their products at the co-operative society. Each village had a co-operative bank, a paddy shell society, a rice mill and a store for the sale of agricultural products. Directors of the village co-operative banks were called 'panchayat' and were responsible for the all-round development of the village; so finance, education, health, adjudication (except for serious offences) were all organised within the islands.

Alongside the schools, Hamilton also built non-formal training centres with subjects such as agriculture, carpentry, fruit processing, book-keeping, dairy farming, and hygiene, so as to impart the 'Art of Independent Livelihood' to the villagers. To boost the economic development of the village, an agro-research, animal husbandry and cottage industry training institute was developed. Soon the thirty-three units became self-governing villages, sending two representatives to the headquarters office in Gosaba twice a month. Hamilton was in close contact with Gandhi and Tagore. The latter even visited the place in December 1932 and with him Hamilton launched the 'Gosaba-Bolpur Co-operative Training Institute' whose mission was to train people to launch co-operative societies in India's rural areas.<sup>26</sup>

The main objective of education, believed Hamilton, was to 'build character' and make people 'trustworthy'. In his will Hamilton recommended that the villagers of his 'Hamilton abad' be exposed to a market economy only once they had become economically solvent. Between 1913 and 1937, thirty-three village co-operative societies mushroomed. In fact, this experiment initially worked so well that Hamilton wrote in his *The Road to Independence* that 'India's road to independence (within the empire [*sic!*]) runs through Gosaba with its sound Man Standard finance' (Bandyopadhyay & Matilal 2003:240). In his speeches he exhorted the government to follow his path and stressed how India's Independence should be first economic rather than political.

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<sup>26</sup> The central government gave a lakh and a half to this institute in 1938, but Hamilton died the following year and the project never materialised.

Hamilton's utopian dream of recreating a co-operative society is one of the popular stories the islanders love to dwell on because it gives their islands a sense of history rooted in the lofty ideals of social justice and the equitable redistribution of wealth. It was this initial just distribution of land which had made these islands peaceful, explained the villagers. Land however, is ultimately seen as inherently hierarchising and corrupting. The islanders blamed the subsequent violence that had broken out in these islands and the present inequalities in land possession on the bhadralok trustees of the Hamilton Trust who, not infused with the same zeal for social justice as Hamilton, had, after Hamilton's death, usurped both land and money Hamilton had left in his Trust for the islanders, before leaving the islands to return to Kolkata whence they had come. Afterwards, in the late 1950s, the government had seized the Trust on the grounds that it had become a zamindari. The fact that the three islands of the Hamilton abad have remained bereft of any fresh water source is believed by the islanders to be the result of a curse cast by Hamilton's spirit on seeing his dream of a co-operative society crushed.

If the foundations of the three Gosaba islands are the ideals of a co-operative sharing society, the general history of the Sundarbans is marred by violence – especially in relation to the state. After the state's annexation of the Hamilton islands in the 1950s, the other important factor for land-related violence was the en masse settling of refugees backed by the various leftist parties in the 1970s and 1980s. Landless refugees from Bangladesh were settled on land that had been grabbed from richer landlords.<sup>27</sup> This became possible through semi-legal means with the implementation in 1978 of the 1975 WB Acquisition of Homestead Land Act. This provision shaped the discourse around land rights<sup>28</sup> and legitimised the CPIM's and the RSP's grabbing of land from affluent landowners, who very often were Congress party supporters.

The 1970s and 1980s were marked by extreme hostility between these three political parties at the local level and they became notorious for taking turns in flooding entire areas with salt river water. Once crop-lands were destroyed, the political party with the greatest clout 'gave' it to the landless poor and the Bangladeshi refugees. Very

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<sup>27</sup> The notorious examples of forceful settlements were in Jharkhali and Hetalbari.

<sup>28</sup> For the whole of WB, until March 1996, it permitted about 273,000 landless persons to acquire homesteads (Siddiqui 1997:232).



often, these colonies were once again flooded, this time by the landlords backed by the Congress, to literally ‘flush out’ the refugees. Now, twenty years after these events, large areas of cultivable land have become the prerogative of the high-school teachers who are posted on these islands for the duration of their service. These reforms, despite their good intentions, did not on the whole decrease the percentage of the landless in the rest of the Sundarbans; instead, as demonstrated by recent studies, inequality of land ownership holdings in the state has increased overall (Bhaumik 1993:64; Siddiqui 1997:247; Harriss 2000; Hill 2003:2-3). However, in the present-day Hamilton islands of the Sundarbans, these discrepancies are fewer and the landless can at least settle without too much difficulty on the newly emerged lands which appear along certain parts of the island.<sup>29</sup>

It has been argued that in WB, the growth in agricultural output has been driven by private interests (Harriss 1993). However, in the case of the lower islands of the Sundarbans, because the service-holding landed gentry has no inclination to settle in the Sundarbans, they do not invest in long-term development projects for the villages they live in. Due not only to the geographical and political insecurity of the area, but also the negative social status linked to living in the Sundarbans, their concerns for the Sundarbans are mainly restricted to having tube-wells installed or brick paths laid alongside their houses. (Along the ‘up’/‘down’ division mentioned earlier, the poor live along the river’s edge or in ‘colonies’ established on reclaimed marshy land (such as Banikhali),<sup>30</sup> and the rich along brick roads, near schools, dispensaries and NGO offices.)

### **II. 3. The multiple meanings of *jati* and *dharma* and their import in the social interactions of the inhabitants of Garjontola**

What is the role of caste and religion in the construction of social and economic hierarchies and the marking of divisions between people? As outlined in chapter I, the inhabitants of Garjontola are for the most part of East Bengali origin

<sup>29</sup> Even though this latter kind of land (termed ‘wasteland’ in administrative jargon), as established by the WB Municipal Act 1993, enables municipal authorities to reclaim it for the promotion of social forestry (Siddiqui 1997:234).

<sup>30</sup> A marshland about six kilometres away from Garjontola which had been dried out only about a dozen years earlier and where the RSP had invited refugees to settle.

and belong to two of the lowest castes of Bengal, the Pod and the Namasudra. The other communities they closely interact with are their immediate neighbours, the Adivasis, and to a lesser extent the Midnapuris – so named because their origins are in Midnapur (mainly OBCs), and Muslims from both the Sundarbans and areas in the North 24-Parganas outside the Sundarbans. The villagers maintain that the divisions between these four communities are based on essential physical, cultural and psychological traits. Each group plays up stereotypes of other groups to denigrate them and attribute to themselves positive stereotypes that establish their own superiority. As we shall see, many of these revolved around each group's moment of settling in the Sundarbans and subsequent possession of land.

The Adivasis<sup>31</sup> – of Oraon and Munda origin – were brought to the Sundarbans as indentured labourers from Hazaribagh and Santhal Parganas<sup>32</sup> for clearing the forest, erecting bunds, building the railway system and the ports of Canning and Diamond harbour (Pargiter 1934:57). They were brought in primarily because they fitted the classificatory stereotype of the hard-working tribal,<sup>33</sup> and it was this alleged trait that launched their entry into the colonial labour market. Even if the term 'tribal' is a 'fiction creation by government officers' (Mathur 1972:460), or even if as structural categories 'tribe' and 'peasantry' are seen as being hardly distinct from each other (Devalle 1992; Pathy 1984), the socio-economic conditions of Adivasis are different from those of the others. The fact that Adivasis drink liquor, eat food considered 'impure' (such as pork), and are amongst the poorest, being 'tribal' conjures for non-Adivasis ideas of their being traditionally 'primitive' and 'wild'.

Adivasis in the Sundarbans are spoken of in very condescending terms as having 'given up their wild ways' after coming into contact with the other groups. Their assumed distinctiveness as hard workers is still being maintained in the Sundarbans by the government's bestowal of jobs related to the upkeep of bunds and embankments exclusively to them. The rationale behind such recruitment is not to

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<sup>31</sup> I prefer this term to 'tribal' which has justifiably been critiqued for being a colonial category constructed as a consequence of the European perception of India to give administrative sanction to the colonial state (Devalle 1992).

<sup>32</sup> Hazaribagh and Santhal Parganas are part of the Chotanagpur Plateau and situated in the newly formed state of Jharkhand.

<sup>33</sup> For an explanation of the basis on which the British classified their labourers see Ghosh (1999:33). Prakash (1992) makes an interesting observation about the perceived relation between aboriginality and cooli-hood especially in the context of the institutionalisation of the pursuit of Anthropology as the science of races.

pursue the wider government policy of uplifting socially backward communities, but because of the Adivasis' assumed physical prowess and 'natural' closeness to nature and their historical role in the Sundarbans reclamation. Yet, even though the other communities point at the Adivasi older generations' slight but distinctly accented Bengali and their physical features, the Adivasis consider themselves part of the wider Sundarbans rural Bengali community and do not maintain any links with their Adivasi kin in Chotanagpur.

The younger generation of Adivasis cannot be distinguished from members of the other communities. Adivasis have a long history of assimilation to the dominant communities in the Sundarbans. If they consisted of only 17% of the population of the Sundarbans at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is because 60% of them, already then, returned themselves as 'Hindu' on the census (O'Malley 1914:69). Today, partly due to the affirmative policy on equal opportunity in the public sector, 8.5% of the population of the Sundarbans return themselves as Adivasis. Successful Adivasis who have become school teachers and clerks are pulled between, on the one hand, changing their names and marking a total break with the Sundarbans and their Adivasi origin and, on the other, highlighting the fact that they are Adivasis and that the trickery of the other communities has deprived them of their land. They see themselves as 'honest' and 'strong' and often argue that their 'naturally truthful and courageous disposition' makes them especially suitable for the role of tiger-charmers.

The Midnapuris are considered of superior status not only because they are OBCs but also because they are, on the whole, the most educated and wealthy community in the Gosaba islands. The East Bengalis see them as aggressive and greedy for land. Midnapuris, at least in the Gosaba subdivision, are more literate than the other groups, wield considerable political power in NGOs and government offices, and are, along with the Muslims, part of the landed gentry. The population emigrated to the Hamilton islands in the 1940s, especially after the Bengal famine of 1943 when their region was one of the hardest hit. The Midnapuris are seen as arrogant because wealthy and because their OBC status makes them the socially dominant group. Their investment in plots of land in Midnapur or the suburbs of Kolkata is seen by the others as a lack of commitment to the Sundarbans and is deeply resented. There

are very few Midnapuri families in Satjelia. Most of them live in Gosaba and other islands which are 'up' in comparison to Satjelia. The Midnapuris believe that all the recriminations against them are due to the envy of those who have not been as successful as them. They talk about their community's numerous freedom fighters (some of whom escaped imprisonment or hanging by settling in the Sundarbans), about having produced the leaders and initiators of prominent revolutionary movements in Bengal, and see themselves as being the torch-bearers of civilisation in these 'down' islands of the Sundarbans.

The Muslims are generally seen, especially by the Midnapuris, as being hot-headed and belligerent and are usually blamed for the violence in the Sundarbans. This is so especially because, being landowners and prawn dealers, they are the biggest political and economic rivals of the successful Midnapuris. The Sundarbans Muslims resent the fact that they are wrongly blamed for a lot of the violence in the Sundarbans. They feel bitter about other communities dubbing them aggressive on account of their enterprise and courage. Indeed they are both famous and infamous for their risk-taking – whether in forest-related occupations such as honey collecting and poaching or in new occupations such as prawn dealing. In some islands they are an enterprising, successful community and see this as being the result of hard work and their fearless attitude. The Satjelia Muslims are seen as less intrepid than those of Gosaba. This might be because it is in Gosaba that they are the rivals of the Midnapuris and the stereotypes spread about each group are more acrimonious as the stakes for control of political power are much higher. In Satjelia, where there are fewer of them and where they are principally forest workers, Muslims are not seen as threatening to the landed.

The Adivasis, Midnapuris and Muslims usually refer to the East Bengalis as 'people of East Bengal' (*purba banger lok*) or with the derogatory caste name Pod (the slang meaning of *pōd* is 'arse'). East Bengalis are made fun of, especially by the Midnapuris, for eating their food 'raw', as the East Bengalis have a different way of cooking from the Midnapuris. East Bengalis retaliate by saying that Midnapuris eat their food 'charred' and joke about their dialect and the architecture of their houses, which they see as conducive to incest. This is because generally Midnapuris live in joint families whereas East Bengali families tend to live separately. Tensions

between East Bengalis and Midnapuris revolve around the fact that the latter, being socially and economically superior, 'accept' brides hypergamously from East Bengalis but refuse to give their own daughters to East Bengali grooms. There are some hypergamous marriages between wealthy East Bengalis and Midnapuris and between wealthy Adivasis and East Bengalis but inter-community marriages are rare and are increasingly being met with such social disapproval that lovers from two different communities will elope to get married and go to live with relatives in other villages or settle in shacks along the railway lines on the outskirts of Kolkata.

East Bengalis take pride in the fact that their dialect is used in famous literary works of such famous Bengali writers as Sarat Chattopadhyay or Manik Bandhopadhyay, while the dialect of the Midnapuris is not. They also see themselves as enterprising and hardworking and think that they are better-looking than the others because of their generally slightly lighter skin and taller frames. They blamed their inferior position on the fact that they were not as 'shrewd and scheming' as the Midnapuris, and they naturally thought themselves to be more cultured and 'educated' than them.

Finally, I would like to point out that much about the identity of the four groups revolves around their success or failure in the domain of landowning: the Midnapuris and Muslims are seen as being greedy for land. These two groups are also seen as trying to safeguard their social superiority by keeping close ties with their richer counterparts in Midnapur and Kolkatan suburbia for the Midnapuris, and North Bengal and Bangladesh for the Muslims. The Adivasis, socially and economically the most inferior group, see themselves as those who have been deceived by the other groups into parting with their land. The East Bengalis are described by the other groups as people who use political clout to usurp land. The other villagers say derogatorily of them that they come in 'flocks' and that if you give a small patch of land to one, the next day their whole village from Bangladesh is present. This of course is mainly due to the large immigration of Bangladeshi refugees to the Sundarbans in the 1970s and 1980s (more on this in Chapter VI). These different perceptions of people's connection to land is not without historical reasons but to what extent do they also reveal local constructions of ideas of caste and social status?

### II. 3.a. Jati

As has been explained above, if people see themselves as being defined primarily by the geographical origins of their community and secondly by how far their community has succeeded in the Sundarbans (the index for this being land), the forest fishers often stress that differences are overruled by the fact that they live in the same region. The landowners, on the other hand, because of the notoriety of the Sundarbans, try to disassociate themselves from this regional identification. In this section, I will simply highlight the use of the term 'jati' when talking of the four communities mentioned above. The Bengali jati, like the term 'caste', provides room for other collective identities such as those of religion, regional affiliation and gender. What I would like to underscore in this section is that these different understandings of group identities highlight the tensions between the broad group of islanders who define themselves as 'educated' and therefore part of the bhadralok, and those who see themselves as forest workers or prawn collectors. So the islanders see differences between each other first along socio-economic lines. Yet if education demarcates one as 'superior' to one's gramer lok kin, association with the forest, explained the forest fishers, 'levels' one, as the forest is seen as transforming all those who come into physical contact with it into 'one kind'.

Some of the forest workers have done well and have ensured a successful education for their children, who are now working as school teachers on other islands. However, although their children are part of the bhadralok, these forest workers, so long as they work as such, have to share equally with their team members whatever they get from the forest. The relative ease with which different generations from one family, or at times individuals in the course of their life, change occupation, is a recurring trait of the inhabitants of Lower Bengal, i.e. those of the southern part of both WB and Bangladesh. For example, Risley, a gazetteer-writer of the nineteenth century, asserted that, though the majority of Paundra-Kshatriyas<sup>34</sup> – the respectable name many Pods took up for purposes of census classifications – are engaged in

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<sup>34</sup> From O'Malley's census report we learn that the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans area, especially the districts of Khulna and the 24-Parganas, were Paundra-Kshatriyas (1913, Table XIII:181). The Namasudras and the Paundra-Kshatriyas, along with the Adivasis, are considered the 'original settlers' of these two districts (O'Malley, 1908:65).

agriculture, they were also traders, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, carpenters, and roof-thatchers. Some had 'risen to be zamindars, and some at the other end of the scale, worked as nomadic cultivators on freshly cleared land in the Sundarbans, changing their location every two or three years according to the fortune of their crops' (1981, II:176-177). O'Malley, another gazetteer-writer remarked how the term *bhasa pod* (floating Pod) was the new name 'applied generally to such immigrants without reference to caste', tradition having it that they were washed over to the 24-Parganas (the name of the administrative district of the western Sundarbans) from Hijili and other places in Midnapur in the cyclones of 1824 and 1834 (O'Malley 1914:84).

In the caste hierarchy of the four jatis mentioned, Midnapuris are at the top and Adivasis at the bottom, with Muslims and East Bengalis in between. Although most of the inhabitants of Garjontola come from the same caste, they rarely refer to themselves by their traditional caste name of 'Pod' and find it offensive. One day, when in the course of the conversation with a little gathering from Garjontola I was told that they were 'Pod', I asked who the Pod are. The story goes like this: Parasuram<sup>35</sup> needed people to come and fight on his side. When he came and asked the Pods' forefathers to volunteer their help and fight on his side, they got so scared that they crouched, hiding their faces in the upturned earth of their ploughed fields, their buttocks sticking out. When Parasuram saw this he said, 'why, these are not people, they're just posteriors.' 'Since then,' concluded the narrator, 'we have been stuck with that name, and naturally, we don't really fancy being called that.'<sup>36</sup> They therefore prefer the term 'SC' which permits them to be disassociated from the negative connotations of being a gramer lok with a caste name which might betray one's lowly rural origin. Calling oneself SC not only permits relative caste anonymity, should anyone ever ask, as well as enabling one to obtain social and economic benefits such as stipends for school-going children and government jobs. Thus the main way in which the villagers improve their social status is not so much

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<sup>35</sup> Parasuram wanted to wage a war against the Brahmins as they had not treated his mother with the respect due to a queen. He avenges her by exterminating them all. This story however, seems to be a local and much changed version of the original story. In it, Parasuram is a Brahmin king who avenges his father's death by coming back to earth eighteen times to exterminate all *Kshatriyas* (the warrior caste) and rid the world of their oppression.

<sup>36</sup> However, it seems that the Pods, like the other major Bengali cultivating castes, have long engaged in an upward status mobility effort, claiming the title Paundra-Kshatriya, which associates them mythically with the legendary Pundra of the Mahabharata.

through the adoption of what Srinivas (1965) calls *sanskritisation*<sup>37</sup> and the manipulation of the ‘idiom of ritual pollution’ (Lynch 1969:13).

However, in the Sundarbans more widely, upward mobility is not generally gained through the reinterpretation of what might have been the past of their *jatis*,<sup>38</sup> nor are political groups in any way organised along caste lines. In fact, the ordering of social statuses of the four *jatis* is often locally specific and linked to each group’s success on particular islands. Hence the importance of the island one comes from, whether one lives ‘up’ or ‘down’, whether one is landed or one works in the forest, whether one has family in Kolkata and its vicinity or not are all markers of social status. One’s connection to the city is the ultimate way of marking one’s status. So for example, while the four main *jatis* are usually endogamous, one of the ways used to gain a higher social status is by getting a bride or a groom from an ‘up’ island like Basanti or Sandeshkhali (though this is not extended to Muslims), and by, as much as possible, cutting off one’s ties to one’s rural roots. In the case of the ‘down’ islands of the Sundarbans, people try to assimilate to higher status groups by becoming a *bhadralok* through what Ruud has called ‘modernisation’ (1999a:258). This includes the ‘civilities’: knowledge of poetry, drama, Rabindranath Tagore’s songs,<sup>39</sup> as well as organising (whether Midnapuri, East Bengali or Adivasi Hindu)<sup>40</sup> the worship of the household goddesses of the Kolkata *bhadralok* Saraswati and Lokkhi.<sup>41</sup>

There are a number of reasons why most people in Garjontola do not care much about social hierarchies based on ritual purity and pollution. The first is because they are nearly all SCs of one particular caste (the Pod) and because most of the families of Garjontola are related to each other through a common relative – Pareshbabu. In Garjontola people easily ask each other for services such as a haircut, a hand in

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<sup>37</sup> The process by which lower castes seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes. I use this term even though, as Fuller points out, it confuses rhetoric with actual practice as there is no agreed *sanskritic* Hinduism (1992:24–8).

<sup>38</sup> Like, for example, the Jatav who deny their Untouchable status (Lynch 1969:69).

<sup>39</sup> Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) is the most well known poet, writer and composer of Bengal. He founded an experimental school in a village he named Shantiniketan (WB) based on the blending of Eastern and Western philosophies. In 1913 he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature.

<sup>40</sup> Even if calling Adivasis ‘Hindus’ is highly debatable, in the case of the Sundarbans the Adivasis would classify themselves as ‘Hindus’.

<sup>41</sup> The more popular worship of the goddess Durga was not undertaken by individuals in the Sundarbans because of the cost involved in her worship. She has, however, now become the goddess worshipped by the shop owners of the markets of the ‘down’ islands of the Sundarbans. At her festival, three images of her are placed at the three marketplaces of Satjelia island.



ploughing land, digging ponds, house construction, fetching wood for fuel from the forest, repairing boats and even officiating as priests (*pujari*). The priest of the forest workers is not recruited from the Brahmin caste but from amongst those who have been pilgrims to holy places.

The worship of Bonbibi, by far the most practised worship, does not need a priest but just a person to read the *Bonbibir Johuranamah* – the booklet which recounts, first, Bonbibi's story and then that of the young woodcutter, Dukhe. The person who has made the vow to Bonbibi (for all kinds of reasons) needs to do the worship herself and the requirements are that she should start and end the reading of the booklet with other people reading the middle. During the usual three hours it takes to read it, any person walking down a pathway where a Bonbibi worship is being conducted and knowing how to read is solicited to read a few pages to relieve the reader. Very often, especially in my role as school teacher, some of my neighbours would 'book' me to read for an hour or so. At other times, when walking past a Bonbibi worship I would be stopped and pleaded with, and had to oblige. I was always struck by the ease with which people would be recruited in – the only requirement being that they know how to read and not, as for other more mainstream Hindu rituals, that they were fasting and had washed. Other commonly practised forms of worship to deities such as Bonbibi, Satyanarayan, Manasa, Ganga also do not require a priest. Priests are solicited mainly by shopkeepers to do the rituals for the new financial year, by those who have rebuilt their houses, and by those (usually the landowners) who worship Saraswati, the goddess of learning. This obviously makes it impossible for priests to make ends meet so the rest of the time they continue with other more lucrative economic activities, which could be cultivating as well as prawn dealing. In fact, they do not list 'priesthood' when asked the occupation they engage in and their involvement in the crass material contingencies of economic life prevents them from becoming too particular with religious doctrine.

The other interesting reason given as to why in Garjontola most people do not care much about social hierarchies based on ritual purity and pollution relates to the fact that they work in the forest, with its 'equalising' ethos. This means not only that in itself the forest 'levels' hierarchical differences but also that people have to actively work at overcoming them. Being hierarchical could cost them their lives, they often

explained. This aspect of the forest's perceived influence on the 'equal' and 'equalising' social relationships expected of them is crucial and, to do justice to this, I shall devote the whole of the next chapter to it. Here, I simply want to highlight how the idea that the Sundarbans 'equalises' people is used to justify subtle social 'levelling' strategies undertaken all the time, such as stealing but also sharing. People steal from richer relatives, ruin their successful neighbours' fishing ponds and kill their prize roosters. But, on the other hand, people also feel obliged to share with their poorer relatives or neighbours their best sari or a valued piece of clothing, a newly received packet of sweets or fruits, a good haul of fish and crabs, or a hand at some task.

There definitely is an ambiguity over how one should live one's life – whether to follow the precepts of the forest or the increasingly popular bhadralok dominant ideology. In a bid to be part of this 'urban' middle class many islanders change surnames with obvious rural-sounding origins. So, for example, the Hauli or Aulia insist that their name is a wrong pronunciation of Haldar, Middhe of Mridha, Bachar of Barman, and Boddi or Hakim, who are traditional doctors, of Baidya. Similarly, the surnames Dāri, Mal, Malo, Majhi, which immediately connote one's traditional caste occupation as boatmen and fishers, is abandoned for the less obvious surnames Mondol, Mandal or Mondal (variant English spellings of the same Bengali name) – this name is not only the most common name of the 'down' islands of the Sundarbans but is easily adopted as it can belong to any of the four different communities.

One of the previous inhabitants of Garjontola, who has become a teacher at the prestigious Ramakrishna mission of Narendrapur, changed his name from Mal to Pathak as he felt that the second name better 'suited the occupation'. *Mal* or *malo* connotes the caste of boatmen and fishers whereas *pathak* literally means 'reader'. The Muslims and Adivasis, too, change their names, the Muslims changing them to Sheikh or keeping to the original surnames 'Morol', 'Laskar' while the Hindus are turning such names to 'Mondol' and 'Naskar' to demarcate them from the Muslims. The Adivasis change obvious Adivasi names such as 'Munda' to 'Mondol'. Possessing an obvious traditional caste name is seen as bearing the residue of rusticity and ignorance. The islanders also see such names as reducing their chances

of getting a 'service' job in the city. Therefore, one's caste and jati is subtly being masked and 'modernised' to suit the urban atmosphere where names which are 'rural-sounding' are distinct markers of inferiority and where one's claim to superior status can only be acquired through one's adherence to the subtle rules which govern the bhadrak sphere.

### II. 3. b. Dharma

Social differences are linked not only to economic activity but also to religious practice. Indeed, district gazetteer-writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were baffled by the way people in Lower Bengal changed their religious practices when changing occupations.<sup>42</sup> Many Muslims for example, categorised themselves as belonging to the Hindu caste Namasudra in the 1891 and 1901 censuses when they became fishers. The religious differences between the Muslim Sheikhs and the Hindu Namasudras have always been loose and arbitrary (Nicholas 1969:39-41). The Namasudras are the other important SC group in the Sundarbans (originally Untouchables and derogatorily called the 'Chandal'). They are not only a cultivating caste but were known in the past for practising a variety of other occupations: 'shopkeepers, goldsmiths, carpenters, oilmen, as well as successful traders' (Risley 1981:188). Similarly, many semi-nomadic fishermen, presumably of the Pod and Namasudra castes, on becoming sedentarised and tax-paying cultivators categorised themselves as Sheikh (a Muslim category) in the censuses of the beginning of the century because they saw cultivation as linked to Islam (Eaton 1987:10-11).

It is obvious that people in Lower Bengal have always been on the economic and social margins of Bengali society. They were brought to the region in order to reclaim forests and cultivate land and were initially cut off from their kin. Maybe to justify their lack of bhadrak practices of purity and pollution, the fishers sometimes said that their forefathers had abandoned these practices when they had arrived on the Sundarbans islands. People from different communities had then all eaten and worked together. They explained to me how, slowly, in a place where one's survival

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<sup>42</sup> See examples given by Risley (1891, II:176-177); O'Malley (1908:65-68); Webster (1911:39).

depended and still depends on one's neighbours' goodwill, they had grown to consider themselves as one community – the people of the Sundarbans (*sundarbaner manush*). They might have different culinary and religious practices, but when it came to face the unpredictable rivers and wild animals of the Sundarbans, they were reminded of their common humanity, was an explanation often provided for fishers' disengagement with the requirements of caste. The other reason cited was Hamilton's ideal of a co-operative society where they had all been given equal access to land and expected to be 'neither slave nor master'.

In fact, the economic and religious practices and social orbit of sharecroppers or labourers and fishers of Lower Bengal, whether Muslim or Hindu, have always been very similar.<sup>43</sup> Religious practice being very often linked to the occupation one practises, and occupation being something one easily changes, people shift religious practices when changing occupations. To match the example of Namasudras returning themselves as Muslim Sheikhs and vice versa, one could take the present-day religious transformation of those who become prawn collectors. Many villagers who were ex-forest workers or the wives of forest workers shifted from being Bonbibi worshippers to Kali worshippers when they became prawn collectors as they saw in Kali a deity more responsive to their situation and thus more appropriate as the patron of their new line of work. Similarly, one of the marked distinctions between the *bhadralok* and the *gramer lok* on a religious level is the kind of deities each group worships. The deities of the *bhadralok*, like the *bhadralok* themselves, are seen as belonging to a superior order as these are 'proper Hindu deities' as opposed to the marginal or 'improper' ones situated on the border of Hinduism and Islam of those engaged in what are seen as 'menial' occupations linked to the forest or the river.

In this context I would like to draw attention to the fact that the negative stereotypes of Sundarbans Muslims as being 'aggressive' and 'backward' is not extended to all Muslims. The inhabitants of riverside Garjontola each spring look forward to hosting urban Muslim bee-keepers for three months. The bee-keepers have been coming to the village since the early 1990s. They place between fifty and a hundred beehives in the cultivable garden patches of those villagers' homesteads which lie directly

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<sup>43</sup> As observed by Niyogi (1997); Bouez (1992:1-5); Dimock (1969:23-24); Nicholas (1969); Mitra (1903, 1917, 1918); O'Malley (1914:83-4, 1935).

opposite the forest. Amongst those who live along the river, the few households who own a lot of land and aspire to be *bhadralok* refuse to sublet their gardens to them. However, most of those who work in the forest or as prawn collectors are very happy to have them. The bee-keepers are, by Sundarbans villagers' standards, very educated, sophisticated and rich and, being part of the *bhadra* urban middle class, have all the attributes of progress such as a maximum of two children, a single wife and no beard. So in contrast to the Muslims of the Sundarbans who are denigrated as backward, the bee-keepers are considered to be of a higher social status. Their association with modern urbanity rather than with what is considered to be conservative country Islam prompted the villagers to pay the same deference towards them as they did towards city people.

These men, called the 'honey-men' (*modhuwala*), never stay more than a couple of nights at a time and usually leave a junior in charge of the hives. The fact that they are urban and better off is obvious by the paraphernalia of urbanity they sport, such as better quality cloths, watches, shoes and plastic bags, and by their use of a more refined Bengali language – and their incessant *bhadralok* complaints. The bee-keepers find it a terrible ordeal to live in the village, even when it is only for two days, and always go on about how, when they return to their own villages, their family members nag them about having become dark and thin. There are no facilities for tea or snacks, no electricity and no TV and, like any other visitor who visits these 'down' villages, they grumble about the lack of basic amenities. This reinforces the fishers' idea that they are living in a god-forsaken place where they are naturally considered by anyone who knows of their existence as mere 'tiger food'. It also reinforces their idea that the air, water and harsh conditions they are surrounded by make them cantankerous. 'Why,' the villagers would remark, 'even the suave and peaceful bee-keepers turn cantankerous when they stay here for two days.'

The residents of riverside Garjontola welcome the bee-keepers as this brings them cash, around twenty litres of honey, and much-appreciated entertainment and conversation. I found photos of the bee-keepers with the various family members of the household.<sup>44</sup> There are surprisingly no complaints about the bee-keepers' bees

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<sup>44</sup> As I came to understand it, a photo is considered a clear marker of who one associates with as well as proof of this association. Friends and elected kin often came to me to have their pictures taken

depleting the forest of its nectar supplies even though many of the bee-keepers' hosts occasionally depend on honey-collection from the forest. It is believed that the bee-keepers' bees, being smaller and more hard-working than the wild variety, lose no time first thing in the morning flying to the forest but, because these bees are 'foreign' or 'Italian', they are not very hardy and never really go very far inside and therefore do not threaten the forest honey collectors' wild honey bees. The local bee-keepers stress that the forest is an abundant 'storehouse' and that there are enough flowers for both sets of bees. Meanwhile, the service-holders and cultivators are bemused and completely ignore these intimate interactions between the bee-keepers and their riverine kin or neighbours.

The school teachers, regarding themselves as invested with the noble task of bringing *bhadra* knowledge and civility to the rustic gramer lok are keen to mark their elite status by organising the celebration of Saraswati puja and the birthdays of Tagore and Netaji<sup>45</sup> at the islands' primary and secondary schools. They change the names of those Hindu students who have Muslim names (Ghazi, Ali for boys and Zorina, Fatima, and Bonbibibi for girls). When I asked them why, I was told that it was because the gramer lok did not know better – they had, inadvertently 'wrongly' named their children and that it was up to the school teachers to give these students 'proper' names matching their religion, especially if these students were good enough to sit for public examinations. They felt that otherwise it would reflect badly on the village which would then be considered backward. When, however, I asked the grandparent of one of these children why she had named her granddaughter Zorina, she laughed uneasily at me and said, 'so?' Maybe thinking that I would judge her about 'not knowing better', she said 'in the Sundarbans, especially us living in the "downs", we all have to depend on the forest and on the protection of our forest deity Bonbibibi; aren't we all her children? We just drink from different breasts, Muslims eat cows, we eat goats, but we have the same blood flowing through our veins as we have the same mother.' I have already mentioned that an important aspect of social life is that, if one is an inhabitant of the part of the Sundarbans linked to the forest, one is part of a 'collective' which has to primarily adhere to the 'cosmology of the forest' but it is important to note that this is also seen

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together. At an election, each group of men, representative of different political parties, wanted me to take pictures 'for the record'.

<sup>45</sup> A prominent Bengali freedom fighter, Subhash Chandra Bose, who took up armed struggle.

as 'Islamic' which, for the gramer lok, conjures up an ethos of 'egalitarianism'. The fact that the realm of the forest is seen as 'Islamic' takes on great significance in light of what Eaton has argued about cultivators categorising themselves as Muslims at the beginning of the century because they saw cultivation as linked to Islam and Islam as bringing about greater equality between people (1987:10-11) and I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter IV.

Quite by chance, when I was once taken by one of my students to his family friends' house in another village, I discovered to my amazement that the children of the house had both a Hindu and a Muslim name because their parents are of both religions. I was surprised that I hadn't been given this information while we were on our way even though I had been briefed about the fact that my student's family friend was a singer by occupation. I soon learnt that theirs had not been a 'love' marriage. Tamal, the father of the children, narrated how he had gone to sing in a 'down' village. Enchanted by his voice, a middle-aged man had approached him with a marriage proposal for his daughter. This was because his daughter had a beautiful voice herself and wanted to marry someone from the 'singer jati' and not a fisherman like her father.

That he was a Muslim and his daughter a Hindu had not deterred either families, which surprised me and, when I pointed that out, Tamal explained that it is not uncommon to find Hindu-Muslim marriages throughout the Sundarbans and that these used to be much more prevalent in the earlier days – to add more credibility to this he said that his grandmother had been a Hindu too. To facilitate the marriage ritual, in the case of these mixed marriages, the girl converts to the man's religion and the wedding is performed according to the rites of the groom's religion. However, the bounded and limiting constructs of 'Hinduism' and 'Islam,' especially amongst the landed gentry, is increasingly gaining currency.

This section is best summed up by a scene from a beautiful novel, *Padma River Boatman*, where a group of Hindu and Muslim villagers are sailing off for a distant island of the Sundarbans. In it, Kuber, the main protagonist, a Hindu fisher and boatman (these two occupations go together), on seeing the two different cooking arrangements on the boat remarks to himself 'leave differences of religion and their

petty rules to those who make their living by tilling the soil – why should boatmen be bound by such trivialities?’ (Manik Bandopadhyaya 1973:94 [originally 1934]). The dejection of fishers has also been given voice in another important Bengali novel, *A River Called Titash* (1956) by Adwaita Mallabarman, himself a man from the fisher community of Malos. Both these novels give us poignant ‘thick descriptions’ of the marginalisation faced by this community, the harshness and precariousness of their lives, the kind of gender relations they shared, the interactions they had with the agricultural and trading communities, and their perception of the natural world and the terrible economic poverty fishers had sunk into by the early 1900s.

It appears from these novels that among fisher communities there was not the gender and caste segregation which existed and still exists in landowning castes and classes. The other interesting aspect in these books, an aspect which accords with what I found, is that fish, both of river and of sea, is considered as ‘commons’ property and ‘collectable’ by the poorest. Fishing was practised by fisher castes, castes that were generally landless (which, in the rural Bengali hierarchy of social relations, denotes being one of the lowest socio-economic communities). Similarly, in the ‘down’ islands of the Sundarbans, the main distinction between people is whether they depend primarily on rivers and the forest rather than on land. In the next section I will show how social relationships are lived out when status is attached to the location of one’s homestead and one’s occupation.

#### II. 4. The politics of homestead location

In the Bengali cultural understanding of land and house, it is not so much having a roof over one’s head that is important as having a *bhite* (homestead).<sup>46</sup> The *bhite* is the consecrated piece of land where one’s house is built, or where one’s parental house lies. It includes the courtyard and the adjoining non-cultivated land surrounding the house. Land is usually divided along horizontal strips from the bund, with a small kitchen garden patch in front, the homestead – usually consisting of a house and courtyard surrounded by thick mud walls (for protection against tigers) – and a pond behind the house and paddy fields beyond. Portions of cultivated fields

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<sup>46</sup> Indeed the Bengali word for ‘refugee’ is *udbastu* – which means ‘one without a homestead’.



are often given to sons for them to build their houses on. Having a bhite is so important that in violent fights people often curse their opponents with losing it.<sup>47</sup> In the section that follows I will discuss the issues involved in the choice of the location of homesteads.

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, Garjontola is roughly divided between the wealthy western area and the poorer southern area along the river. The residential area where the landed gentry live is called 'Schoolpara' because the big houses (three of them brick) of the area house most of the school teachers and because the brick path that strings these houses together leads to one of the two more important schools of the island. The houses located here are those of the late Pareshbabu's family, who own sixteen acres, the headmaster of Toofankhali High School, many of the school teachers, a couple of doctors, the school clerk, Tara the shop owner, the school matron<sup>48</sup> – in other words, the socio-economic 'elite' of Garjontola. The houses along this road do not share SC or ST divisions. These are the houses of those who are successful, either service-holders or landowners and they attend each other's festivities irrespective of jati or religious differences.

Yet, one of the first things that Badal, my host's cousin, told me when I arrived was that in Garjontola they are all related. In fact, because, as I mentioned earlier, half the village of Toofankhali is related to Pareshbabu, his past is intimately linked to Garjontola's history (refer to the genealogy on page 215 to place some of the names mentioned). Pareshbabu arrived from Bangladesh with nothing in his pockets and was known to have worked as a simple labourer on other people's fields. He had ended up the richest man of the village through an incredible combination of luck and shrewd moves. When, in the early 1950s, he shot a tiger the Scottish nephew of the erstwhile estate manager, Sir Daniel Hamilton, gave him three acres of land as a reward, his claim to fame and fortune was clinched. Soon after, he made the right political connections and married each of his nine daughters to very successful young men. He now had roughly sixteen times more land than the average villager, a tractor, a tiller, a registered boat and a two-floored brick house. His eldest daughter's

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<sup>47</sup> *Bhitay ghughu charano* means to raze someone's homestead to the ground, to render a person homeless or to ruin them completely.

<sup>48</sup> Incidentally she is the only Brahmin in Garjontola and came to the village in 1995 when she was appointed to work as the janitor at the High School. She lives in a portion of Pareshbabu's homestead.

marriage to Toofankhali High School's headmaster had mutually reinforced the two men's status.

Pareshbabu may have been the richest man in Garjontola but his blood relatives from riverside Garjontola stopped the usual exchange of food, tools and visits when, after being targeted by dacoits, he had shifted homesteads. Deciding that his house on the river's edge was no longer safe, he had moved towards the interior of the island nearer the school. He then had the Panchayat build a road to the school from the jetty so that from his house he could access both places easily. Even if the new homestead was barely five minutes' walk from the old one, by shifting his homestead from the river's edge to the interior Pareshbabu had moved 'up'. In time, he had invested some of his money in a flat in Kolkata, and his village homestead, now situated amongst those who have done well for themselves, stopped seeing any 'comings and goings' (*asha-jaowa*) from his kin living on the river's edge.

When I was still new to the village, Badal insisted on impressing upon me the fact that he has relatives living 'up' – meaning in Kolkata and its suburbs. Over the months I saw that there were no 'comings and goings' between the rural and the city relatives and noted the silences about them, punctuated by the significant phrase about their 'blood having changed', affected as it must have been by their shift of homesteads and the air of Kolkata. I realised then that, even though people are all related by blood, 'relatedness' is based on whether food is shared and visits exchanged. The location of one's homestead and the easy exchanges which are possible in relation to the geographical location of one's homestead are important not only to remain 'related' with one's kinsfolk but also in thinking the terms along which kinship is understood.<sup>49</sup> To better grasp how relations with blood relatives are negotiated and to introduce the widely practised custom of 'elected' relations, I will now show how Pareshbabu's poorer relatives separated from his immediate family over his funeral ceremony (*shradh*).

During the time I was conducting fieldwork, Pareshbabu died. The funeral ceremony created some ado as many of his Garjontola relatives refused to attend it on the

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<sup>49</sup> I will take the conventional facts about North Indian kinship in general and Bengali kinship in particular to be common knowledge.

grounds that ‘they had not been invited properly’. They felt that those from Schoolpara had been given preference over them because the Schoolpara crowd had been invited by Pareshbabu’s own son, Subhas, while they had been invited only by Nityo, a distant relative who worked for Pareshbabu. Yet, the acrimony was about more than this: it was also because Pareshbabu’s son had approached his neighbours, rather than his own blood kinsmen, to organise the ceremony. Those residing in well-off Schoolpara are the affluent Adivasis, SCs, OBCs and a couple of higher castes. ‘They’ve become his relatives just because they’re rich, eh! We, as family, as his “own crowd” (*mohal*)<sup>50</sup> should have been involved in the organisation of his funerary rites and asked to supervise the building of the marquee, do the marketing, cook, keep the accounts, organise for a singer and musicians to come,’ said Badal. So those from Garjontola who felt that they hadn’t been ‘properly invited’ had called a meeting and decided that they wouldn’t go. ‘What do they think? That there is no rice in Garjontola? Well they can stuff their faces in theirs, we’re not going. What is important is to participate, anyone can be called to eat!’ Lokkhi complained.

Nor was it only food or how it was offered but the fact that the poorer blood relatives had not been invited to help organise the ceremony. This was an indirect way of letting them know that their visits or ‘comings and goings’ to the homestead would not be welcome. Thus the poorer Garjontola relatives were not ready to compromise their self-respect by attending such a meal, even though this banquet held the fascinating attraction of good food, colourful clothes and the chance of catching up with long-lost relatives and generally provide a break from the humdrum of everyday life. One of the greatest rift-causing factors between blood families is thus moving one’s homestead ‘up’ and the subtle prioritising of certain people around invitation procedures, food sharing and access to homesteads.

Those whose homestead are worst off are those whose houses are nearest the bund. Walking on the crest of the bund, which is anywhere between two metres to five meters above the ground, one sees the houses stretched on one side and the river on the other. Beyond the houses lie the ponds and the fields. Now, due to a gradual shift of the Sush river bed, a long strip of land has emerged along the southern part of

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<sup>50</sup> *Mohal*, a term which gained currency during the Permanent Settlement, means ‘one’s own place’. Its literal meaning is ‘palace’; in the Sundarbans context it strangely denotes both a loose group of families all related by blood and also a geographical part, like a village *mohal* or a forest *mohal*.

Garjontola. Even though these new sand bars are considered government property, it is common practice for the inhabitants of the homesteads which lie directly in front to use them as a latrine ground or as parking spots for their boats. The villagers also collect any honey or twigs off the mangrove trees which sprout there. These newly emerged strips of land, as long as they remained 'un-bunded' and therefore submerged by the tide twice a day, are seen of no importance. Consequently, the villagers do not object to deprived relatives 'temporarily' settling along the bunds which are flanked by the new sandbars (though they are more mud than sand).

Settling directly along a bund is dangerous (tigers swimming over, high tide waves washing over the top, flooding fields and drowning houses). Generally, people are not desperate enough to build a permanent hut there. No crops can be grown on these strips of saline land and they are anyway soon overgrown with mangrove shrubs. It is, however, not uncommon to come across the little makeshift huts of people who have been marginalised built along the bunds adjoining the sandbars. These huts belong to old women who do not get along with their sons and daughters-in-law, women who are separated or widowed, or young women who are separated from their husbands,<sup>51</sup> either temporarily because their husband is working elsewhere as a labourer or because they do not get along with him any longer and have come back to their parental village. In places, on a platform jutting out from the crest of a bund, a makeshift shack, called *khoti*, is built along an adjoining fishery by a prawn fishery owner. These serve to watch over the fishery at night and are used as a prawn seed transaction area during the day. They also become temporary living spaces for prawn dealers during the busy months. Along the bund there are also little grocery stores built by men who have gone through high school but found no 'service job' and now think that working in the forest is below their status as 'educated'.

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<sup>51</sup> As highlighted by Agarwal (2000) and Basu (1992), the Left Front's land reform efforts have been completely gender insensitive. These reforms, for all the Government's good intentions, have not helped change the gender imbalance within the rural areas by, for example, extending the registration process to widows or female-headed households.

## II. 5. Conclusion

In contrast to living along the bund, living along a brick road is a mark of success, just as living in an 'up' island is versus living in a 'down' one. The location of one's homestead corresponds to social status. People rebuild their houses every three to five years and change homestead locations when they feel threatened by their neighbouring families and/or neighbours. Being well off in the Sundarbans makes you susceptible to the wrath of your poorer relatives. Indeed, this, and not so much the pan-Indian belief in the 'evil eye' was very often the reason given to me by fishers and landowners alike as to why successful people never remain in the 'down' islands. As mentioned earlier, the successful have their fisheries poisoned, their ripe crops harvested and stolen or even at times set ablaze, their houses attacked by dacoits. As I learnt in time, these acts are seen as justified on the grounds that 'in the Sundarbans, we're in the same boat' and anyone doing better is seen as having done so on the back of others and thus is seen as the 'legitimate' target of public outrage and its episodic outburst in violence. This has also to do with the fact that this is a fairly recently settled population, chiefly from the bottom of the social ladder and with heterogeneous regional origins.

Land and its possession are seen as fundamentally 'alienating'. If in the three Hamilton islands, its history is based in the equity initiated by Hamilton's co-operative dream, in the rest of the Sundarbans, land is infamous for the very hierarchical and divisive relationships it engenders. The people who settled in the 'down' islands come from very different locations and do not share similar ethnic and/or religious backgrounds. Yet what is of relevance is that divisions between people today are not so much based on these distinctions of jati or religion as whether one owns a substantial amount of land versus whether one depends on the forest. Land symbolises hierarchy and exploitation and is seen as dividing families. In contrast, I will explain in the next chapter how the forest is seen as the domain of 'equality', which unites everyone in a web of 'sharing'.

### III. IS SALT WATER THICKER THAN BLOOD?

#### NEGOTIATING THE SOLIDARITIES OF 'ELECTED' RELATIONSHIPS

In the last chapter I argued that, even though people in the Sundarbans are of different jatis, religions, and social backgrounds, they are divided along *gramer lok/bhadralok* lines and this is, in turn, intimately linked to perceptions and interactions with land and forest. In this chapter, I will focus on how the islanders perceive the forest and how they negotiate their interactions with each other in relation to it. Land, argue the villagers, leads to hierarchical and divisive relations. In contrast to land, the forest, both through the precepts left by the forest deity Bonbibi, and through the nature of dealings between the different team members, leads to 'unity and equality'.

This idea that the forest has to be shared between all is primarily because the forest is seen by the forest fishers as a 'common food storehouse' which does not distinguish between whom it feeds. In opposition to land and the restricted access to its fruits, the forest is seen as the realm where all are welcome to partake in its 'food' as long as this does not act to the detriment of those who need it most – whether tigers, deer, or crab-collectors. The importance of food and its sharing in the making and bonding of kin is of primary importance in the Bengali construction of sociality. As argued by Inden and Nicholas, in Bengal, shared food is the basis of relationships which are both given as well as chosen (1977).<sup>52</sup> What I will argue is that what ties humans and non-humans in a symbolic web of kinship is the common forest and the shared food and environment it provides.

This chapter will also lead me to explore how the islanders perceive and practise kinship and relatedness in a world where they have to adhere to two differing ideologies: that of the forest versus that of the village. Here I will concentrate particularly on the ideological sociality expected of Sundarbans islanders as forest fishers and the role of tiger-charmers. This chapter will principally be about how the forest fishers understand the cosmology of the forest. I will also look at the position of tiger-charmers and the dilemmas they face when reconciling the fact that they

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<sup>52</sup> Many studies have pointed out the importance of commensality in the constitution of kinship in South Asia (Lambert 2000; Raheja and Gold 1994; Uberoi 1994; Trawick 1990; Parry 1979; Östör et al 1982; Fruzzetti 1982; Inden & Nicholas 1977; Vatuk 1972).

have to consider the forest as sacred and peaceful when it is actually violent and is also becoming, in their own word, 'polluted'. I will also address how one remains 'sharing, egalitarian and peaceful' when tigers are violent and thieving. Finally, how does one live according to the precepts of the forest when the harsh environment one inhabits endows one with a 'cantankerous' disposition, i.e. arrogant, greedy, and violent?

### III. 1. Introducing the realm of the forest

Soon after my arrival, I was one night plunged into the heat of an ongoing debate about what is causing tigers to kill humans. Mihir, a fifty-five year old neighbour and a tiger-charmer who, throughout my time in Garjontola kept me enthralled with stories of the jungle, was that night explaining how his technique of 'remote-controlling' tigers worked. At one point he started telling us about an incident which had occurred a few days earlier. He narrated how, when his hand had refused to gently settle on the *mal* (forest earth/ground; I shall refer to this act as 'checking the earth') for him to say his charms, he had understood that there was a tiger whose charms were stronger than his and that it was best to leave the place. He then explained that his charm was not working against the tiger because the group of youngsters he was accompanying were acting in a very rowdy manner. Fearing for their lives, he told them to rush back to the boat while he desperately went on flinging charms towards the forest to keep the threatening tiger at bay.

Mihir then told us how after some time, realising that there was nothing more he could do, he decided to return to the boat. He then saw that his wife had refused to run towards the boat with the others and was courageously standing beside him. He now demonstrated to us how he had grabbed her arm and hurried back to the boat with her. Mihir concluded his narrative by saying that it was 'greed' – especially the prawn collectors' – violence between different parties, and the fact that there are too many people entering the forest which was causing tigers to feel disturbed and therefore annoyed with humans. Also, it was because humans were increasingly taking the forest for granted that the place was losing its sacredness which in the long term was ruining the effectiveness of charms. Here Prodip, the neighbour who

officiated as priest and wanted to be called ‘*Thakur*’ (literally ‘lord’, a term of respect and usually a Brahmin caste name), interjected sneering, ‘say instead that it’s women! Ha, how can your charms take effect if you take your wife to the forest and think about her while reciting them?’

Now Prodigip Mondol is also a neighbour and a first cousin of Hori Mondol, my host. He had of late become a ‘proper’ Vaishnavite<sup>53</sup> – which in this case meant that he had become vegetarian. The villagers often poked fun at him saying that he was lucky they did not tell his disciples that he ate fish when he proclaimed for all to hear that he was a vegetarian. People often got annoyed at the unsolicited display of erudition he indulged in at the slightest opportunity and, as he is the youngest of his generation in the Dwarik household (see genealogy on page 215), I often saw his brothers and cousins laugh at him. But the villagers put up with him as he used to act as their officiating priest and would whet their imagination with colourful narratives of the kind of food he was served at the various pilgrimage sites he had visited.<sup>54</sup> His accounts of his experiences at these sites were greatly enjoyed, especially one at a pilgrimage centre where he got the shock of his life by being ‘surely mistaken for a Naga’<sup>55</sup> and served what he took to be frogs, snakes, snails, and worms to eat.

Back to the story of the tiger-charmer: ‘No way, the charms weren’t working because the others were making such a din, it was only at the last minute that I rushed back with Kusum [Mihir’s wife] and had I not been present there would have been an accident,’<sup>56</sup> retorted Mihir. ‘The extent of your ignorance about the laws of purity and impurity surprises me, you don’t hesitate to take impure women into a sacred place and then you wonder why your charms do not work,’ snapped Prodigip. At which Mihir just rose and told his wife, ‘come, let’s leave’. We all pleaded, but he was adamant. ‘You see,’ said Prodigip turning to me after Mihir’s departure, ‘first he takes women to a place where there are so many restrictions about purity and

<sup>53</sup> Worship of Vishnu as the supreme deity, as well as his incarnations, Krishna or Rama. Vaishnavism is one of the major forms of Hinduism. It was popularised in 16th century Bengal by Chaitanya. Vaishnavism, characterised by an emphasis on *bhakti* (devotion) and simple worship of Krishna and Radha (Krishna’s consort) has since its inception appealed to the ritually lower stratum of society. Modern Vaishnavism, partly due to Hindutva ideology of unifying different schools of Hinduism, is increasingly finding popular resurgence in rural Bengal especially among the low castes.

<sup>54</sup> It was while on a pilgrimage that he realised that Vaishnavism was the ‘true religion’ (*sanatan dharma*).

<sup>55</sup> A Naga is someone from the state of Nagaland in the north-east of India. They are notorious for their taste for lizards, dogs, and other animals not usually eaten by the rest of the Indians.

<sup>56</sup> The term used when a person is killed by a tiger.



impurity and then he does not even have the mental concentration to keep his mind off his wife while he is trying to make his charms work.’ Prodip had earlier told me that he used to worship Bonbibi in his youth, when he used to go to the jungle regularly, and he had even, for a time, designed clay pictures of her. I asked what had made him abandon the worship of Bonbibi and take up Vaishnavism.

After giving me an impressive list of the things he does or those he refrains from doing (eating fish for example – at which Maloti scoffed) as a Vaishnavite, he then told me that he had become one because at least ‘they know the Hindu gods from the Muslim ones’. He also said that, after becoming a Vaishnavite, he stopped going to the jungle. Getting firewood once every month isn’t really considered as threatening your Vaishnavite identity and so I asked ‘But why have you stopped from going there? If you say Krishna is the supreme god then surely he has enough power to rescue you from any tiger.’ ‘No, the jungle is exclusively Ma Bonbibi’s and she is sent by Allah, and they are Islamic, so if I want to go there I would have to betray Krishna, and neither divinity would be happy.’ Prodip had the knack of getting on my hostess Maloti’s nerves and now she was annoyed that a few minutes earlier he had upset Mihir in such a rude way and in her house too. Losing patience at his list of dos and don’ts, which I was diligently transcribing, she said ‘purity and impurity has to do with the heart, not silly rules. Why, I call god’s name when I am in the loo shitting as it is the only moment of the day I have to myself.’ ‘How disgusting, to think you’d not have a better time and place to call god!’ snorted Prodip. ‘Well shitting is a god-given necessity so I don’t see the problem,’ she answered back.

I then asked Prodip why he thought women were ‘impure’ and shouldn’t be allowed into the forest. When he replied that it is because they menstruate, Maloti quipped that that too was a god-given necessity. A bit surprised that she was not showing more decorum, at least in front of the newly arrived guest (myself) and maybe to get back at her, Prodip said that women are less pure because they underwent operations to stop getting pregnant. Maloti had got herself sterilised and being a health-worker often enlisted women to undergo sterilisations. Their charms would remain ineffective because of the missing organ (as with Brahmin priests who have to have no impairments if their ritual worship is to have any effect), he said. I remained mum, but Maloti, not one to give up easily said ‘what about your appendicitis, I

presume its absence does not disturb you in the recitation of your *mantras* [sacred formulae recited during the worship offered to deities]?’ Prodip couldn’t find anything to say in reply to this and, annoyed at this public snubbing, got up to leave. Later, Maloti told me that only a few nit-wits from some distant villages believed him to be ‘a proper Vaishnavite’. ‘He does not adhere to half the rules he was listing; when worshipping, everything has to do with the heart, not silly pantomime. Besides, in the forest, one has to adhere to a different set of rules.’

What is considered of prime importance when one goes to the forest is to remain free from the divisions of *jati*. This is the reason why arguments over whether women should be allowed in are often the subject of heated discussion. Some of the jungle workers believe that the sacred forest will be defiled if women are allowed in. Others, like Mihir, believe that this is erroneous because, when one works in the forest, one has to overlook *jati* differences – whether these are of caste, of religion, or, indeed, of gender. Mihir, like many jungle workers, argued that women could even become tiger-charmers, that he knew of some who had, and that it is those who believe in upholding these differences that have ‘impure hearts’ – and therefore jeopardise the forest’s ‘purity’. When, out of curiosity, I asked to be taught some of the charms, I was told by Mihir that he would be ready to initiate me if I were ready to lead groups into the forest and give up crab-eating. As Mihir later explained, working in the forest does not give rise to the same kind of relations as those around land. ‘Interactions around land are hierarchical and violent as land is “status”; it makes people greedy and divides families,’ he said, ‘but the forest equalises and unites.’

To this effect, the little shelters which are erected in Bonbibi’s honour are rarely located on one’s homestead but along tracks or pathways. This is because the worship of Bonbibi is supposed to be accessible to anyone when on their way to the forest. On the two main days of her yearly worship, mid-January and mid-February, new images of her are placed in little shrines by those who want to take up forest work for the year or by the veterans of this line of work. As night falls, the villagers sit in little groups and worship Bonbibi by reading aloud her story from the *Bonbibir Johuranamah* (see photos of Bonbibi’s worship on pages 222–224). The villagers explain that it is important Bonbibi should be on pathways as she protects and

‘shows the way’ to those who travel along those paths, whether in the village or in the forest. She is interstitial and the mediator between village and forest, between the world of humans and the world of tigers. The shrines for important vows are located within the precinct of the forest, in small clearings on the banks of rivers.

According to the villagers, especially those who work in the forest, the goddess Bonbibi – the ‘woman of the forest’ – was sent by Allah to protect them against a greedy man-eating half Brahmin-sage half tiger-demon, Dokkhin Rai. Dokkhin Rai literally means ‘King of the South’ (in this case to be understood as referring to Lower Bengal).<sup>57</sup> Eaton, who documents the history of the Islamisation of Bengal, believes that Dokkhin Rai was most probably a minor deified king of the Sundarbans (1987:4). The fact that Bonbibi was sent by Allah makes it difficult for the recent followers of Vaishnavism to worship her. The Vaishnavites, touched by the religious fervour of new converts, are very keen to be part of what they see as conventional Hinduism and its separation between pure and impure, its easy rationale for differences of gender and religion. Emulating the ‘up’ islands, the villagers of the islands of Gosaba and Rangabelia organise big open-air fairs around the week of Krishna’s birth. These are usually held in fields where on one side a marquee is installed for villagers to sit and listen to various groups of artists singing night-long songs in Krishna’s honour and where on the other there are stalls of all kinds selling toys, snacks, and hot and cold beverages.

The understanding or ‘ethos’ around the forest and Bonbibi is different. Bonbibi’s worshippers insist that her cult is at the intersection between Hinduism and Islam and that she protects all communities equally. I enquired of a Muslim man who in his youth had been part of a Bonbibi theatre troupe why he had stopped performing her play. He replied that it was because ‘her play can only be acted when people of different jatis come together.’ After some members had left, the others felt that their group no longer represented enough communities. For fear of their group turning partisan, they had stopped altogether. He had wanted to gather a few people back together but then the *imam* had told them that if they wanted to be ‘true’ Muslims they should cease enacting Bonbibi’s story; so the man had stopped. Why is it crucial

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<sup>57</sup> It has been suggested to me by Professors Chris Fuller and Johnny Parry that Dokkhin Rai might be a reference to Shiva and/or Yama, the god of death, who is believed to reside in the symbolic south. However, the villagers themselves never made such a connection. I leave them the last word.

to be of different jatis when one wants to enact Bonbibi's story? The man explained that anyone can lay claim to Bonbibi. Hence there is an obligation on those who believe in her to ensure that she remains the 'egalitarian' goddess she is by letting her be accessible to all. This is warranted by building her shelters on the roadside, never putting a door on them – and never having people of only one jati sing out and enact her story.

### III. 2. Bonbibi – the adoptive mother of tigers and forest fishers

The forest fishers always refer to the story of Bonbibi as a prelude to the subject of their economic forays into the forest: as a sort of economic 'agreement' about equitable sharing of food and resources between humans and tigers. The full story goes like this: Dokkhin Rai was a Brahmin sage who lived in the forest. One day, in a fit of greed he decides to feed on humans. For this, he takes the form of a tiger. This is possible for him as, through his ascetic powers, he could magically transform himself into anything. In his increasing greed, the sage refuses to share any of the forest resources with humans and legitimises killing them as 'tax' (*kar*) for the products they usurp from what he has come to see as *his* jungle. Soon his arrogance and greed know no bounds and he proclaims himself lord and master of the mangrove (*badabon*) and of all the beings that inhabit it: the 370 million spirits, demons, godlings (*bhoots, prets, dakinis, deo*) and tigers. He becomes a demon (*rakkhosh*) who preys on humans. Tigers and spirits become the subjects of Dokkhin Rai and, emboldened by him, also start to terrorise and feed on humans. The trust that had existed between tigers and humans is thus broken.

The story then continues with the entry of Allah who, in compassion, decides to put a stop to the reign of 'terror' and lift the 'exploitative tax' that Dokkhin Rai extorts from the people of the 'land of the eighteen tides'. He chooses for this task Bonbibi, a young girl who lives in the forest. Bonbibi's father, Ibrahim, following his second wife's wishes, had abandoned his wife Gulalbibi in a forest while she was pregnant. Gulalbibi, gives birth to twins, but decides to keep only her son, Shah Jongoli, and abandons her daughter, Bonbibi. A deer takes pity on Bonbibi and becomes her surrogate mother. When she grows up, Bonbibi hears Allah calling her to free 'the

land of the eighteen tides' from the exploitation of the Brahmin man-eating sage who takes the form of a tiger. At the same time, Ibrahim comes to retrieve his wife and children but Bonbibī calls out to her brother and tells him to accompany her to Medina to receive the blessings of Fatima and to go to Mecca to bring back some earth from there to take to the 'land of the eighteen tides'. As they arrive in the 'the land of the eighteen tides', they call out Allah's name and mix the holy earth of Mecca with the earth of the Sundarbans. Dokkhin Rai resents their intrusion and their invocation of Allah and decides to drive them away. Rai's mother Narayani then insists that it is better for a woman to be fought by another woman and takes on Bonbibī. As she starts to lose the conflict, Narayani calls Bonbibī 'friend' (*sai*). Bonbibī, gratified by the appellation, accepts Narayani's 'friendship' and they stop warring.

In this part of the story there is a clear staging of a fight between the Hindu human/animal god Dokkhin Rai and the Muslim human/'god' Bonbibī. This may simply be because the *Bonbibir Johuranamah*, the booklet that narrates their story – was written by a Muslim Abdur Rahim towards the end of the 1800s, and is written, although in Bengali, from back to front. Moreover, the charms against tigers which Bonbibī is supposed to pass on in dreams are in Arabic. Dokkhin Rai is a Brahmin, a *muni* (sage) rather than a *pir* (Muslim holy man); his mother's name 'Narayani' is another name for the important Bengali Hindu goddess Durga. This fully inscribes him within the Hindu tradition. What is equally notable is that he stands for all that is wrong and brings about total chaos when he takes over the forest and incites tigers and spirits to kill people or to instil fear in their hearts. If Dokkhin Rai is the symbol of the benign sage turning into a blood-thirsty demon, the abandoned baby girl Bonbibī raised by a deer is, by contrast, chosen by Allah and turns into a powerful goddess.

The myth of Bonbibī is always followed by Dukhe's tale. Dukhe (literally 'sadness') was a young boy who lived with his widowed mother grazing other peoples' animals. His village uncle lures him into joining his team to work in the forest as a honey collector. Dokkhin Rai appears to the uncle, whose name is Dhona (from *dhon* meaning 'wealth') and promises him seven boats full of honey and wax if he can have Dukhe in return. After some hesitation, the uncle leaves Dukhe on the banks of

Kedokhali and sails off. (Kedokhali is the only island which remains totally under the control of Dokkhin Rai after Bonbibi establishes the forest as a kind of 'commons' to which all have equal access. 'Kedokhali' is translated as 'the island where there are only tears'.) Just as Dukhe is about to be devoured by Dokkhin Rai, he calls out to Bonbibi who rescues him and sends her brother Shah Jongoli to beat up Dokkhin Rai. In fear for his life, Dokkhin Rai runs off to his friend, the Ghazi (mentioned earlier) who in the Bonbibi story is Dokkhin Rai's only friend and ally. Ghazi, who is a pir (I will give a substantial explanation of the role of pirs in the next chapter), suggests Dokkhin Rai must ask forgiveness by calling Bonbibi 'mother'. He then takes him to Bonbibi and pleads on Dokkhin Rai's behalf. Bonbibi, heeding the Ghazi's intervention, accepts Dokkhin Rai as her 'son'.

However, Dokkhin Rai starts arguing that if humans are given a free reign there will be no forest left. So, to be fair and ensure that Dokkhin Rai and his retinue of tigers and spirits stop being a threat to humans, and humans stop being a threat to non-humans, Bonbibi elicits promises from Dukhe, Dokkhin Rai and the Ghazi that they are all to treat each other as 'brothers'. She does this by forcing Dokkhin Rai and the Ghazi to part with some of their wood and gold respectively and sends Dukhe back to the village a rich man so that he does not have to work in the forest again. Following on Dukhe's story, the islanders often explain that Bonbibi has left them the injunctions that they are to enter the forest only with a *pobitro mon* (pure heart) and *khali hate* (empty handed). The villagers explain that they have to identify completely with Dukhe, whose unfailing belief in Bonbibi saved him, and consider the forest as being only for those who are poor and for those who have no intention of taking more than what they need to survive. This is the 'agreement' between non-humans and humans that permits them both to depend on the forest and yet respect the others' needs. This arrangement, they say, can last only as long as those who have enough leave the forest and its resources to those who are dispossessed.

The other 'agreement' is between forms of religious worship and is based on the story mentioned earlier about the fight between the explicitly Hindu Dokkhin Rai and the Muslim Badi' Ghazi Khan. The story is a version of an epic poem called *Ray-Mangal* composed by Krishnaram Das in 1686 (it thus predates that of Bonbibi by a couple of hundred years). Eaton believes that this story is a 'personified memory

of the penetration of these same forests by Muslim pioneers' i.e. Sufi holy men (1987:4). Briefly, according to this myth, although the initial encounter between the two was hostile, the conflict was ultimately resolved by a compromise: Dokkhin Rai, the 'tiger-god', would continue to exercise authority over the whole of Lower Bengal yet people would show respect to Ghazi Khan by worshipping his burial spot. Today, the two always appear together. Dokkhin Rai is marked by the symbol of a human head and the Ghazi's tomb by a little earthen mound (these are also always present in the Bonobibi shrines for the simpler shrines<sup>58</sup> or represented in their full forms in the Bonbibi shrines or 'shelters' (see photos on pages 221 and 222). The story of Dokkhin Rai and the Ghazi's initial distrust and subsequent friendship is very popular in the villages which were reclaimed earlier, i.e. the 'up' islands and the mainland.<sup>59</sup>

For the islanders, Dokkhin Rai represents the domination of caste *and* class. He stands for hierarchy and his opposition to the 'ethos of equality' of the forest is shown by his declaring it to be his own private property, his jungle. He thus suddenly changes from being a sage (one who refuses material possessions) to becoming a rich zamindar who is jealous of his possessions, in this case wood. So, along with being a Brahmin – someone of a superior caste – Dokkhin Rai is also an exploitative landowner who is so greedy that he is 'keen to kill humans to feed his own greed' (I will come back to this point later). This is the reason why the forest fishers stress the fact that they have to consider all jatis 'equal'. Tigers and humans 'share the same food', they explained, because they both depend on the forest – tigers eat fish and crabs like the villagers, and like them, tigers are greedy for wood. These facts not only make tigers equal to humans but it also 'ties' them to humans. Also, Dokkhin Rai, the Ghazi and Bonbibi have to be placed together in shrines, point out the villagers, to show how different jatis and religions must come to an agreement when dealing with the forest. The forest fishers keep repeating that the most important factor for ensuring their safety in the forest, apart from entering the forest 'empty handed' and 'pure hearted', is that they should entrust their lives to Bonbibi and not highlight their differences.

<sup>58</sup> Also mentioned in Bhattacharyya (1947:49).

<sup>59</sup> This worship, though a marginal cult, was surprisingly widespread on the outskirts of Kolkata.

To recapitulate, the reasons why the Sundarbans forest fishers believe they are tied in a web of 'relatedness' with tigers is because they have the same symbolic mother in Bonbibi, who binds them to each other by urging them to be 'brothers'. The other reason why they share 'relatedness' is because they share a harsh environment which turns them all into 'cantankerous' beings. This idea is best illustrated through the discussions the villagers often have about the tigers from the Sundarbans which are in the Kolkata zoo. These tigers are said to have 'dried up' and have become 'like dogs' or 'mere shadows of their former selves' because they are cut off from the fresh food of the forest and the daily battle with the tough milieu of the Sundarbans. Correspondingly, the harsh life one lives in the 'down' islands of the Sundarbans, especially the life led by those who work in the forest, is believed to make people irritable and angry but also healthy and strong. Bonbibi, by eliciting an 'agreement' between Dukhe and Dokkhin Rai, i.e. from those who work in the forest and tigers, works towards tempering this angry violence of their necessarily aggression-prone relationship around the sharing of food from the forest.

Bonbibi is seen by the villagers as challenging: (i) the Hindu hierarchical caste system; (ii) private land-owning and therefore the zamindari system; (iii) gender inequality; and (iv) the difference between humans and animals. By defeating Dokkhin Rai's prerogative over the forest, Bonbibi is seen as ushering in 'Islamic egalitarianism' between different jatis – in this case tigers and humans, and by extension, between humans whether male or female and whether Hindu, Muslim or Adivasi. Moreover, by treating the forest as a 'commons', she is seen as breaking both caste and class distinctions (the latter in rural Bengal often along religious lines, the Hindus being rich and the Muslims poor).

### **III. 3. The tiger-charmer: being egalitarian and controlling violence**

Those ascribed the biggest responsibility to ensure this 'agreement' between tigers and humans are the tiger-charmers. They have the toughest job, of subtly negotiating between the groups of humans and non-humans. The islanders believe that those who have been blessed with a vision of Bonbibi (and in some cases Dokkhin Rai) become tiger-charmers. Tiger-charmers are expected to be humble and



peaceful so as to be in accordance with Bonbibi's wishes and yet also at times 'arrogant' and violent so as to be able to stand up to greedy Dokkhin Rai and those tigers who emulate him. It is tiger-charmers who decide in each specific situation the stance to adopt – whether meekness or defiance – to smooth potential disagreements between the two groups.

The tiger-charmer (*bauley*, also spelt *bawliya*, *bawali*) is considered to have the ability to control tigers. The word *bauley* has traditionally stood for 'woodcutter', 'leader of a group working in the forest' or 'tiger-charmer'. Today, the villagers use it just to mean 'tiger-charmer'. Tiger-charmers, have to follow 'Islamic rules' such as not entering the forest on Fridays (as Bonbibi goes to Medina for prayer [*jumma*] on that day), the holy day of the Muslims,<sup>60</sup> refrain from eating crab or pork, or lending or borrowing money with interest charges. Tiger-charmers never announce themselves as tiger-charmers. Very surprised by this, I initially thought that the reason for such wariness was the long statist tradition of blaming them for the high number of tiger victims in the Sundarbans. (Most forest working teams refuse to venture to the forest without a tiger-charmer. The mockery of tiger-charmers I came across in old gazetteer literature was very much echoed in current forest officials' narratives about how 'these people' feed on the gullibility of villagers and how they are 'worthless and invariably the first ones to be killed'. So they are blamed for leading the gullible to their death.) However, I soon realised that tiger-charmers' reluctance to announce themselves as such had a deeper reason which I shall come to later.

Most tiger-charmers work in the forest all year round. They work as crab collectors mainly in winter and as fishers in the monsoon season. Many also work as honey collectors in spring and from time to time, when the occasion presents itself, as woodcutters. They are not distinguished from the others when they go to the forest as fish or crab fishers; however, their presence is considered essential when going honey collecting or woodcutting. They are then supposed to 'feel' if it is sound to take people to the forest. They have the power to cancel a trip to the forest or to dissuade people from going there. The tiger-charmer is also believed to be able to control storms and cure ailments – especially spirit- and forest-related ones.

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<sup>60</sup> O'Malley highlights how the jungle-goers only worked six days each week, as one day was set apart for 'the worship of the sylvan deity presiding over that particular forest' (1908:193–94).

However, at the village level, tiger-charmers do not hold important political or economic positions. They see their role as being a ‘call’, usually from Bonbibibi, and therefore a sort of ‘vocation’. The landed, such as the forest officials, see them as the epitome of backwardness and superstition. However, most of the riverside people count on the tiger-charmers’ intervention to cure minor ailments and to exorcise them of ‘fears’ – usually those contracted by young people who visit the forest for the first time.

Tiger-charmers’ power is called upon when forest working teams land from the boat to go into the forest and, again, when they have to depart. They are the first to alight from the boat and the last ones to climb back in. Thus lurking tigers sometimes make off with the tiger-charmer even before he has time to utter his tiger-repelling charms. Once off the boat, his job is to crouch and ‘check the earth’ (*mal dekha*) by placing his hand on the earth – usually on a little mound – while reciting the names of the five pirs and the five bibis.<sup>61</sup> Once he has finished reciting his silent chants to pacify cantankerous non-humans – especially tigers and spirits – he ties a piece of earth to his body and keeps it there during the whole venture. Then, later, before leaving the forest, when all his team mates are safely back in the boat, he has to crouch again on the forest earth and break the spell he had cast when he first alighted, so that animals can again go about their ways unhindered.

These precautions are explained as showing that one does not mean any harm to the animals. ‘Checking the mal’ also permits tiger-charmers to ‘feel’ if they have arrived at a correct time. If they deem they have not, they return to the boat, as one of the important precautions when setting off for the forest is not to disturb animals unduly. Just as it is bad form to arrive at people’s houses during lunch or dinner, it is considered as asking for trouble to enter the forest during the animals’ dinner-time, which the islanders believe is at night. A ‘correct’ time to enter the forest is when tigers and other animals are resting, which is the morning and early afternoon. This is the reason why tiger-charmers usually refuse to go to the forest at night and resent poachers and prawn seed collectors, who are seen as not respecting wild animals’ need for privacy when feeding (more on this in Chapter V).

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<sup>61</sup> These are i) Ali Madhab, ii) Moklesh Fakir, iii) Jalal Fakir, iv) Mongolsh Shah and v) Moniruddin Fakir; the names of the five bibis: i) Bonbibibi, ii) Fulbibibi, iii) Gulalbibibi, iv) Dulalbibibi and v) Fatemabibi.

The tiger-charmers are to strike a balance between the needs of non-humans and those of humans. If, when trying to place their hand down, their fingers start quivering and their hand refuses to settle gently on the earth, the tiger-charmer either has to leave or say stronger charms. If they leave, they return to the boat and row it to another part of the forest where they ‘check the earth’ again. The important aspect of this ritual is to show total submission. As one tiger-charmer explained, ‘We crouch on the ground to ask for forgiveness from the forest and its inhabitants for barging in on them and upsetting their routine by the charms we use.’ This act of submission is also explained as having to let tigers know that the intruders are ‘beggars’ who need to be fed because they have nothing left to eat back home.

Most of the tiger-charmers I came across had taken up the task after receiving a vision of Bonbibi and mastering the charms she had taught them through dreams. The important thing, they said, was to remember that Bonbibi cares for the well-being of everyone and that, to ensure the forest animals’ needs, humans are supposed to enter with a humble and generous disposition, which recognises, as Mongol explained, ‘that the forest is the tiger’s realm.’ ‘I can’t just come to your homestead and chase you off from your own house and eat up your food, can I?’ or ‘We’re barging into his home, his place, shouldn’t we be meek and ask his pardon?’ were phrases I was repeatedly told. Mihir explained, ‘Before starting a charm I tell non-humans, especially tigers as they are those who have the biggest egos, “Listen, lord, you will have to clear off from the path I have chosen, you go yours, let me go mine,” or “Mother of mine, whether in water or in the jungle, clear my path, collect your tiger children to your bosom and show the way to these human children. Pleading your name, I say these words.”<sup>62</sup> This kind of opening situates our acknowledgment of our position and does not leave anybody “discontented”.’ So tiger-charmers have to strike a subtle balance between having the required humility when entering non-human territory and retaining their co-workers’ confidence through their reputation as being powerful.

<sup>62</sup> In Bengali: *shono prabhu, amar path amay chere dite hobe, tumi tomar pathe jao, ami amar pathe jayi* (the first line), and *mago, jole male, amar oi path chere dao, bagh shantan buke tene ei manobi shontander path dekhiye dao, ma tomar name dohai ei katha bolchi* (the second line).

As mentioned earlier, when tiger-charmers go as fishers to the forest they rarely use strong charms and do not dismount from their boats to 'check the earth'. However, when they go on dangerous ventures such as honey and wood collection, they have to back up mild 'pleas' with strong 'magical formulae'. This is where the tiger-charmer's expertise is seen as essential and where their credibility is most at stake as they have to ensure that the whole team will return to the village safely. Anyone can invoke Bonbibi to come to their succour when they are crab collecting or fishing, say the villagers, because, not taking much, they do not risk much. The work of wood or honey collecting is risky, they say, because it is 'stealing' from Dokkhin Rai. The magical formulae used in these riskier ventures are strong and are believed to have the effect of completely upsetting tigers and the other forest beings' routines. The most common charm consists in placing a folded leaf on the ground to symbolically hide any lurking tiger.<sup>63</sup> Another popular formula involves 'tying the towel'. In this case the tiger is transformed into a pebble or a small shell and kept tightly tied inside a towel, explained the villagers. These magical charms have the power to 'shut tigers' mouths', 'make them drowsy', 'force them to run away as if their bodies are on fire', 'make them ticklish and roll themselves on the ground.' These charms are therefore seen as violent.

The dilemma of these professional mediators between humans and non-humans very often emerges in conversation. The villagers often argue with each other about the potency of charms in this day and age. One night, after terrifying re-enactments of tigers the villagers had insisted he do for my benefit, Bharat, who had worked all his life in the forest, said, 'Nothing really works against tigers, they've tried masks, electrified dummies, and guards holding guns but nothing works. Your only protection is a total confidence in Ma Bonbibi; but this is impossible and when faced with a tiger you start doubting her, and your heart fills with fear. The solution then is to face up to the tiger and then you have to show him that you are stronger by letting out a string of loud insults.' He then continued, 'Long ago, whilst a tiger-charmer and I were crab-catching we felt that the *fakir* [tigers are very often referred to as 'fakirs' because like fakirs they too are believed to use magic and attack with counter spells] was around. The tiger-charmer ran away, I was disgusted and speechless, but

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<sup>63</sup> This was called *atali muri* and usually undertaken with a leaf from the gol tree.

suddenly I decided to face the tiger and said in a loud angry voice 'OK you have come to take me but first let me give you a good beating. This scared the fakir off.'

Bharat was one of the few to speak of his own courage and I attributed this to his great age and the fact that he no longer had to fear tigers as he did not go to the jungle any longer. I soon realised, however, that these were not the main reasons. He could hold forth in such a vainglorious way because, he admitted he had 'never taken the risk of being a tiger-charmer'. Why had he never become one? I wanted to know. He replied, 'Just as the tiger-charmer prepares a stick for the tiger, so too another stick is prepared for the tiger-charmer.' Becoming a tiger-charmer is a question of having the courage to become one, as the ultimate retribution is that, when you 'deal violence, you die in violence'. To acknowledge that one is a tiger-charmer in public is thus to invite the wrath of the non-humans, as this is seen as arrogance.

Thus the main reason why they do not want to acknowledge the fact that they are tiger-charmers is the very nature of their work, an occupation, they say, which necessarily uses 'violence' against animals. This is why, once their day's work is complete, or once they move away from the spot where they have been working, tiger-charmers have to try to limit the damage done by breaking the effect of their charms with the corresponding counter-charm. That is also why many forest fishers are reluctant to become tiger-charmers or to accompany groups on honey and wood collection and also why, when going on the less dangerous jobs of crab-collecting or fishing, professional tiger-charmers do not use these charms. Besides, the charms are seen as bothersome when undertaking these jobs because they are believed to have similar effects on crab and fish. 'How to catch fish,' Mihir asked rhetorically, 'if they are going to swim away as if their bodies were on fire? Or crabs, if they are going to keep their mouths shut and not bite their feed?'

#### **III. 4. Practical relations between forest fishers, prawn collectors, landowners**

Relations, whether blood or 'elected', are very often elaborated around the fact that the Sundarbans is a harsh environment which turns people aggressive and cantankerous as well as forthright. The villagers point to the poor quality land, the

fact that it can only be mono-cropped, that it can be reclaimed anytime by the saline rivers and that their houses are always under threat of being submerged or blown away by the next tidal bore or cyclone. The islanders often say that having to deal with these calamities and the constant fear of their occurrence makes them violent with each other. They illustrate this point by pointing to the general lawlessness, high number of murders, piracy and attacks by robbers in the region. The villagers believe that the constant interaction with the environment has the potential to transform them into 'violent beasts' – but also '*matir manush*' (people of the earth / earthen people, meaning gentle, amiable persons).

To what extent is the rhetoric of being a *matir manush* based on the cosmology of the forest, which demands that fairness and honesty be a conscious way of life? The following anecdote seems to be a good illustration. I was coming back from school and, seeing Mihir selling his crabs at one of the richer houses along the school road, I stopped so that we could walk back home together, as we were neighbours. During his transaction, I had been surprised to note that he sold his crabs on credit. As we walked back, I asked why he had not insisted on getting paid when the occupants of these houses said they would pay later. We both knew that the people living there have a ready supply of cash. He replied that he needed 'their goodwill' and explained that, with the kind of work he was doing, losing his temper could prove to be lethal. I assumed that this was a reflection of the typical patron/client scenario but, on seeing that he reacted the same way even with poorer clients, I was interested to learn more. I had also, on other occasions, seen Mihir feign anger with the schoolteachers; however, when he did so he rarely actually said that they 'owed' him the money for the crabs he had brought them, preferring instead to stress that he needed to build a new roof, pay a doctor's bill, or organise a wedding.

When I enquired why, I was told that the products of the jungle could not be exchanged, bartered or sold 'with anger'. These were items taken from the jungle – the forest goddess's 'storehouse'. They could be sold in the market or to specific wholesale crab and fish dealers and to individual villagers as long as there was no animosity and as long as the money made was to survive (i.e. not used to buy excess land or store gold). To insist on getting paid when another person wants them but cannot pay is tantamount to a repudiation of kinship or of amiable relations between

neighbours. So the economic morality of the forest is believed by the forest fishers as having to be 'production for use' rather than a 'production for exchange'. The danger, for a forest fishers is when s/he is tempted to go in for the latter kind of production, because, while self-provisioning is legitimate, profit is not. Also, the ideology of having to 'share with tigers' may be seen as a kind of Sahlinsian 'generalised reciprocity'. This makes sense in light of the fact that those who refuse the 'relatedness' link with tigers and other wild animals are the very ones who poach from the forest or who indulge in Sahlins' 'negative reciprocity' (1974:196).

Being a crab collector or a forest fisher does not allow one to make much money. Briefly, the economics of crab collection, for example, is as follows: Crab collectors usually set off for the forest in teams of threes. The share will be divided into four as the boat is considered as one person. The owner of the boat thus gets a greater amount but usually they take turns in using boats so that the extra amount evens out over the months. If a team wants to rent a boat then they usually pay rupees 250 for it. The price of obtaining passes and registering the boat comes to about rupees 100 per month. Per month they need about rupees 300 worth of rice, pulses and vegetable, and five kilograms of crab-feed (pieces of dried shark – early in the season. After the monsoon months however, fresh skin-peeled frogs are substituted for dried shark pieces). This amounts to a little less than rupees 220 per person per month, in costs. As their overall income is around rupees 900–1000 per month once rupees 220 is deducted they are left with 700 to 800 rupees.

Team work is very important for crab collectors (and forest fishers). While one rows a boat the other two have to tie the bait at the end of ten to twelve feet long strings attached at intervals of about four feet on a fine rope of about a kilometre long. Pieces of brick are also tied on to keep the thin rope close to the river bed. Once the bait has been tied onto the strings, the rope is gently unravelled into the shallow end of the canal, at a distance of about a metre from the bank. When they have come to the end of the rope they wait a quarter of an hour before slowly rowing back while at the same time gently pulling the fine rope back into the boat. While one rows the boat back to where they tied the end of the rope, a second person pulls the thin rope out of the water while a third jerks the crabs hanging to their feed (*thopa*) from the loose ends of the string into a little three cornered landing net (*jalti*). The crabs are

then placed at the bottom of the dinghy with some branches of the goran so that they do not tear off each others' claws, as that greatly diminishes their price.

The crabs are sold in three categories. The best are those above 400 grams or the female crabs above 300 grams and with eggs (*ghilu*), considered very tasty. The category below are the crabs weighing above 300 grams and category III are those which weigh above 200 grams. These have to be intact and are usually sold at a khoti for fifty to eighty rupees a kilogram. These are immediately shipped to Canning or Madhyamgram where they are auctioned and then packed before being sent off to the airport as export product. All the other crabs are sold between fifteen to thirty-five rupees a kilogram either house to house or at marketplaces to individuals. They catch around fifty kilograms of crab. In the fishing season, the forest fishers can get very lucky. In one day they can sometimes catch up to 250 kilograms of fish in one day. But when that happens, they immediately abandon staying on in the forest and return home to distribute the fish or sell it at a very cheap price. Once when that happened, they had been gone for barely four days when they returned with 250 kilograms of *ari* fish (a kind of oily sea fish). They sold the fish for an average of sixteen rupees per kilogram and made rupees 4000 in one go. But this is rare, they usually come across forest officials or dacoits who take some of their best fish and crabs on the grounds that these are government property. They are also fined if they are found in the core area or if they have fresh wood in their dinghy (the fine is of rupees ten per log). The LIC (life insurance) is now compulsory and their family is supposed to get rupees 45,000 if any accident was to happen to them (except hit by a storm!). They see their work as honest and this is why they are so careful to abide by the rules both of the state (they now rarely go without passes) and with the ideology of the forest.

While crab collectors are usually calm, wood collectors are less so and sometimes legitimise violent outbursts against the *bhadralok* on the grounds that they are helping fight injustice. One day Subhas, a jungle worker who had gone to collect wood from the jungle, angrily shouted back at one of the school teachers. He had been unloading some wood from his boat, when Nemai, the school teacher, asked him the price. 'Forty rupees a *maun* (unit of measuring wood roughly equal to forty kilograms)' replied Subhas. 'How expensive!' remarked Nemai. 'Now wait here, let's get our accounts right,' said Subhas angrily, 'How many *maun* do you think



there are on this dinghy and how many days' work do you think this represents? We've been battling with the forest and its dangers while you've been sitting cool in a school paid by our taxes; now just who do you think is trying to make a fool out of the other?' Nemai just walked away, his head hanging low, said Subhas. He then went on, 'I showed I was angry just to give him a lesson. Not many people have the guts to tell them the truth to their face because they act as money-lenders and because they think they are refined, yet it is of notorious that they are the biggest thieves and have no qualms about stealing from the government, like by ensuring that the brick roads pass in front of their houses or by taking bribes before hiring a new teacher.'

People who work in the forest are 'better' than those who work the land because the forest is a *pobitro jayga*, a 'pure/sacred place', the jungle workers explain. It is such a 'pure' place that food, whether cooked or collected from the forest (such as crabs or fruits), tastes divine because it is untainted by the violence and untouched by the polluted soil of the village, they said. The islanders often talk about the 'special healing nature' of the Sundarbans forest earth; this was made especially evident when a local forest official told me, as we were getting off a launch, to remove my shoes so as to better feel the 'earth connection'. He explained how the jungle soil has intrinsic cooling qualities beneficial for the well-being of the body. Echoing what the villagers often said, he told me that not only did the forest act as a 'purifier' and healer of mind and body ailments but also that it is imperative that one enters the forest with 'pure' disposition (here echoing the tiger-charmers). Those who did not would meet their death in the forest, the target of wild animals or killed by roots or branches of trees.<sup>64</sup>

It is not just the tiger-charmers who have to enter the forest with a 'pure heart'. To have a 'pure heart' one has to respect some very specific rules such as keeping quiet in the forest, not defecating, urinating or spitting on jungle land,<sup>65</sup> nor throwing bidi butts or burnt pieces of wood either in the river or in the forest, nor washing the soot off utensils nor combing hair, nor dropping one's axe nor inadvertently make any

<sup>64</sup> The numerous kinds of pneumatophoric roots of Sundarbans mangroves are real death traps. Some are like stilts all around trees and others stick out of the ground like spears; there are stories about inadvertent visitor tripping and getting impaled on them.

<sup>65</sup> When one needs to, then s/he should do so in the river or after having placed some leaves and branches over the soil so that impure matter did not touch the soil directly.

mark on a tree. The villagers also had to eat up any cooked food which might be remaining at home<sup>66</sup> before leaving for the jungle, or food in the boat before alighting on the forest territory. The villagers said that this is because when one possesses land or riches, in other words, when one has enough, one has to refrain from going to the forest as then the forest is not safe for that person.

This is why, after a good catch of fish or a very lucky collection of honey, the forest workers think it ominous to stay back in the forest even if the season or the tides are propitious for gathering more. Bonbibi was sent by Allah to curb Dokkhin Rai's uncontrolled greed for human flesh. It is now for humans to show the same kind of restraint and to abide by the laws of the jungle left by Bonbibi, they explained. Entering the forest with a 'pure heart' is even more demanding as it also means that one has to have shorn oneself of greed and deceitful motives (i.e. of the urge to hunt/poach). Animals are Bonbibi's 'elected' kin. Because a deer saved her life by suckling her, Bonbibi is believed to consider the deer of the forest as mothers. Similarly, as she has adopted Dokkhin Rai – the sage cum tiger – as her 'son', both directly and by becoming his mother Narayani's 'friend', she is related to tigers too. But Bonbibi is not only connected to non-humans. She also adopted Dukhe, a poor Sundarbans islander, as her son. Through the adoption of Dukhe she has adopted all those who depend on the forest. Tigers and forest fishers, linked by the same mother, Bonbibi, are thus 'brothers' and 'equal', as the forest in its 'purity' does not distinguish between the different beings that depend on it.

'This is why, before entering the jungle, we remit our lot to Bonbibi, vouchsafing mentioning to her that we are entering the jungle not of our own free will but forced by our economic situation,' said Sukumar Mridha. 'Some of us have been lucky to have received visions<sup>66</sup> of Bonbibi and we try to respect her injunctions: not going into the forest on Fridays, on a full moon or a new moon day, never killing deer or tigers, and reciting the formulae she teaches us in dreams. She knows that actually *we do not have the choice* and that if we go there it is because we are forced by our

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<sup>66</sup> Refusing to eat is the principal way of expressing resentment throughout Bengal, so I wondered if such a refusal implied that the person was lacking the much needed peace. Someone suggested that having a cooked meal waiting meant that you were not that badly off and that venturing into the forest in this circumstance was greedy. Delaying or refusing to eat showed your self-sufficiency and therefore your 'arrogance'. It also meant that if you were hungry you would invariably be tempted to take more than your fair share from the forest.

stomachs and the hungry mouths at home. This is why we jeer at those who have good situations yet go prawn collecting along the banks of these rivers full of hungry crocodiles or go to the jungle to poach deer or big tree logs in silly acts of bravado when their actual reason is greed,' he continued. 'Ultimately, the only ones safe,' he said, echoing what many others told me, 'are the crab and fish collectors, as they are satisfied with little [meaning that there is thus no risk of *depleting the storehouse of Bonbibi*] and, as they do not alight onto the soil of the jungle, they do not threaten the animals.'

The forest, like pilgrimage sites (one of the forest deities' place of worship – the Ghazi's – is called *pithasthan* (pilgrimage place)), can be seen as a sort of 'liminal phenomenon' that brings people who are in its realm to partake of a sense of community feeling (or 'communitas') with each other (Turner 1974:166). As such, the forest serves inherently to isolate one from one's socio-cultural environment, bringing people into 'a form of institutionalised or symbolic anti-structure' (Turner 1974:182). One of the important philosophical dilemmas of forest fishers, and especially of tiger-charmers, is trying to find a compromise between living a life ruled by the demands of the cosmology of the forest versus living one ruled by those of rural Bengali sociality.

### III. 5. The forest and its 'levelling' effect

How are relations in the forest 'equalising'? In contrast to land, where befriending the powerful and well-connected (those living 'up', politicians and bureaucrats) brings one success, the forest fishers believe that the forest has a common law for all. Bonbibi, the forest goddess, established regulatory laws for the 'proper management of the forest commons,' explained Mihir, and the forest is thus to be shared equitably between all. Thus humans and animals 'understand' each other because both know the laws bequeathed by Bonbibi. Many stories were narrated to show how dealings between non-humans were 'fair'. A popular 'true' story was about how a villager had caught a glimpse of a group of monkeys' sense of justice. 'A young monkey was playing tricks on another monkey and at one point started pulling his tail and beating him. The other monkeys, seeing this, caught the offending

monkey and buried him in the bank of the river with just his head sticking out. The tide started rising and the monkey was soon gasping for breath. After some time, the other monkeys thought the naughty monkey had been punished enough and let him go.' Dealings here were considered 'fair' because the monkey was punished and the punishment meted out seen as appropriate and just. When I asked how this is different from humans' sense of justice, Prodip explained that humans are malicious and would have unnecessarily hurt the offending human more than was necessary and that in their anger they might have gone to the extent of killing the other person.

It is because forest animals have such a heightened sense of justice, or are so 'pure', that the villagers think it improper to bring back any wild animal, fruits or vegetables from the forest to the village. As one of my newly wedded neighbours, Saira, a young woman married to one of Mihir's sons, described, the taste of forest fruits is 'like ambrosia', better than anything she had ever tasted before. When I asked her to tell her father-in-law and husband to bring back some for me so that I could taste them, she replied, 'But they'd turn bitter'. She then pointed at a coconut tree behind the house and said, 'One of my brother-in-laws tried. He was so delighted by the coconut he had tasted in the forest that he brought back one of the seeds and planted it but, having grown up in our village soil, the kernels are small and tasteless.' 'Why do you think that is so?' I asked. 'Well you see, the village earth is so poor that jungle trees find it difficult to adapt to it; we've been overworking the land and she's now old and overused. However, there's another reason everything tastes so much better there, even the food cooked with little oil and spices, and that is because everything there is so pure.' The village is 'polluted' by fights, divisions and hierarchies and this makes the forest fruits turn bitter, the forest animal unhappy, and us people unhealthy.' The forest soil is much richer and the yield of paddy and vegetables much better because it is 'holy land', since it is mixed with a clump of earth from Mecca, I was often told. Where the village is tainted because of violence and divisions, the forest is pure and sacred, just like its earth and honest animals.

The forest fishers therefore rarely bring back vegetables or fruits from the forest; nor do they track, kill or bring back any wild animals. Besides the risk of incurring Bonbibi's wrath, they said, these animals, being 'pure', have the power to curse human beings. Bhim told me that his uncle once brought back an otter from the

jungle and put it in the pond for the children to play with. They looked after it well and kept it a few days but had finally released it back into the river because it seemed to grow unhappy and weak. However, the separation between the forest and the village is not completely water-tight. Some of the forest animals are seen to be happy to 'settle' in the village for some time – female tigers come in winter to give birth, when the paddy crops are ripe and high, to protect the cubs from the prowling male tigers of the forest. Bimal had saved a hen by mending its wing during a trip working in the forest and when he was about to return to the village, the hen flew back to his boat and refused to leave him. Since then he had kept her with him, letting her sleep next to his cot at night. He said that, though she was tiny, she was the most courageous hen he had ever seen. She used to fly right into the face of danger and attacked kites that came near the chicks, and always saw to it that all the chicks were fed equally. He fed her in a special plate.

I had heard that possessing land compromises one's chances in the forest and that the more land and property one owns the less one's chances of coming back from the jungle safely. But somehow I had always thought that this was a mere figure of speech, a set of metaphors the villagers had to be heard using, for fear of reprisals, especially by lurking non-humans who take offence when they are spoken about trivially. I had been told that it is very dangerous if those working in the jungle fight or have misunderstandings with their neighbours and family members, particularly their husbands or wives. I knew about the importance for those working in the forest of having the goodwill of the whole village and the assurance of the care and affection of their loved ones if they want to return safely from the jungle. What surprised me was to see that this was actually widely shared and expressed in choosing how one deals with one's kin and neighbours – such as delaying the payment one receives for one's crabs, refusing to get into rows with one's neighbours, being a pauper or at least not possessing anything of importance like land or gold. It also means being generous and always being ready to give away anything one brings from the forest lest someone's covetous eye fall on it and cause misfortune and, of course, remembering not to be greedy. This rule was one day extended to me. My hostess Maloti, surely because she was fearing that I might fall victim to my intrepid stupidity in persisting in my wish to accompany Mihir to the forest even after she thought I had 'seen and known enough', asked, 'Wasn't Mihir

telling you the other day how you have to enter the forest with a pure heart and empty hands?' I said that I understood Mihir to have meant 'without either devious motives or firearms' and that I had neither. Maloti then explained that this could also be extended to not writing more about, nor taking more photos of, the forest than was necessary. 'Don't tempt the tiger,' she said in an attempt to close the chapter on my desire for future trips to the forest.

Briefly, to conclude, whereas land is symbolically linked to hierarchy, divisions and violence, the forest is seen by the *gramer lok* as a space which brings everyone to an equal level. The forest, by being the zone of peace and equality where all enter as 'children of the same mother' is 'pure'. This is why on a practical level people who work in the forest are required never to engage in hierarchical or divisive behaviour even when in the village. However, living so rigorously along the lines set by Bonbibi is very impractical. How does one adhere to the rules of staying 'pure-hearted' and 'empty handed'? How does one negotiate between being part of the 'violent' Sundarbans people because of the harsh geography and yet 'peaceful', 'forthright' and 'pure' by being a forest fisher? In the next section I will illustrate how understandings of land and forest and the corresponding expected behaviour are major causes of dilemma. If the forest is the sphere where all 'sharing' humans and non-humans are equal, how do people resolve their disputes and find a common plane of interaction between conflicting rhetorics around marriage, society, and social relations?

### **III. 6. The 'comings and goings' of relatives**

In Chapter II I stressed the importance of the homestead and its location. In this section I show how the islanders situate their relationships by reference to the site of their homesteads. I will also depict how being an inhabitant of the Sundarbans brings one to negotiate between (i) territories of the forest and those of the village; (ii) between the 'kind' of person one has to be in relation to these two locales; and (iii) blood and 'elected' relations.

One hot afternoon, after a particularly rough fight with her elder brother, Hori, my neighbour Arati declared loudly that she could not suffer her blood family any longer and that she would shift homesteads. Her shrill voice cursing her brothers, cousins and neighbours early each morning had made her infamous. Arati was in her early thirties. She had got married of her own volition when she was about twenty, had refused to live with her in-laws because of their resentment of their son marrying her. She had resolved the initial problem of finding a homestead by calling upon her school friend and distant cousin, the young Ratan, who was the upcoming RSP leader of their portion of the village, to find her and her husband a spot at Banikhali. Banikhali is a marshy place which the RSP party had distributed to the landless and Bangladeshi refugees and which lay at a distance from either of their villages.

When her husband had left for the Andaman Islands in search of work, she had come back to live on her parents' homestead where the couple had built a hut for themselves. Arati was then expecting their second child. All through her time at her mother's house Arati had never depended on her parents. Neither did she depend on her elder brother who lived separately. She had made ends meet by pulling the net along the river bank for tiger-prawn seed (though she would not have been able to do that had her mother and sister-in-law not taken care of her two sons). When their father had died in 1997, her mother and two brothers had refused to give her any land. Her brothers argued that she had received enough for her dowry (which she alleged was not true as hers was a 'love' as opposed to an 'arranged' marriage) and that, if they gave her a portion, they would have to give their other four sisters portions too, which was physically impossible as the whole of the land amounted to a bare two acres. Besides, Hori, the elder brother, having separated from his parents, could not lay any claim to his widowed mother's land and only owned half an acre.

Arati's example illustrates of the way people shift homesteads easily. She and her husband had first built a small hut in Banikhali. When the two children were born and she needed someone to look after them, she and her husband had settled on her parents' homestead after building an extension to their hut. Her husband worked in the forest while she continued being a prawn collector. In exchange for baby-sitting her sons, she gave her mother and sister-in-law some of the prawns and fish fry which gets caught in her prawn seed collecting net. Now that the children were going

to school and she and her husband had enough money put aside, she wanted a piece of the parental land on which to build separate hut. When her mother and brothers refused she decided to settle along the bund.

As discussed earlier, building one's house immediately along the bund means being on the margin not only of village geography but also of its sociality. This is why, initially, Arati's brothers and cousins tried to prevent her from building her house there. She remained adamant and found the place suitable for the following reasons. It was next to her friend Miti's house with whom she went prawn collecting. Miti was her neighbour, Sasadhar's wife, and she had a soft spot for his mother as she had been the only one to accept her marriage to her husband, who was younger as well as a forest fisher. And she was assured by her cousin, Ratan that she would not face party pressure to decamp. So Arati and her husband built their house along the bund. One end of the house rested on the bund and the other on stilts planted on the bank of the river. Her elder brother was furious, not so much because she had deprived him of his chance of laying claim to that piece of land (which anyway would have been of no immediate use to him) but because he saw it both as an affront and an unsafe spot for his two nephews of whom he was very fond. He, however, soon gave up trying to talk her into coming back because he realised that having her continue living on their homestead would lead to more fights, and his wife had had enough.

The ease with which Arati and her husband moved homesteads and huts is very representative of how the villagers move whenever they feel that the tension with their blood family members is becoming too much to bear. Also, because she worked as a prawn collector, she was wealthier than her landowning female cousins. Having cash at their disposal is increasingly enabling the riverside women to refuse the exploitation they constantly face, especially in peasant families, and this is the reason why many of them decide to live on their own. What, however, is interesting is that, when I pointed out this fact, I was told, especially by men, that it is because in the Sundarbans people have such cantankerous natures that they cannot bear to live together. This is also used to account for the way the islanders are continually aligning and realigning themselves into various groups and constantly openly fighting with each other. Having to 'wrestle with tigers and crocodiles each day' and



living in this salt environment makes one irritable and angry and always up for a fight, they quickly explained.

Let me illustrate this: I happened to be fishing one day as Arati passed by me to get to her younger brother's house to participate in one of their routine exchanges of tools, food and information. I told her how much I had enjoyed the prawn she had recently brought back after one of her fishing expeditions to her elder brother's family, Malati, Hori and their children with whom I was living. She had caught such a lot, she said, that she had distributed them all over the place. Curious to learn more about her web of food transactions, I asked her who else had been the beneficiaries of her generosity. She mentioned her mother and younger brother, her cousins and Sasadhar, our common neighbour. She must have noticed my extreme surprise as she hastily added, 'But I didn't step over his homestead, I didn't have to lose my face, I sent Tukai.' I said in disbelief, 'But you claim that he's been poisoning your roosters, and the other day you wished him terrible things: that he drown, that his house burn down, his eldest son die...' <sup>67</sup> 'He's a real monster, and we're not on talking terms but I sent Tukai, I didn't go there myself,' she insisted. Tukai is her little seven year old son. 'But the prawn were sent by you, weren't they? What is the point of giving something to somebody you always fight with?' I asked, puzzled. 'I'm friends with his wife and mother who supported my marriage, they're both always kind to me, the prawn was for them. Sasadhar is like my brothers, a mean, double-faced, lying bastard. But he borrowed some money from me which he needs to return. I can't afford to completely sever all ties with him as otherwise I will not see my money again. You see, we also need to have the goodwill of those who live around us,' she concluded as she left.

I knew that, being of the same age as well as neighbours, Sasadhar and Arati had played and fought together as children but what shocked me was the violence with which they, like the rest of the villagers still fought with each other – as well as how extremely generous they were with each other. Surprised by the acrimony of Arati's fights, I asked why she fought so often. She laughed out loud and said, 'But haven't you noticed that here it is a pastime we all engage in? We are "people of the low-tide lands" (*bhatir desher lok*), always in contact with salt air and water; we are

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<sup>67</sup> The three most terrible curses inflicted on a person in the Sundarbans (and presumably Bengal).

cantankerous, just like our tigers. Stay here for awhile and then see if this place doesn't affect your *bhadra* placidness; I can assure you that you too will be fighting like the rest of us.' Yet, a lot of the stories they told about each other highlighted the immense web of gratitude in which they seemed to be inextricably enmeshed. Sasadhar's mother had supported Arati's 'love' marriage; Sasadhar's wife used to go fishing with her and they had become close friends; during cyclones they had taken refuge in each other's houses and had begged food from each other during harsher times. Similarly, a few days after her terrible rows with her brothers, they were talking and exchanging food with each other again. Fighting, said Arati, is an evil they all have to put up with because they live in the Sundarbans but the important thing was to try and repair relations as soon as possible through the exchange of food and small talk.

### III. 7. Can salt water be thicker than blood?

The other very prevalent kind of 'relatedness' is 'making each other kin'. This 'kin-making' very much resembles the descriptions of 'fictive' kinship in the anthropological literature by Lambert (2000) or of 'ceremonial' relations (Bhowmick 1976: 74). I prefer to use the term 'elected' rather than 'fictive' or 'ceremonial' because I feel that these terms do not appropriately reflect both the degree to which such relationships are assimilated to blood ones and the element of affect on which they are held to be based. Such ties include those not only between same-aged people who call each other 'friend',<sup>68</sup> but also relationships between people of the opposite sex (who then refer to each other as 'brother' or 'sister') and of different ages. One can have such a relation with a woman of one's mother's age or classificatory group who is then literally described as one's 'flower mother' (*ful-ma* because they would 'tie' themselves to each other through an exchange of flowers) or with a man of the same category as one's father and called 'god-father' (*dharmā bap*) or with people of the age of one's children and referred to as 'god-daughter' (*dharam-meye*) or 'god-son' (*dharam-chele*). The terms of appellation are similar to those used for blood kin and very often the relation is solemnised through rites.

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<sup>68</sup> *Bondhu* for male friends and *sai* for female friends. It is important to note that *sai* is a loaded word and its import is often highlighted in reference to Bonbibi's story and her 'friendship' to Narayani.

For the ritual solemnisation of such relations, an auspicious date<sup>69</sup> is picked and both families invite close blood kin, neighbours, and previously 'elected' relatives. A festive meal is cooked, a new set of clothes exchanged and then, asking 'the sun and moon to be witnesses (sometimes Bonbibbi or Gangadevi are invoked in place of the sun and moon), they establish that, from that day on, the other person is a *mother, father, daughter, son* or *friend*. Performing this ceremony means that the two families are now required to invite each other to all their social and religious ceremonies and to come to each other's succour in times of need. On a daily basis it means being able to eat, visit and stay at each others' houses. Once two people are 'united' in this way, the relation their families share with each other is lived out in the idioms of blood. This consists of respecting the rules of consanguinity, one being that neither family can marry into the other. This bond often stretches over generations and at least one representative from the descendants of such families are present at social ceremonies.

As I started seeing it, these relationships are at the centre of new webs of social interactions and play a vital role in the exchange of food and information between villagers. As such 'relatives' are often from different villages, the islanders draw on them when cross-checking important information such as the credentials of a 'suitable' bride or groom for the marriage of a younger relative, or are called upon for information on political connections and parties, or again when to find out the price of something, whether it be land, potatoes or fishing nets. These relations are also very useful and come in handy when food or temporary shelter is required, for instance, when one is caught in a thunder storm or stranded on an island because one has missed the boat, or needs rest after having walked several kilometres.

How are these relations embedded in the wider relations of blood, jati, religion or class? Elected relations sometimes meet the disapproval of blood family members who do not necessarily see the need to 'increase relatives'. Those blood relatives who are not ready to share with these new relatives grow distant and break off all interaction with their own kin. During my house-to-house survey, those I questioned were rarely indifferent to this custom. Some of them deplored it, saying that the

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<sup>69</sup> Makar Sankranti occurs mid-January. It is also the main day on which Bonbibbi is worshipped, the other day being mid-February.

custom is not practical or that it is too expensive.<sup>70</sup> The complaints people have against their 'elected' relatives are generally of the same order as those levelled against blood kin – that they are selfish. However, the riverside people also pointed out that it is the landowners who are the staunchest critics of this system even though they themselves have many such 'friends', especially city-living ones. They say that this is because landowners are self-centred and hierarchical and do not have the same understanding of the Sundarbans environment as themselves. However, when I pointed out that, at Pareshababu's funeral, his family had invited their Adivasi and Muslim friends, they replied that their relationships to these people weren't bound in the 'sun and moon' or in Bonbibi as were theirs and were just 'relations' of convenience without a 'mirroring of hearts'.

There are many reasons why people enter 'elected' relations. As in Midnapur (Bhowmick 1976), around 4% of people entered such relations with the belief that it would cure their child. Sickly children are sometimes paired to the healthy child (in some rare cases with the child of an inferior caste)<sup>71</sup> and 'polluted' food exchanged (*etho* – food considered polluted because touched or tasted by someone else). It is believed that such a pairing 'unites' by blood the two children and thus annihilates the negative effects of the 'evil eye'<sup>72</sup> on the sickly child. The other reason – and it accounts for 6% of elected relations – is to show recognition for a favour. Here relations are initiated with those (usually doctors and veterinarians) who have managed in extremis to save one's child or one's milk cow from death. These naturally have the tendency to lead to unequal, exploitative and resentful patron-client type relationships and the villagers mention in this respect having been cheated or not treated as 'one's own'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> A woman told me that her mother had 'paired' her with a dog as they were too poor to add yet another set of relatives to their already impoverished family.

<sup>71</sup> Very often that of an Adivasi. Though the Adivasis, the first to have been brought to the Sundarbans to reclaim forested land, had initially been allowed to settle and cultivate that land, they were either evicted or resettled on the same land as sharecroppers (Bhaumik, 1993:31). Many also had their land wrested from them by the arrival of affluent cultivating communities (Das 1968:14). In the present day, as a community, they hold the least amount of land in the Sundarbans.

<sup>72</sup> 'Jealousy and envy lie behind the evil eye as well (...) the harm is caused, often unconsciously, by the gaze of envious people. All kinds of trouble can be brought by the evil eye, and any display of good health, splendour or success is likely to attract it' (Fuller 1992:238).

<sup>73</sup> Bhowmick not only discusses how such relations played a very important role in breaking social distinctions in Midnapuri social life but also gives numerous examples of how these inter-caste (even of Brahmins or other upper castes with Untouchables) and inter-religious (mainly Hindu-Muslim) relationships operated (1976:74-76; 145-158 and 119; 145 respectively). He also devotes an entire chapter to the subject under the heading *Minimising Group Distances* (1976:141-158).

Another small section of these relations (about 10%) are entered into because of a particular event where one person has saved another from some grave danger or misfortune. Nirapada, for example, had made friends with two courageous men who had come to the rescue one night when he and his wife had been collecting prawn seeds from the river and were caught in a violent storm during which their boat capsized. They would have drowned had these two strangers not risked their lives in coming to help them. Another time, a young woman narrated how a very honest man had 'saved' her. Her father, entrusting her with quite a large sum of money, had sent her to the market to engage in a transaction. On the way, she had stopped by a tree to pee and only realised once she reached the market that she had lost the money (which had been tied to her waist). Very worried, she retraced her steps and along the way met a man who, on hearing about her misfortune, gave her the purse he had found. As he had been 'her saviour', she called him her 'godfather' and, as a mark of appreciation for his honesty, her family honoured him and organised a ceremony to mark their newly established kinship to him.

As conversations with older people on the subject deepened, they suggested that this 'elected' kin-making custom is a kind of guarantee against the harsh life they led, where staying alive is 'a lottery'. This custom is widely practised because, as Shukuri, a woman in her late sixties explained, when they had arrived to clear these lands, the threat of snakes and tigers had loomed large over their everyday lives and having neighbours with whom one could recreate the security of blood families had been necessary. Many of the young women who came as brides while the island was still being cleared needed substitute mothers to teach them about life in this new area. Indeed, men were often related by blood as younger relatives kept coming to settle from their home villages; the women, however, were not necessarily related and found themselves in a world where these elected bonds were precious as they ensured their social and emotional well-being. Many women never travelled back to their paternal houses because of the expense and the risk involved in crossing the border with Bangladesh. In the harsh lonely surroundings of these first settlements, it was one's newfound god-father and god-mother who provided both the economic ties one needed and the emotional support of 'home'.

However, the main reason that 80% of the people elected kin was what the villagers call a 'mirroring of hearts'. This 'mirroring of hearts', they explained, highlights similarities of two people's lives, such as two men working together, women with children of the same age and gender. These relationships are struck especially when one is young and are currently very popular amongst adolescents, especially of the same age and gender, and are often talked of in affective terms. When wanting to know more about a 'sharing', 'mirroring' or an 'understanding of hearts' I was often told stories of love and separation.<sup>74</sup>

One day, on enquiring where one of my middle-aged neighbours, Bhuban, had been over the last two weeks, I was told that he had gone to his sister's place for her father's funerary rites. When I asked which branch of the family she belonged to, Bhuban replied that it is 'the branch of his heart'. He then told me the story of how they had met and grown to be so fond of each other. They had studied together at college and did politics together. He wasn't well off, whereas she, Paro, being one of the professor's daughters, was rich. She had been impressed by one of his political speeches and often brought him food from home and left it in his room without letting him know it was from her. Then some friends started to make fun of their relationship; he got scared his reputation might get tarnished and, one day, dragged Paro to the principal's office. Dramatically, after stating how they were in the modern setting of the college, he requested that the principal substitute his presence for that of the sun and moon and called on his authority to witness and bless their 'relatedness of siblings'. The principal was relieved but Paro was disconsolate, her passion now made impossible for all time. She decided never to marry. Paro's family, who had thought Bhuban had designs on their daughter, started thinking well of him and now regularly invited him over to their place. He participated so much in the general life of the family that Paro's brothers would often solicit his help in family matters and even asked him to convince Paro to marry.

Had he ever regretted not getting married to her? The pangs of remorse had overwhelmed him all through his college years and he had always felt the pain of separation. Then he turned to me and asked what alternative he could have had. The

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<sup>74</sup> Giddens (1992:38) distinguishes 'passionate love' which, he says, is a universal phenomena from 'romantic love', which is culturally specific. 'Mirroring of hearts' fits his sense of 'romantic love' as introducing the element of narrative into an individual's life.

girl's people lived somewhere 'up' and had all the trappings of the rich, he said, whereas his parents lived on the river's edge and barely managed to pay his college fees. Had she become his wife she would have had to adjust to a harsh life and he had feared it would have spoiled her love for him. So he had preferred sacrificing his newly emerging feelings of 'love' for 'affection'. He now reasoned that, by becoming her 'friend/brother', he had also insured that their love for each other remain 'true'. Why 'brotherly friendship?' I had asked Bhuban. Just 'friends' elicits ambiguity as there is a possibility of a sexual relationship, whereas the ideal of brotherly love is based on 'selfless care and affection'.

As Lambert demonstrates in her study of Rajasthan on the various types of relatedness which are not based on procreative links, this kind of relatedness is usually described as superior to and purer than reproductive kinship, because 'it does not originate in the pollution of sexual intercourse' (2000:79). Had they got married, her family might have had difficulty in accepting him or their marital state. But, by giving up an affinal relation for an elected 'brotherly friendship' he had ensured that their relationship be one of equals (as opposed to the hierarchical one shared by spouses). This had permitted him to strike a subtle compromise between their interpersonal relationship and that of their two larger families. The proof of her family having accepted him as a trustworthy family member lay in the way he had been called on to tell her to get married (as an elder brother would) and now, thirty years later, they were both able to come visit each other when either of them was ill, and to partake in all the ceremonies their two families organised.

The basis of these relationships is the sharing of food and affective sentiments. In sharing forest products, just as in Bhuban's story, it is around food and its sharing that the tension revolves. The combination of nurturance, shared environment, and sentiment are all seen as forms of acknowledged 'elected' relatedness, and as operating irrespective of one's genealogical tie or of class, caste or religion. What is interesting to observe is the extent to which this 'elected kin-making' defies the differences of both jati and religion. The establishment of such relations, with the expectation that its protagonists will partake in shared meals, death pollution and similar periods of mourning for blood as well as 'elected' kin, is common throughout the Sundarbans.

### III. 8. Conclusion

Understanding the 'situatedness' of persons in the world and their relationships is the aim of the 'anthropology of the person' suggested by Ingold. Ingold disputes the idea that social life is the aggregate of interactions among individuals in frequent mutual contact, to suggest instead that social life is not a 'pattern of interactions' but an 'unfolding of relationships' (1990:222). The portion of conversation between Mihir, the forest fishing tiger-charmer, and Probir, the priest and Vaishnavite, in the first section highlighted the different views the villagers have of the forest and of the nature of its sacrality and its cosmology. This led me to discuss the dilemma of tiger-charmers who have to negotiate between the realm of humans and that of non-humans. The Sundarbans are a harsh place which transforms both humans and non-humans into 'cantankerous' beings. However, the environment, by its very purity, also makes them all to smaller or greater degrees 'pure', which in turns enables them to share with each other, explain the villagers.

In the Sundarbans, meal-sharing and gift exchange between 'elected' relations are very common. This is helped by the fact that there are very few differences in Bengal between the diet restrictions of a Brahmin and those of other Hindu castes. Differences arise when communities eat pork (usually Adivasis and Christians and in some rare cases certain SCs) or beef (Muslims) or when individuals, for some reason or another, prefer not to eat certain commonly eaten food (such as crab and small fish as in the case of tiger-charmers). However, on occasions when 'elected' relatives are invited, blood relatives make sure they do not to cook or offer taboo food. As for blood relatives, the proper managing of the sensibilities of 'friends' and 'elected relatives' is all about being attentive to their wishes. What I would like to highlight is how sharing forest food with non-humans is seen as another factor in the constitution of non-humans being 'related' to humans. Bonbibibi, they say, was suckled by a deer, whom she called 'mother'; similarly, she establishes Dokkhin Rai, and thereby all tigers, to be 'brothers' to Dukhe by offering the products of the forest as food for them to share. The sphere of the forest is all about sharing food and 'relatedness' with tigers. In the next chapter I will address how the islanders explain the mutual history they share with tigers and the implications this has for them.



#### **IV. SHARING HISTORY WITH TIGERS: NAVIGATING THE CONTIGENCIES OF A HARSH PAST**

The objective of the first part of this chapter is to situate the history the islanders believe they share with tigers. Tigers, say many islanders, have changed from being meek to being ferocious animals. This transformation occurred not only because of the harsh environment but also because of the history they have had to go through. Feeling that their existence was threatened in Java and Bali, tigers, said the islanders had emigrated from there. In their search for a suitable place, they passed through many different regions but were chased away from everywhere. Finally they reached the Sundarbans and stayed on, as they did not feel threatened any longer. What I shall show is that this narrative about the tigers' history articulates much about the villagers' – especially the East Bengalis' – own history of migration and feeling of rejection.

After this section, I will outline the background to the tensions which revolve around the two types of relatedness to tigers: one based on peace and equality and the principles of the forest left by Bonbibi, and the other on violence. What I will highlight is how these two ways of relating are actually linked to two corresponding understandings of the realm of the forest: one, as I discussed in my last chapter, where the forest is considered to be the domain of Bonbibi, where 'equality' and 'peace' are important, versus one, which I will discuss in more detail here, where the forest is seen as the domain either of Dokkhin Rai or of the state, and where the ruling principles are hierarchy and violence.

What has special significance in the light of tiger-charmers' spells against tigers is their connection to the history of Sufi saints, especially in relation to their reclamation of land and their control of tigers. At its inception in Bengal, Islam was seen more as a technique which could work magic, enabling Sufi leaders to control tigers and evil spirits (Eaton 1993:209). To what extent is present-day tiger-charmers' use of Arabic formulae control tigers and evil spirits a reflection of the relationship which might have once existed between the 'wild' and the Sufi holy men who came to clear the Bengal delta of its forests?

After having looked at the way tigers were and are kept in check with magical charms, in the second half of this chapter I will explore the way in which scientific knowledge has been deployed by state officials to prevent villagers from being killed by tigers. In the 1980s, scientists and state officials came to the conclusion that the Sundarbans tigers are 'natural' man-eaters. I look at the implications of these results for the way some villagers, especially those who 'do the jungle', view tigers and their relationships to them. It also leads me to challenge the 'scientificity' which identifies the Sundarbans tiger as 'man-eater' and to ask to what extent 'science' is used as an instrument of rule? This will lead me, in the next chapter, to look at how the villagers situate themselves within the tension between, on the one hand, trusting Bonbibi and tiger-charmers and, on the other, the state's powers of protection.

#### **IV. 1. A shared history of fleeing**

For the villagers, the reason why tigers are cantankerous is not only the harshness of the Sundarbans environment but also the kind of past they have gone through. Soon after my arrival, in the course of a conversation on how the formerly inoffensive tigers had become aggressive, it appeared from what the villagers told me that tigers were prone to attacking humans 'because of their difficult past'. It was then I was told how tigers had travelled from Bali and Java 'and had passed through Sumatra, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong, China, North Bengal before finally being allowed to settle in the Sundarbans'. This long exodus, during which they had met with so many rebuffs, had affected their nerves. Coupled with the salty air and water of the Sundarbans to which they subsequently have had to adapt, contended the villagers, this had given them a 'cantankerous' nature. The tigers had emigrated from Bali and Java because they were being ruthlessly killed for their bones. Fearing for their lives, they had set out on the long march to find a suitable place. They settled in the Sundarbans because they felt safe in its precinct. This long exodus had left them bitter and the tigers now also felt threatened by the incursions of humans into their territory as they saw it as further challenges to their new-found territory, I was told.

This strange story about the migration of tigers to the Sundarbans, which seemed to me to be a local reinterpretation of ecologists' narratives about the extinction of the Java and Bali species of tigers, intrigued me. Though rumours have it that the Bali

tiger was around until the late 1970s and sightings of the Javan tiger were made in the 1990s, it is generally believed that the first species was extinct by the first half of the twentieth century and the second by the 1970s (Boomgaard 2001:13). Most of the grammer lok have not studied beyond primary school and the great majority of them are not able to place Java or Bali on a map. Yet they are conversant with urban popular eco-friendly literature such as how some species of tigers have faced extinction due to the reclamation of forests for agriculture and rampant poaching for tiger bone. But this story is important not so much because it incorporates a highly sophisticated version of Sundarbans tigers' origins but because it is, as I eventually came to understand, a narrative which permits the villagers to voice (i) their own sense of displacement; (ii) their conceptualisation of the Sundarbans as a refuge for migrants; and (iii) their feeling of being 'second-class citizens' especially in light of city-dwellers' view that the Sundarbans is primarily the abode of tigers.

Even though the history of the different peoples who have settled in the Sundarbans is far from homogeneous, many islanders tell how their history is a common one of fleeing. Yet the islanders –Adivasi, East Bengali, Muslim or Midnapuri – hardly refer to their history of migration except in relation to the fact that, when their parents or grandparents first arrived on the islands, they had had to 'fight off the tigers and the snakes, and live in huts built on raised platforms which were five metres above the ground' and reclaim the island from the saline tidal rivers and the vagaries of violent storms by building a bund all around. They had been brought by the British from diverse places to reclaim the forest or cultivate the newly reclaimed land. As mentioned earlier, large numbers had come to evade money-lenders and exploitative zamindars, while many others, such as freedom fighters, had initially come to avoid the reprisals of British law. Those amongst them who had arrived more recently were escaping communal violence in Bangladesh. As with tigers, explained the Garjontola villagers, they saw their past as one where they had had to find a suitable place, fight for it, and 'make it home'.

The conclusions which the grammer lok come to in relation to the fact that tigers share a history similar to theirs is that this has given tigers 'human' sensitivity. Tigers, they explain, like all Sundarbans inhabitants, are cantankerous and bitter beings but, by virtue of having gone through the same history of rejection and having had to put up

with the same insalubrious conditions as the islanders, tigers have also been invested with the human quality of compassion. To substantiate this point they underscored how, if tigers had so willed, they could have chased away the human migrants who had encroached on their forest, but they had not. This point draws attention to the fact that the gramer lok also see themselves as compassionate. To quote Prodip, 'We also could have chased tigers away, but how could we when tigers gave us a portion of their homestead?'

In other words, if tigers' and humans' common harsh experience had rendered them even more violent and at times even blood-thirsty, it had also made them develop 'feelings' for each other. Such sentiments, coupled with the 'agreement' which Bonbibi had left for them, made it imperative that they should 'share' with each other. One of the important arguments the villagers often highlight when narrating this story is that their presence in the Sundarbans depends on honouring this tacit agreement they have with tigers, just as tigers' presence is conditional on them respecting their end of the agreement. As long as each group respects the other's need for a piece of territory and a portion of the products of the forest they can cohabit in relative peace, explain the forest fishers.

For the islanders, it was irrelevant whether it was tigers or whether it was humans who had arrived before the other, as it was not seen as de-legitimising the second group's desire to settle in the Sundarbans. The Java-Bali tigers' story is one of many versions explaining why Sundarbans tigers have inordinately aggressive characters. The extent to which the Java-Bali tigers were connected to the Dokkhin Rai tigers I never managed to learn. What is, however, significant, is that these stories reflect questions which the villagers always engage in. The Java-Bali tigers' migration story emphasised the sorrow of losing home and being chased away from 'better' places and finding a place only in the god-forsaken Sundarbans.

#### **IV. 2. Charm-slinging competitions with tigers**

In contrast to the peaceful approach to the forest, many islanders are of the belief that tigers have to be dealt with in a strong way. They point out that Dokkhin

Rai, the ‘king’ of all the non-humans of the forest, is primarily a ruthless and greedy Brahmin and landowner and that he and his retinue of tigers, being embodiments of ‘arrogance’ and ‘greed’, have to be ‘stood up to’. Dokkhin Rai resents humans because he sees humans’ charms as undermining his power. Besides, the villagers often explain that Dokkhin Rai sees humans’ extraction of forest products as a depletion of *his personal* wealth. Thus, Dokkhin Rai challenges those humans he considers threats. These are mainly those who know magical formulae that can outwit his own charms as well as those who pose a threat to his favourite possessions – the most important of which is wood. Arrogant as he is, the forest fishers explain, he loves challenging important adversaries into a battle of wits and his greed is so great that anyone taking anything from him, especially wood, is terrorised with the threat of death reprisal. The task of tiger-charmers or of the intrepid wood and honey workers, the *gramer lok* explain, is therefore far from enviable as it challenges Dokkhin Rai’s arrogance and greed.

This point is well illustrated through the following story. Binod, a veteran tiger-charmer had been hired, along with a few others from the village, to collect some huge logs which had been washed up along the sea shore, twenty kilometres south of Garjontola. Binod, with seven other men, had sailed off in two boats with enough water and food to last ten days. By dusk they had reached Kedokhali which is the biggest island furthest South. Infamous as Dokkhin Rai’s abode, it is also notorious for its large number of tigers. Once they arrived, they decided to settle for the night in one of the canals which criss-cross the island, away from the powerful sea waves and strong wind and well hidden from any forest boat on patrol. This was deep in the core area of the forest and, had they been found, they would have been heavily fined as it is an area where humans are barred entry. On their way there they had been lucky and had already started collecting some logs.<sup>75</sup> Then, as night fell, one of the men chopped off a piece of the wood and lit it. All of a sudden they heard ‘auuuu, ouuu, I’m burning, I’m burning!!’ coming from the jungle. Binod ordered the man who had lit the log to extinguish the piece of wood. Then they heard a threatening voice floating down to them demanding, ‘Hand me that man, he burned me.’

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<sup>75</sup> The collection of timber from wrecked vessels is another trade in the Sundarbans: ‘Such flotsam and jetsam were collected in secret until some few years ago, when a case occurred in which the authorities refused to interfere. Since then the trade is openly carried on’ (as noted by Westland, in Hunter 1875:314–315).

Surprised, they turned towards the voice and saw in the distance, sitting along the river bank, what looked like a human figure, beckoning with his long arms, and calling for the man in the boat who had lit the piece of wood.

Binod had often had experiences with the nastier non-humans of the forest and was never one to be easily intimidated, so he replied, 'Come and fetch him yourself if you have the guts; it's impossible for me to deliver him to you because, having brought him to the jungle, I have the responsibility of taking him back home.' But the figure refused to leave them. So, after some time, Binod took a clay pot and a thin towel (*gamcha*) and recited some magical formulae. The figure stopped threatening them and disappeared. Once the recitation of his charms was completed, Binod found, as he had expected, a pebble inside the pot. He plucked it out and tied it to the bow of the boat – it was Dokkhin Rai, who had been converted into that pebble. He then told his men not to worry, ordered that food be served and that they go to sleep, as the next day would be a long one.

The next morning, the occupants of both the boats woke up not in the canal where they had moored the previous night but in the middle of the sea, their anchor having mysteriously been loosened. They were totally lost, surrounded by a heavy mist which clouded all sense of direction. To make matters worse, they were suddenly hit by a storm and one of the two boats capsized with most of their water and food. Directionless, cold and hungry they started wondering whether they would ever reach home again. A couple of nights after this strange happening, they heard the same voice say, 'Deliver me' (*amake chere de*) but every time, Binod would reply, 'Take us to safety first, after that I will deliver you.' Finally, after about two weeks, they reached a coast. The voice said, 'This time I could not stop you, but I'll get even later' (*ekhon tomake antkate parlam na, pore dekhe nebo* – said in the singular form, so referring to Binod). As they arrived, Binod kept his promise, untied the pebble and threw it into the sea. Then they got shivers down their spine as the voice parted with a menacing, 'I am Dokkhin Rai, nobody messes with me.'

They had arrived at a little fishing village in Orissa and the inhabitants, not being able to understand their language, called the police and they were sent back to WB. After a few days' rest, Binod returned to the forest as he needed some golpata leaves

to rebuild the roof of his house.<sup>76</sup> He and the men who had accompanied him heard that voice again. It kept saying, 'Bring me that man and I will leave you alone, otherwise I will not let you cut any of my golpata.' Binod said, 'I've had enough of you and I will cut golpata whether you like it or not.' With the powerful charms he knew, Binod managed for a second time to imprison Dokkhin Rai in his earthen pot, which he then covered with his thin towel to prevent the miniature Dokkhin Rai pebble from escaping and causing any more mischief. Dokkhin Rai pleaded to be released, but Binod replied that he would not do so until he had completed building his roof.

With Dokkhin Rai still tied, Binod came back home later that day with enough golpata leaves for his roof. On the way back, Dokkhin Rai's pleas became more insistent, 'Please, let go of me now, you know that I am not allowed to see women's faces, I am a bachelor (*brahmachari*), please deliver me.' Binod replied, 'After all the mischief you have done to me, how can I now be sure that you will not create more trouble? No, it's safer to release you once I have reached home.' 'Please,' pleaded Dokkhin Rai, 'I am not allowed to enter inhabited places (*sahore jaoya nished*) or see women's faces, deliver me.' Binod turned a deaf ear to his entreaties, returned home with Dokkhin Rai in his pot, removed all the golpata from his boat and arranged them in the middle of his courtyard in preparation for his roof-building. Once he had finished, he decided Dokkhin Rai's ordeal had lasted long enough and untied the towel with the intention of freeing him but, as he lifted the towel, a huge wind blew all his golpata over the river back into the forest. This was Dokkhin Rai's doing. From the pebble-like form he had been first transformed into and then released from, he had used his magic to take the form of a storm and blow the leaves back into the forest, explained the villagers.

Thus the manifestations of Dokkhin Rai in his 'arrogance', the villagers believe, do not restrict themselves to taking the form of spirits or of tigers. Also, Dokkhin Rai is not just 'arrogant' but also 'greedy' and 'thieving'. Indeed, if these titanic beings can match the powerful charms and fearlessness of certain humans, they are also 'thieves' (*chor*). This is because they not only attack from behind and usurp more than they should – as has been illustrated here in Dokkhin Rai's possessiveness over

<sup>76</sup> A bush with a kind of broad palm-like leaves. The leaves are used to thatch roof by those who do not have enough land, therefore not enough straw (from paddy), for a roof.

his golpata – but also because they are insidious beings who disguise themselves to plant the seed of fear in humans' hearts to make them weak and cause them to die. They are greedy, possessive, and arrogant. This is the reason why these beings always target courageous men like tiger-charmers, honey collectors and woodcutters as their victims. The islanders narrate that arrogant non-humans target tiger-charmers because they know of their powers and feel threatened or challenged by them. Once one of them is killed, the other team members are filled with fear and become easy prey as they will have 'caught the fear'. Most villagers recover from such fears by having it exorcised but some of them never pull through and months later die from this fear which has been eating into them.

'Why do you refer to it as "arrogance"?' I asked, perplexed. 'But this is what they all are. Whether it is Dokkhin Rai, tigers, or spirits (*danavs*), they all have a firm conviction of their self-importance, are very possessive about their wood, are vengeful and are the very embodiment of arrogance,' they replied. One person then told me how some friends of his had challenged a group of spirits into a charm-sliding competition. When, after a whole night's fierce competition, they fell short of charms, one of them had the good sense to say, 'Please forgive me, master (*guru*), I know no more.' Hearing this, the satisfied spirits left them. 'They love to feel superior to us and once we recognize that, they leave us humans alone.'

### IV. 3. Of fakirs and tigers

In this section, I will look more closely at why many villagers maintain that, to be in accordance with the 'ways of the forest', one has to respect certain basic 'Islamic' rules because the forest is ultimately the realm of Islam. For, as we have seen, the forest is a domain of Islam because Bonbibi reclaimed it from the Hindu Brahmin and zamindar Dokkhin Rai and restored the original *entente* that had existed between tigers and humans. It is obviously not feasible, nor is it my aim, to retrace the present-day myths of the Sundarbans to the history of the dissemination of Islam in Bengal. This is because such a history is not one the villagers engaged with. However, for the purposes of clarity, and in the light of the recorded history of



Lower Bengal, the constant highlighting of the forest as a shared territory to which both Sundarbans people and tigers lay claim needs to be addressed.

Briefly, Eaton argues that, from 1200, Sufi holy men and their converts cleared the forests of the northern parts of the Sundarbans and that agriculture thus came to be intimately linked to the spread of Islam in Bengal (1993:310). Eaton demonstrates this by arguing how, for several centuries after the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Bengal delta saw two frontiers, both of them moving. The first was a cultural frontier dividing Turk and Bengali, the second was an agrarian frontier dividing forest and field. The cultural frontier was not a clean or stable line since the advance of Indo-Turkish garrisons was itself uneven. Operating at the same time, the second frontier, he argues, was a quieter one, slowly advancing into Bengal's eastern and southern districts with wet-rice cultivating communities moving into previously forested areas. Many of these new agrarian communities started professing an Islamic identity, for it was Muslim holy men or, perhaps more accurately, men popularly endowed with charismatic authority and a Sufi identity, who played a pivotal role in this process. Indeed, in the subcontinent generally, Bengal is perhaps the only region in which the extension of agriculture is associated in popular memory with the lives of Sufi saints (1987:6).

This parallel conversion of forest into agricultural land and of people into Muslims continued until the eighteenth century in much of South and East Bengal (Eaton 1987:6). The consequent symbolic tie-up between agriculture and Islam in Bengal has been well documented (Eaton 1993; Greenough 1982; Nicholas 1963). What has remained unexplored, however, even though equally interesting, is the persisting relationship in Bengal between Islam and the forest. There is historical evidence of a 'symbiotic relationship' between tigers and Sufi holy men (as noted by gazetteer writers Marshall, O'Malley, Wise, in Eaton 1993:208-9; Mitra 1903,1918). Eaton argues that, with the forest being cleared, Islam progressively shifted its link from the forest to agriculture. What I would like to underscore in this section is how this persisting link between Islam and the forest has never entirely been broken.

What appears to be the most common aspect shared by these holy men<sup>77</sup> is their propensity to work miracles and make ‘a multitude of converts by whom the wastes were gradually reclaimed.’<sup>78</sup> There are numerous local stories of how these Islamic holy men, popularly known as pirs, received popular canonisation as patron saints of villages after coming to the aid of local rajas against the Mughals. Let me take an example. Mobrah Ghazi (also known under the name of Mubarrak),<sup>79</sup> a legendary pir who reclaimed jungle tracts, is believed to have come to the succour of the local Raja Sadanand Chaudhri to help him repay his debts to the Mughal emperor. It is believed that he did this by appearing in a dream with his posse of tigers, scaring the Mughal emperor. He also paid up the revenue due by the raja to the emperor from his treasure buried in the forest. After that, he returned to the forest.

The return to the forest is another recurring feature of these pirs. The stories about them narrate how, even after receiving large tracts of cultivable land or initially lordship over them, they always redistributed them and went back to live in the forest as recluses. Khan Jahan, for example, after obtaining from the king of Gaur a *jagir* (revenue assignment) of the lands he had cleared, eventually withdrew himself from worldly affairs and lived as a fakir. In fact, even though most pirs end up becoming the patron saints of villages, the main attachment of these holy men is said to be to the forest, an association characterised by a peculiar intimacy. This is manifested not only in their urge to return to the forest once their earthly duties are performed but also in their control of tigers.

The earliest reference to the connection between Muslim holy men, or their tombs, and the delta’s tigers dates to the seventeenth century. The Englishman John Marshall, travelling from Orissa to Hooghly, recorded on 14 February 1670, ‘Tis reported That every Thursday at night a Tyger comes out and salams to a Fuckeers [faqirs] Tomb there [in Ramchandpur, near Balasore], and when I was there on

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<sup>77</sup> I shall indiscriminately use ‘fakir’, ‘pir’ and ‘Sufi saints’ to mean Muslim holy men and to distinguish them from their Hindu counterparts, the ‘sadhus’.

<sup>78</sup> This is said of Pir Umar Shah, who is said to have come to the jungles of Noakhali from Iran in the 1700s and lived in a boat (Webster 1911:100–101).

<sup>79</sup> His territory included Basra which is in the Maidanmal Fiscal Division, Baruipur Subdivision, situated on the Bidyadhari river.

Thursday at night, it was both heard and seene' (Khan, 1927:62).<sup>80</sup> Hunter refers to Mobrah Ghazi as a 'fakir' who had taken up residence in a part of the jungle and 'overawed the wild beasts to such an extent, that he always rode about the jungle on a tiger' (Hunter, 1875:119). Wise writes towards the end of the nineteenth century that 'no one will enter the forest, and no crew will sail through the district' without first of all making offerings to one of the shrines of the pirs.

This relation between Sufi saints and tigers was not restricted to the Sundarbans but seems to have been common all over Bengal. Francis Buchanan, a British officer, noted in 1833 that in the Dinajpur District pirs and tigers usually inhabited the same tract of woods. He says, 'as these animals seldom attack man in this district, the Pir is generally allowed by persons of both religions to have restrained the natural ferocity of the beast, or, as it is more usually said, has given the tiger no order to kill man. The tiger and Faquirs are therefore on a very good footing, and the latter ... assures the people that he [the tiger] is perfectly harmless toward all such as respect the saint, and make him offerings' (Buchanan 1833:93). Based on traditions collected in 1857, Wise writes, for example, how Zindah Ghazi – a legendary protector of woodcutters and boatmen all over the eastern delta – was '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 1894:40).

In fact, while these holy men did not take possession of land reclaimed and cultivated through their leadership, administrative records inform us that in the popular imagination they were seen as retaining control over the forest because, as pointed out by Wise, they were often the ones to decide the exact limits within which the forest was to be cut (1894:40). However, this control is not perceived as total. As noted by Buchanan a century before Wise, 'A particular class of men make a profession of collecting this oil, honey, and wax. They are Mohammedans and pay a duty to the Zemeendars for liberty to follow their profession. The woods, however, are not considered as property; for every ryot [Indian peasant or cultivating tenant]

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<sup>80</sup> Khan also mentions how this tomb at Ramchandrapur is that of Muhammad Khan Shahid, one of Kala Pahar's commanders. Marshall may have heard some local legend regarding this tomb and confused it with that of a fakir (1927:84).

may go into them and cut whatever timber he wants.’<sup>81</sup> What thus emerges is that these Sufi holy men are mentioned in two different contexts. The first sphere portrays them as ‘pirs’ or the patron saints of Bengali villages where their memory is sung and respectfully marked by graves and shrines. The second context portrays these men as ‘fakirs’ and as the living patron saints of woodcutters.

Even as late as the first two decades of the twentieth century we have evidence of an ‘intimate relation’ between Sufi fakirs and the forest. The first is in 1908 by O’Malley, the compiler of the gazette for the Khulna District, who reports that parts of the Sundarbans forest were associated with the charismatic authority of Muslim holy men who were visited by the ‘professional woodcutters’ of the Sundarbans. He reports how together they proceeded in boats to certain localities in the forests, and how each locality was presided over by a fakir ‘who is supposed to possess the occult power of charming away tigers and who has undoubtedly some knowledge of woodcraft’ (1908:193-4). However by the turn of the century, those with the ability to control tigers were spoken of both as ‘fakir’ and as ‘bauley’. Moreover, just as the present-day word ‘bauley’ conflates woodcutter and tiger-charmer, it seems that from 1918 onwards ‘bauley’ becomes the acceptable term for Sundarbans woodcutters. At the beginning of the century, ‘fakir’ and ‘bauley’ denoted people doing the same kind of work – i.e. leading woodcutters to the forest; however, gradually the meaning shifted and today, in official discourses, ‘bauley’ exclusively means woodcutter, thus stripping this occupation off its association with magic and tiger-charming. For the gramer lok, however, ‘bauley’ refers specifically to those who can control tigers.

#### **IV. 4. Are today’s tiger-charmers the spiritual descendants of the Sufi pirs?**

Even as late as 1908, the gazetteer for Khulna District reports that parts of the Sundarbans forest were associated with the charismatic authority of Muslim holy men. O’Malley describes how these ‘professional woodcutters’ of the Sundarbans worked six days each week, as one day was set apart for ‘the worship of the sylvan deity presiding over that particular forest’ (1908:193-94). Mitra reports how ‘bauley’

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<sup>81</sup> ‘An Account of a Journey Undertaken by Order of the Bd. of Trade through the Provinces of Chittagong and Tipperah in Order to Look Out for the Places Most Proper for the Cultivation of Spices’ (March-May 1798) in Eaton (1987:1).

was used both for ‘woodcutter’ as well as for ‘fakir’ and how no work was begun in the forest until the fakir had gone through his charms and incantations (1918:440). The link between Sufi saints and tiger-charmers is repeatedly stressed and throws considerable light on the reasons why the villagers consider the forest as the realm of Islam.

Today, claiming descent from the Ghazi and the ‘five pirs’ is a way for the tiger-charmers to acknowledge Islam’s sovereignty over the forest. This is why they see it as necessary to inscribe themselves within Islam. Islam and the ethos of the forest are conflated for the jungle workers and this link offers a greater insight into the ideology of ‘egalitarianism’ which they believe they have to uphold. I talk of ‘Islamic egalitarianism’ because ‘Islam with its more democratic appeal in the social plane and a simpler code of tenets, [...] opened up an inviting vista, [...] proved to be a haven from religious and social persecution by the upper classes (Ray 1945:49). Because the forest is the realm of Islam, those who work there, especially those who entrust themselves to Bonbibī’s care, believe they have the prerogative of adhering to what they see as being Islamic rules.

Present-day tiger-charmers thus claim to be, like the fakirs, lineally descended from the pirs (Wise, 1894:40). By claiming that their occupation is of Islamic heritage, the tiger-charmers in the Sundarbans can be seen to inscribe themselves within the tradition of the pirs. The growing popularity of pirs and pir-cult in Bengal was, and is, as argued by Roy, a challenge to yet also an opportunity for the Brahminical priestly class (1983). The Brahmin answer was to create Satya-Narayan as an extension of Satya-Pir so as to establish continuity between old and new beliefs and with a view towards a total absorption of Islamic practices into Hinduism.

Conversely, perhaps in conflating Islam and the forest, the pirs of old were doing the opposite. Somewhere along the line, the tiger became a Hindu symbol – or was it because it was already Hindu symbol that gave weight to all these narratives about pirs controlling tigers? The forest is claimed to be the realm of Islam where tigers *fit in* after they become the adoptive sons of Bonbibī. Thus the Bonbibī story is seen by the villagers as the supremacy of Islam over Hinduism as far as the forest is concerned. To the extent that distinctions based on gender, age, or jati are considered

irrelevant when one deals with the forest, this is posed, through Bonbibi, in opposition to Dokkhin Rai who is a Brahmin, who cannot see women's faces and who only challenges the powerful.

However, Bonbibi has been seen by some intellectuals as an attempt by Islam to reclaim Hinduism. In an article of the beginning of the century, '*On some Curious Cults of Southern and Western Bengal*', Mitra reports a song sung by fakirs where Dokkhin Rai is considered to be the son of Bonbibi (1918:440). The song goes like this:

The birds are calling in bush and brake. The tides are running high in the creeks.  
 O sons of female slaves! come, come to cut the reeds and bulrushes.  
 Remembering the name of our mother-goddess, we go in front.  
 O! come ye all with axes and hatchets and bekis [unknown word] in your hands.  
 The son of 'The Dame of the Forest' (Ban-bibi) is sitting alone in the forest.  
 O shaven-pated Mahomedan clodhoppers! Come into the midst of the mangrove.

Mitra reports that this is sung by the 'baoyalis' (alternate spelling of 'bauley'), whom he calls 'the Sundarban traders in fuel', in their worship of the forest goddess. Bonbibi, he says, is the 'dame of the forest' 'believed to preside over the gloomy and impenetrable jungle of the Sundarbans and to protect the baoyalis'. He then, to my mind erroneously, explains that '(T)his goddess must be an incarnation of the terrible goddess Kali, for it is said that, over the mangrove (*bada*) or, at least, over that portion of the Sundarbans which has been reclaimed and is now tenanted by Pods, Chandals and Musalmans, many deities are believed to preside, among which may be mentioned Kali' (1918:441). I believe this interpretation is wrong because it is from a bhadrakalok's point of view. The forest fishers never ever associated Bonbibi with Kali during the time I did fieldwork. To them she even is the antithesis of Kali as Kali is associated with violence whereas Bonbibi with peace. However, Dokkhin Rai is definitely seen as 'Hindu' and as a violent god and connections between him and Kali are sometimes made in that he sacrifices victims to Kali and that his mother, Narayani, may actually be a form of Kali. Some islanders therefore believed that they needed to worship Dokkhin Rai and, by extension, Kali. However, there are other reasons explaining the popularity of Kali amongst poachers, those who 'do the jungle', and prawn collectors; I shall address these in the next chapter.

Tiger-charmers have to be humble and meek in accordance with Bonbibi's wishes and yet also at times arrogant and powerful as they have to stand up to Dokkhin Rai and those tigers who emulate him. It is the tiger-charmer who is seen as having to negotiate the appropriate relations not only between the world of humans and that of tigers but also between the world of Hindu gods and that of Muslim ones.

#### IV. 5. Contrasting Bonbibi with the state

Islanders often told me that those who 'do the jungle' are 'insane daredevils'. Also, even if forest fishers do occasionally collect honey and wood they do not refer to these forays as 'doing the jungle'. This is because they want to mark the fact that they are not 'professionals' i.e. they do not practise honey or wood collection in the intensive way the honey and wood collectors do. Those who 'do the jungle' on a regular basis are seen as taking enormous risks both because they actually *walk* on the forest ground (thus exposing themselves to tigers and crocodiles) and because, as seen by the forest fishers, their occupation is *threatening* to tigers. They are also called 'arrogant' and I explained earlier how this is seen by the forest fishers as the main reason why the forest is getting 'polluted' and wild animals increasingly killing people.

I was keen to meet these people who regularly work as honey and wood collectors and learn from them how they situate themselves vis-à-vis the criticisms levelled both by the villagers and by the representatives of the state. So, one mid-April morning, I dropped by the Sajnekhali Wildlife Sanctuary to meet the honey collectors who had come to apply for permits. Once their passes are obtained, they set off for a couple of weeks in groups of about seven to work deep inside the forest. I stopped by two men who were sharing a smoke in the verandas of one of the typical little wooden bungalows built on stilts, which dot the sanctuary. One, in khaki shorts, was evidently a minor forest official, the other looked as if he could have been a honey collector. I purposefully asked for a glass of water. The forest official went in to get me some water while the other struck up a conversation. Soon I came to learn that he worked in the forest and that he had come to collect his permit for honey

collecting. When the forest official came back with the glass of water and learnt the purpose of my visit, he sarcastically pointed his chin towards his companion and said, 'It is only *greed* which makes them take up such a job, they seem to leave their senses behind and, led by guys like him who call themselves tiger-charmers, they enter in a trance.' He then mockingly explained how the *gramer lok* had no knowledge of the importance of the forest and its prime position in the list of world heritage sites. Stung, the other man retorted that there was a difference between '*greed* and *need*, between being in a *trance* and being *shit-scared*.' 'Give up your place and we'll happily stay put in your well-fenced forest and well-paid jobs,' he added at the end.

This altercation is highly representative of the way the forest officials often speak of the *gramer lok* in general, and of forest workers in particular, in order to impress upon the visitor that they are very aware of the rapid depletion of the Sundarbans forest and that they are not to be blamed for it, for they are the upright guardians of the forest. However, even though the two groups argue fiercely with each other, they are often on conniving terms. It is a known fact that honey and wood collectors also work as poachers and that they would not be able to undertake poaching without the help of the forest officials. The honey collector, whose name is Shankar and who is also a tiger-charmer, explained that he was not 'greedy' but, having come from Bangladesh in the 1970s, he did not own land and there was not much else he could do. Like most jungle workers, he enumerated the different occupations he engaged in during the different seasons and stressed that he mainly worked as a crab and fish collector.

Shankar explained how the risks in honey and wood collection were so great that they were not very tempting lines of work for most people. Neither were the economic returns very lucrative. In fact, they had even dwindled over the past few years. For example, for honey collecting, in the previous year (1999) there had been forty-five groups entering the forest but in 2000 the numbers had increased to sixty-two. This had forced the government to further reduce the amount of honey each person could collect for the entire trip and from the previous year's maximum of fifty kilograms the amount had been reduced to forty kilograms. He also pointed out that, though tigers were taking more victims, there were greater numbers of people trying



their hand at this occupation. Wasn't this simply an indicator of a growing desperation and not of greed? he rhetorically asked his companion, the forest guard, and me.

Many poachers however, were hesitant about worshipping Bonbibi and thought she was ineffective. One day, the father of my host's eldest son's friend, Atish, came to my host's place to thank him and his wife for having let their eldest son stay over at his place for about four months and look after the house while he and his wife were trying to get their own son treated in different nursing homes and hospitals in Kolkata. The man was comfortably off, owned quite a bit of land, and had spent around 50,000 rupees trying to cure his son, my host had briefed me. I also came to know that he was a poacher. Interested in his view of the forest, I started asking him about Bonbibi. Atish looked straight at me and said in a wry mocking tone, 'You believe these stories? Pray tell me, which government gave *her* the deed of lease (*patta*) of the forest?' The man went on to explain that he 'believed in firearms' and that this was the reason why he thought that worshipping Kali was more appropriate.

Atish's explanation of how the two domains worked was something I repeatedly came across. 'When you call Ma Bonbibi the deer disappear, this is why the thieves have to call out for Ma Kali,' I was told by Bhim, a fearless young man who occasionally poached deer. 'To enter with Bonbibi's protection means entering the forest with bare hands [*khali hate*: 'empty-handed', both in its figurative as well as in its literal sense]. 'When you do black,' he went on to drive the point in, 'you refuse to acknowledge the animals as Bonbibi's, you not only take the jungle for granted, but actually greedily plunder it. How in these circumstances can you imagine her coming to your rescue? She's good to fish and crab parties but, as for us black parties, we have to rely on firearms as we bear more resemblance to dacoits and policemen than to crab catchers.' Another poacher told me, 'Actually, I'd have liked to continue entrusting myself to her care but different circumstances and times call for different methods.'

As mentioned earlier, the islanders often tell how the older Sundarbans tigers were aggressive because they had had to travel all the way from Java and Bali and that they were getting more and more ferocious because of living in such close proximity

to the salty air and water of the Sundarbans. 'Earlier the tigers still used to be manageable and fell under the spell of charms. In recent years, with the government's initiatives to see their numbers grow, the tigers have become almost uncontrollable and nothing but firearms work in dealings with them,' Bhim explained. For the islanders, some of the measures taken up by the government, such as building fresh water ponds (as mentioned in Chapter I) and the introduction of 'hybrid' tigers which came straight from a city laboratories, had endowed *their tigers* with the arrogance of knowing that their species was invincible as they had state-protection and because they were the national animal both of Bangladesh and India as well as the current popular trademark for global conservation. 'Hybrid' tigers were so called because they were considered to be a cross between a kind of jackal and a dangerously ferocious species of tigers. The villagers believed these tigers had a long snout not unlike that of a mole and that their bodies were so long that they 'looked like trains'. The villagers explained how, because of tigers' access to fresh water and, because of their growing imperviousness to charms, tigers were now reproducing faster.

Atish sells deer meat and gave me the price list of different sizes of tiger skins. 'You are well off, you have come face to face with the terrifying image of tigers many times, you have even had close shaves and yet you persist in working in the jungle, why?' my host asked him. His answer was straightforward, 'For me, it's not work, it's an addiction (*eta amar pesha noy, nesh*). Ignoring the pleas of my wife and children, I rush there twice a month. You ask why, I can't really answer, what I know is that you put an ill person in the jungle and he will get better, you put an insomniac in and he will find sleep – the jungle has properties you will find nowhere else, it is a sacred place.'

For Atish, even if the jungle was still a 'sacred place', the animals in there were no longer sacred. Atish, like others who went poaching, believed that his job was violent and that therefore Bonbibi's blessings could not be solicited for his occupation. But people are sometimes very ambiguous about the way they divide their allegiances to gods. Subol Bachar, who is also poacher, said, 'Whether you are a doctor, a poacher or a policeman, you have to worship Kali. But, even if you worship Kali, Bonbibi is the deity of the jungle, and you have to call on Bonbibi as you enter the forest

because you have to [bring yourself to] fear the tiger (*bagher bhoyta kintu kortei hobe*).' He went on to explain, 'You know, gods are like government ministers, they have different departments divided between them and Bonbibi is the one who is responsible for the forest.'

Probir, the self-styled Vaishnavite I mentioned in Chapter II having an argument with Mihir, maintained that, if you go to the jungle, then Krishna is of not much use. Previously, he used to worship Bonbibi, and had even had visions of her: she was tall and healthy, fair and very, very beautiful, had a compassionate expression, peaceful eyes like those of exquisite lotus blossoms, and decked in gold jewellery. She did not teach him any formulae but told him very softly whether or not he should go. He was so taken by the image that he made one of her the next day and worshipped her. He had received the vision prior to his setting off for the jungle when he needed wood to build his house. But once his house had been built he had then married and had received a relatively large amount of land as dowry. After that he had been afraid to return to the forest and had decided to become a Vaishnav. In the forest, neither Bonbibi nor Ghazi nor Dokkhin Rai could be replaced by Krishna or Kali. His dilemma was that he owned land and that 'forest deities are Muslims and Hindu deities are no good for the jungle.'

Many people mentioned having become poachers after the incidents on Marichjhapi in 1979 when hundreds of refugees died, many of them shot at by the government (more on this episode in Chapter VI). Then, in the 1980s, the same time as the introduction of prawn collection, it actually became very dangerous to be killed by a tiger because the family of the dead trespasser was made to pay the fine for their kin entering the forest illegally. Many villagers also argued that, if the tiger could swim over to their village (which happened very often in those days) and make off with their cattle and sometimes even human beings, they did not see why they were not allowed to be able to enter the jungle and do the same. 'The state officials think we are thieves and poachers anyway,' said a young man. 'Then why not live up to their expectations?' he asked sarcastically.

The difference between forest fishers and wood and honey collectors is not simply a distinction of occupation; they are also seen as undertaken by groups of different

ages and living in different places. The crab collectors and forest fishers are principally older men who often work with their wives and live in the 'down' islands, whereas the occupational honey and wood collectors are young all-male groups from 'up' places. Although some of the honey collectors come from 'down' places such as Jamespur, Satjelia (in the Satjelia island), Pakhiralay (in the Gosaba island), Jharkhali, most of them come from places such as Deulbari, Kumirmari, Rampurhat, Basanti and Mollakhali, and even as far away as Katakhalai, Barunhat, Hasnabad or Hingalganj. Because these places though part of the Sundarbans region, are relatively better off and far removed from the forest, they are seen as offering greater opportunities for making money. The villagers of Garjontola argue that these people come because they can make relatively good money within a week.

Now, to get an idea let us take a group of seven people each collecting the maximum amount of honey (i.e. forty kilograms) allowed per person by the government during their trip. This amounts to a total of 280 kilograms of honey and forty-five kilograms of wax; this gives us a total of 325 kilograms. (For every quintal (100 kilograms) of honey there is about fifteen kilograms of wax.) The government buys the 280 kilograms of honey at thirty-four rupees per kilogram. This gives the team rupees 9,520 for honey. After adding forty-five kilograms of wax at thirty-six rupees a kilogram they get a further rupees 1,620. They now have to deduct the sales tax from this. Honey and wax have the same sales tax of three rupees.

Three rupees multiplied by 325 kilograms = rupees 975 on honey and the wax deducted as sales tax. Now 12% of that amount is equal to rupees 111. This amount is levied by the government as income tax. Another 15% of additional sales tax on the wax has to be added (15% of 135) which means twenty rupees. So a total of (rupees 975 + rupees 111 + rupees 20 = ) 1,106 rupees has to go as tax to the government. So from the total of rupees 11,140 they make by selling their honey and wax, they have to deduct rupees 1,106 as tax. At the end of the trip they get the net amount of rupees 10,034. As they are seven, this means that they each receive rupees 1,433. Once costs like food and boat permits are deducted they are assured of taking back home between rupees 1,000 and rupees 1,200 – an important sum to make within a week and which sometimes even exceeds by double the sum the crab collectors or forest fishers make in a month.

To get good honeycombs the honey collectors have to venture deep inside the forest. Some of the prime honey areas, such as Golbhaksha, Jhille and Chamta (refer to the map on the surroundings of Satjelia on page 218), are notorious for the large numbers of tigers they host (presumably because of the many fresh water ponds dug there). It is because the honey collectors are seen as not being afraid for their lives that they are considered to be 'arrogant daredevils'. Of all the occupations linked to the forest, the honey collectors face the greatest risk of being killed by tigers. One in every twenty-four was killed in 1999. The *Anandabazar Patrika* newspaper of 2 May 2000 reported that there was a total of seven honey collectors killed. This gives us a figure of 2% victims for honey collectors. Unofficially though, tiger and crocodile casualties during the honey collecting season are at least double this figure, raising the death toll to a minimum of 4%.<sup>82</sup>

It is indeed a very dangerous job and if honey collectors can make a relative good sum of money they can also lose their lives. On the other hand, the villagers explain how the honey collectors, like the wood collectors, have to invest much more than do crab collectors and forest fishers, for example, by having bigger boats. So it is economically more risky as well. Practically speaking, it is not easy to enter the smaller canals with such boats. The honey collectors can navigate their boat through the smaller canals only during high tide. Once they locate four or five honeycombs (they stick a bamboo pole on the nearest bank to where they think there is one),<sup>83</sup> they dismount from their boat and set off into the forest. They have to do this before the tide recedes.<sup>84</sup> To get to the honeycombs they have to wade in waist-deep water, holding flaming torches above their heads, walking abreast as if combing the forest at an interval of 30 metres and calling out to each other to make sure they are still all walking in the same direction. When they come across a honeycomb,<sup>85</sup> they call out

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<sup>82</sup> Even though the family of a tiger victim is compensated with rupees 55,000 (rupees 10,000 from the Block Development Office, rupees 25,000 from the Janata Life Insurance Policy, and rupees 20,000 from the Tiger Project), they unfortunately lose at least half of this sum in the process of claiming it at the hands of unscrupulous middle-men and politicians.

<sup>83</sup> In learning how to 'read the jungle', they learn that, when the flight of bees is light and swift, they are in search of flowers, whereas when their flight is heavy and drowsy, nearer the ground, it means that they are laden with their booty.

<sup>84</sup> After taking into account the force and direction of the wind, the flux of the tides and currents along with whether they are in a small or a big canal, as the flow and the level of water is different depending on whether a canal joins a river or a creek.

<sup>85</sup> Each comb has a minimum of ten kilograms of honey and a maximum of twenty-five kilograms, and usually they manage four or five combs per day.

to the others and start the process by chasing away the bees with smoke. What makes this occupation so dangerous is that if people do not get along with each other they put at risk the whole team. Usually the cook stays in the boat and rows it back to a bigger canal before the tide recedes; otherwise the boat gets stranded. If this happens, not only does he put his own life at risk but also that of his colleagues as he cannot pick them up for the next ten hours. They are then completely defenceless, with no protection against tigers or crocodiles.

‘To engage in violence is to die in violence’ is a phrase the villagers often use to explain the honey collectors’ gory end. Violence is seen as an inherent prerequisite as well as a consequence of being a honey collector: they have to use powerful charms which threaten non-humans. As the villagers see it, standing up violently to tigers and spirits risks arousing their deadly anger. The honey and wood collectors are, as the forest fishers explain, ‘insane daredevils’ because ‘to do the jungle is to tempt the tiger’ (*mohal kora mane bagh chesta kora*). ‘Tempting the tiger’ and the use of the word *chesta* (literally ‘trying’) is translated as ‘deliberately searching for’ or ‘looking for’ the tiger. To ‘do the jungle’ means to enter the jungle in order to collect honey (or wood) with the intention of making money and in full knowledge of the danger one is incurring. This arrogance makes a mockery of the tiger and this is what the tiger resents, as tigers, too, are ‘arrogant’.

There is another reason for this perception: the honey collecting teams are seen as always ending up fighting with each other. Whenever I was told stories of honey collectors having died in the forest, it was said that this was because the group had fought, as happens with such necessarily ‘arrogant’ people. Both the arrogance and the fighting are seen as due not only to the risks they took but also the way tasks are distributed. Each honey collecting team has a tiger-charmer, a leader (usually the person who owns the boats and holds the purse), a third person charged with the important task of holding the container below the comb, a fourth responsible for cutting the comb, a fifth – the cook – who has the important responsibility of rowing the boat when the others are out in the forest and of cooking for them. If there are other team members, usually new recruits, they are helpers. The one who cuts the

comb and the cook<sup>86</sup> are the two most important people. However, the three others also hold important positions. These five roles of honey collectors are seen by the villagers as being so important that those who undertake them are liable to becoming conceited and enter into rows, thus rendering themselves vulnerable to tiger attacks.

However, even so, the main reason why regular honey collectors and wood cutters are given such a bad press by the villagers in general is because they are seen as being the biggest allies of the state. The state tightly regulates these two occupations both because they are risky for those who undertake them and because they bring in a lot of revenue. During the two-week honey collection period, the forest is closed to all other occupations. Crab, fish and prawn collectors as well as wood cutters are not allowed to enter during that time. Besides, the state controls the entire process. The forest officials divide the jungle into plots and decide where each group goes; on certain days 'flying launches' come to collect honey and provide water to the different teams and monitor their locations and movements. The amount of honey or wood to be collected and the price at which these items are to be sold are all set by the government.<sup>87</sup> For the forest fishers, such protection compromises the whole ethos of the forest. They see their own collection of honey or wood as something they do 'on the side' and they neither register their boats for this nor obtain permits.

#### IV. 6. Sundarbans tigers: 'natural' man-eaters?

All through the 1970s and 1980s there were arguments over whether Sundarbans tigers were 'natural' man-eaters. Hubert Henrichs, a German scientist, after months' research in the Sundarbans, in 1975 published an article where he argued that the primary reason tigers in the Sundarbans kill high numbers of people (around thirty officially but around 100 unofficially) was because of the increased brackishness of the rivers in the Sundarbans. Such a transformation, he concluded,

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<sup>86</sup> The cook is the one least at risk as he is not supposed to alight; he has to have sharp ears and be physically the strongest as he has to be able to row the boat single-handedly as quickly as possible to the bank where his friends call him to collect them. For all practical reasons the cook, explained the honey collectors, took on the role of the 'mother' and had to give them moral support and tend to their ills by applying medicine to their bruises (as they often get cut and scratched), encourage and console them, and generally keep up their spirit of companionship.

<sup>87</sup> In addition to the taxes, when teams overstay the two-week period, they have to pay fines of rupees three per day per person.

has forced Sundarbans tiger to depend on the 'sweetness' of human blood to obtain a certain dietary balance.<sup>88</sup>

Henrichs' article was followed by those of various experts Chowdhury and Sanyal (1985a, 1985b); Chakrabarti (1986); Rishi (1988); and by journalists such as Diamond (1979). Whether the Sundarbans tigers are 'natural' man-eaters was fiercely debated in the public arena of the metropole, and even reported back in the Sundarbans, as these articles were published in the leading Kolkata dailies. The reasons given, for Sundarbans tigers being man-eaters, were mainly environmental. Apart from the brackish water, it was suggested that, because the Sundarbans rivers are tidal and wash away the boundaries of the territory a tiger marks with its urine, the tigers of the Sundarbans have no idea of what constitutes their specific space – this is why they swim into villages. Others maintained that the inordinately aggressive character of Sundarbans tigers might be because they have to keep swimming for hours to stay afloat during high tide.

Taking the advice of scientists, the government decided on a few remedial procedures to thwart the tiger's predilection for human flesh. Between November 1986 and October 1987, the government placed four electrified dummies dressed in used clothing (to give them human smell) in strategic spots in the forest, and distributed 2,500 plastic masks free of cost among honey collectors and woodcutters. The idea was that tigers, through aversion therapy, would stop attacking humans after they received an electric shock (a safety fuse and a low current of twenty to twenty-five milliamps ensured that it was not fatal to the animal. Each dummy was connected to a twelve-volt battery through an energizer which delivered a current of 230 volts). As we have seen, the government also took up the very expensive project of digging fresh-water ponds surrounded by raised mud-banks in different corners of forested islands so that tigers could drink fresh water. Fresh water in Bengali is called 'sweet water', and drinking 'sweet' water as opposed to salt water is believed to have the effect of turning cantankerous natures into 'sweet' or amiable ones and help them both tone down their irritability and therefore, as mentioned earlier, incites them to reproduce faster.

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<sup>88</sup> As reported by the press 'forced to get by with salty water, the felines undergo a chemical imbalance that can be corrected by eating humans, who constitute high-quality food' (Diamond 1979:37).



The government was very pleased with these experiments. The dummy experiment was believed to have reduced the incidence of man-eating by half and the mask experiment, which I mentioned in Chapter I, was considered to be a total success because none of those wearing one were killed (Sanyal 1987: 427-34). There was, however, the usual official thirty people killed during the twelve months of the experiment. But the government highlighted the scientists' argument that these had been people who were 'too superstitious' to wear a mask (Rishi 1988). The fresh water ponds also were believed to have lessened instances of man-eating. However, while the government officials believed that these measures had made tigers less aggressive, the villagers were not so convinced. They argued that, even though in the Bangladesh Sundarbans the rivers were much fresher than those in WB, the tigers on the other side of the frontier were taking just as many victims per year. To seek to know whether tigers are 'natural' or 'unnatural' man-eaters is a futile endeavour, they argued, as it does not change the fact that they still kill people. According to villagers' observations, the killings have actually increased.

What was more important for the villagers, as we have seen, is that the old tigers, even though violent and arrogant, had been sensitive to them because they shared their harsh past and difficult surroundings. 'Their' tigers had a 'human' quality – not only because they had, like them, huge egos and were very keen to establish their rights over the forest – especially over wood – but also because their migratory history and their difficult geographical environment had given them some feeling of compassion and taught them to share with their fellow human neighbours. In contrast, the new tigers were seen as being violent and arrogant in a nasty way: they killed 'for fun' to prove they were the 'real' tigers the tourist expected them to be. Because they were discussed by the powerful – the influential representatives of the government, the scientists and the increasingly interested foreign NGOs like the WWF – and were the national animals of both India and Bangladesh – these new tigers thought they were invincible even though they had become mere 'tourist tigers'. If, for the old tigers, the villagers were 'equals', these new tigers were treating them as 'tiger-food'. The government's refusal to engage with the social reasons which favour the existence of man-eating in the first place was seen as inherently pitting tigers against people. The Sundarbans villagers' refusal to wear

masks was, as I came to learn during fieldwork, a way of defying the legitimisation of a state-backed ‘scientific knowledge’ of tigers’ appetite for humans.

#### IV. 7. An interview with the tiger

While preparing for fieldwork to the Sundarbans ten years after my childhood episode with the masks, I came across a text that brought back memories of the conversations my friend and I had had with the forest guards and the scientists who had been involved in the government research on stopping Sundarban tigers from eating humans. This text had been written in 1875 by the surgeon and prolific natural science writer, Sir Joseph Fayrer, who was conversant with the writings of naturalists, especially those on the Indian Subcontinent.

Fayrer recounts how, in 1758, Linnaeus classified the tiger as *felis tigris*. After that, different categories of tigers were given various generic names by naturalists. About a hundred years later, the Indian sub-species (and particularly the one from Bengal), by virtue of it being the largest, was given the name *tigris regalis* by J. E. Gray in 1867 (Mazak 1981:1). But Fayrer did not think that physique alone was sufficient to justify the term and sought to justify this appellation, to which he fully subscribed, with a description of the tiger’s ‘habits and mode of life’ to prove why this animal was indeed ‘royal’. In *The Royal Tiger of Bengal: his Life and Death*, which he published eight years after Gray’s book, Fayrer argues that even though its physical aspects were considered superior to those of the lion, the tiger had been unfairly prevented from acceding to the title of ‘royal’ because of a misunderstanding of its ‘nature’, thought to be that of a natural ‘man-eater’. Fayrer thus took it upon himself to rehabilitate the tiger’s image through an account of why it had ‘fallen into evil ways’, explaining that this man-eating habit, of ‘not of much consequence’ anyway (1875:32), was to be blamed on the superstition of villagers.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Fayrer claims that it is both because of the ‘apparent indifference of villagers and cowherds with which they regard the brute’ (1875:37-38) and because ‘the natives of India, especially the Hindoos, hold the tiger, as they do the cobra, in superstitious awe’ (1875:41-42). I will not develop here the broad generalisations which permit Fayrer to make these claims. He uses examples from Chotanagpur, concerning the Ghond and Khurkoo tribals, to conclude that the victim of man-eating tigers are thrown out of caste on the ground that they ‘are labouring under the displeasure of the Deity’ (1875:46) and that these tiger victims are ‘prescribed sacrifices’ offered by these ‘wild and ignorant aborigines’ who believe that the man-eating tiger is in fact the deity (1875:46).

What I want to highlight is that, along with a description of the physique of this animal, what appeared necessary to Fayrer was, so to speak, an account of what he believed to be the tiger's *true* 'psychology', implying that, for the sub-species to regain its due or 'natural' regal status, it had to forego of its nasty man-eating habit. Fayrer was convinced that to stop tigers from killing humans the only solution was to 'stand up to them'. If the 'superstition' of villagers prevented them from doing so, he continued, they were nevertheless happy to be rid of this animal that caused villages to be deserted, roads to be abandoned, and great loss of life among humans and livestock.<sup>90</sup> The fear caused by these animals amongst the local population is used by Fayrer only to highlight the courage of the English sportsmen who killed, in Bengal proper, about 1,200 tigers per year (Fayrer 1875:44). By hunting them, Fayrer implies that the British government not only rid the villagers of this scourge but also rid tigers of their 'evil man-eating ways'.

Here we have to briefly mention the very problematic nature of the relationship the British had with the tiger. The following quote from a Dutch man could just as easily have been made by someone British '(I)f it is the lion who rules Africa, it is undoubtedly the tiger who is the tyrant of the Indian jungles and forests. It is a beautiful animal – black stripes against a yellow and white background – graceful in his movements, but of a mean, cruel disposition, so that one could compare him with a Nero or a Philip the Second' (Hartwig 1860:61 in Boomgaard 2001:1). The sport hunters who shot the tiger in huge numbers saw it in a largely negative light. It was 'a cunning, silent, savage enemy', 'a pleasure to outwit and shoot', to end 'the fearful ravages' it committed against people. The image of the tiger was also imprinted in the official British mind as a flesh-eater that dared to eat *people* (author's emphasis, Rangarajan, 2001:25). The cultural construct of the 'royal' nature of the tiger was not limited to the British. It definitely stood, for many Indian monarchs<sup>91</sup> as a symbol of

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<sup>90</sup> Fayrer accepts that tigers have increased since 1857 but he is sceptical of the figures concerning loss of life (even though he tells us that in Lower Bengal alone, from 1860-66, tigers killed 4,218 people) and property (it amounted annually to 10 million pounds [1875:47]). He invites the reader to consider this destruction as being 'not so great' when one bears in mind that 'the population of India, including the native states, is nearly 250,000,000 (...)' (1875:55)!

<sup>91</sup> Tipu Sultan had a carved musical instrument representing a tiger pouncing on a British soldier (at the Victoria and Albert museum). In a similar, though inverted, symbolism, the curbing of the Revolt of 1857 is represented in a painting called 'Retribution' where Britannia is depicted, not unlike the goddess Durga, slaying a tiger. Masters (1956), in recalling his life in the pre-war British army associates Pathans with tigers. That the British also seemed to have associated the metaphor of the

their power. It was thus a symbol the British were keen to highlight as it gave them the pleasure of measuring themselves to an 'equal' or an opponent who stood his ground by his virtue of his strength, and thus killing a tiger (or any big cat for that matter) added extra prestige to the sport of hunting because it was such a potent cultural emblem symbolising the power of Indian monarchs.

It seems that, though the prestige of hunting and killing tigers has now been replaced by the prestige of conserving and saving them, the discussions about the 'natural' nature of tigers and whether man-eating is part of it remains in the hands of 'experts' instead of those who actually have to co-habit with tigers. In the present, as the past, the tiger is bestowed the epithet 'royal'. Previously it was to rehabilitate its symbolic import and so that it could fit its position in the forest as royal animal. Today, it is called 'royal' in its position as national animal. Faced with people getting killed by tigers, the only remedial procedures the WB government has come up with are ones geared towards changing a tiger's 'nature'. The tiger's 'nature', first understood along colonial lines of ruler and subject, is now understood along bhadrak lines of inferior gramer lok and superior tigers.<sup>92</sup> This approach does not permit engagement with the local ways of understanding the reasons for tigers being man-eaters and is therefore a way of failing to address the more complicated issue of preventing Sundarbans people from getting killed by tigers and crocodiles.

Fayrer, in the last century, argued that the reason why tigers were man-eaters was due to the superstition of villagers. Today, we are told that villagers refuse to use masks because they are too superstitious. But nobody can disprove the fact that Sundarbans tigers, as far as records go back, have always killed people. The earliest records of travellers (who used the interlacing rivers of the Sundarbans to get to the trading centres of Bengal) mention the threat Sundarbans tigers posed to humans. Bernier, a French traveller who passed through the Sundarbans in the mid-1600s mentions how tigers were able to carry people off boats in the middle of the night and swim back with them to the forest (Bernier [original 1656-1668] 1891:443). The

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tiger, as a worthy enemy, with the control of the Pathans has been noted by Bayly (1990). Also, it appears that Kipling's *Jungle Book* character Sher Khan is an animal representation of the Pathan. (I am thankful to Rory de Wilde for pointing out these references.) The tie-up of the symbol of the tiger to 'royalty' needs to be further explored. However, the Mughals had lions as emblems on their flags.

<sup>92</sup> For a further discussion of how understandings of animals are linked to cultural categories see Bird-David (1999), Descola (1992, 1996); Franklin (1999); Mullin (1999); Ohnuki-Tierney (1987).

causal link, whether this makes them ‘natural’ or ‘unnatural’ ‘man-eaters’, is a question that will probably always remain unanswered.

‘Science’ is not a unified phenomenon, living a life of its own separate from other social sectors (Nader 1996:2). Many claims on behalf of science are based on an image of western science as a unique way of producing knowledge. However, science studies have made clear that knowledge is situated knowledge. Objectivity is bounded, contextualized, and therefore we always get relative objectivity. Instead of the scientific *culture*, it seems more productive to speak of scientific *cultures*. Here the remedies proposed by the government are to be understood in relation to structures of power. There is undoubtedly a certain political expediency in the arguments used to justify the measures taken by the present-day WB government to counter the Sundarbans tiger’s evident predilection for human flesh. We were told that the only forest-going villagers to be killed by tigers after the introduction of masks had been those ‘too superstitious’ to wear them, yet, when we bhadrakol children had wanted to enter the forest we had been stopped. Is this not crudely all about ‘dispensable’ and ‘non-dispensable’ people?

#### IV. 8. Conclusion

The transformation of the *tigris regalis* to the status of Royal Bengal tiger and trademark for global conservation and tourism has reduced discussions about this animal to those bounded by the terms of ‘scientific’ environmental discourse. Such a discourse, by refusing to engage with the social reasons which favour the existence of man-eating in the first place, is in itself an inherently repressive knowledge. The Sundarbans villagers’ refusal to wear masks, as I came to learn during fieldwork, was a way of defying the legitimisation of a state-backed ‘scientific knowledge’ of tigers’ appetite for humans. Even though local narratives of the tiger interweave a rational observation of these animals with the social problem of man-eating, and have, one could argue, as much scientific purchase as the narratives of scientists, they have consistently been ignored.

I have no intention here to plead for ‘deep ecology’.<sup>93</sup> What we need to recognise is the relevance in Latour’s claim that modernity did not succeed in, and indeed, cannot separate the natural from the cultural/human; there can only be hybrids and networks of humans and non-humans (Latour 1993:23). The implications of Latour sensitise me to look for hybrids and networks in the various understandings of Sundarbans tigers. This is so as to dismantle the assumed superiority of certain forms of knowledge – here the one highlighted by the state and which is assumed ‘scientific’ and above the knowledge of the ‘indigenous’. Instead of focusing on the conflicting scientific debates on the ‘naturalness’ of Sundarbans tigers’ man-eating habits, the question I would pose is why the Sundarbans villagers believe that they have now become ‘tiger-food’.

The narratives developed by the villagers about the history they share with tigers is another aspect they see as ‘bonding’ them to non-humans. Those who have to ensure that the agreement left by Bonbibi is respected are the tiger-charmers. Their history is a long one – which highlights both the Islamic heritage of the forest as well as pirs’ rather strained relationship with central powers such as the Mughal state. The tiger-charmers of today have many aspects which link them to Sufi pirs. The fact that the forest is the realm of Islam is increasingly seen as problematic for the villagers – especially the landowners. For those who work as poachers the dilemma is of a different order. When the state officials use firearms to protect themselves against tigers the poachers do not see why they should use masks. The villagers who opt for rifles thus do not want to carry the attributes which mark them as inferior because ‘superstitious’ in relation to the bhadrakal and argue that if firearms are good for forest guards then they are as good for them.

The question the villagers ask is, why are the attacks made by the tiger justified on the ‘scientific’ grounds that the Royal Bengal tiger of the Sundarbans forest is a *man-eater*? Scientists in the last twenty years have been studying the reasons which might

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<sup>93</sup> Briefly, its central tenets, as criticized by Guha, are: ‘the distinction between anthropocentrism and biocentrism, the focus on wilderness preservation, the invocation of Eastern traditions, and the belief that it represents the most radical trend within environmentalism’. Guha criticises these four points on the grounds that: the distinction between anthropocentrism and biocentrism is of little use in understanding the dynamics of environmental degradation; the implementation of the wilderness agenda is causing serious deprivation in the Third World; the interpretation of Eastern traditions is highly selective; and how in different cultural contexts (e.g., West Germany and India) radical environmentalism manifests itself quite differently, the one with a far greater emphasis on equity and the integration of ecological concerns for example, and the other with livelihood and work (1989b:71).

account for the predilection the Sundarbans tiger for human flesh. But how 'true' are these 'scientific truths'? These discourses of 'scientific truth' about the peculiar habits of the Sundarbans tiger cannot be understood on their own. As Goody (1977) and Latour (1986) point out, dichotomous distinctions are convincing only as long as they are enforced by a strong asymmetrical bias that treats the two sides of the divide or border very differently. Developing this argument, Latour says that these 'great divides' do not provide any explanation, but on the contrary, are the very things to be explained (1986:2). What needs to be addressed therefore, is not why tigers are 'natural' man-eaters but why scientists insist that they are.

## V. ROUGHING IT OUT WITH KALI: BRAVING CROCODILES, RELATIVES AND THE BHADRALOK

‘With the one jati that Hindus and Muslims will form, Narayan will come as an avatar to settle the sadness of this Kolijug’,<sup>94</sup> said Arati at the end of a long answer to my question about why she had not been invited to her nephew’s wedding. Arati explained how in 1995 one of her neighbours – Gora – had come back with a woman whom he had presented to his family and neighbours as his wife Amina. Some of the village political heads<sup>95</sup> had objected, stating that Gora, being a Hindu, could not remain with the woman, as she was Muslim. Gora decided to ignore these objections and stay on in Garjontola with his wife. This union soon became a catalyst for the separation of one section of the locality of Garjontola into two factions, one group wanting the groom’s family and the couple to be ostracised and the other group vehemently refusing this ostracism. Eventually the groom’s family was reintegrated into the village fold but the differences between the two groups, one that had supported this union, and the other which had first demanded ostracism and later wanted compensation to be paid for this breach of societal rules, had remained. Arati explained that the reason why she, her mother and younger brother, had not been invited to her nephew’s wedding was because they had supported the wedding whereas the rest of their family had not. She then ended her long story with the conclusion that political parties’ fights for power had used Gora’s marriage to carve out potential electorates, and that the only redemption for the times we live in, was for ‘Hindus and Muslims to form one jati’.

This ethnography will lead to a complex unravelling of the Garjontola islanders’ relationships with one another, especially in relation to the relatively new occupation of prawn collection. I shall highlight how Arati’s reasons for upholding this marriage was actually another bid (after her failed attempt at reclaiming land from her elder brother) to assert herself. Similarly, the reason why two sections of the riverside Ganjantala had fought over this Hindu-Muslim marriage stemmed not so much from

<sup>94</sup> Bengali form of ‘Kaliyuga’ – the last of the cosmic periods. This seems to be a well-known adage in the Sundarbans. In Bengali: *Hindu Musalman ek jati loye (niye), ghochaibe kolir dukho abtar hoye*.

<sup>95</sup> *Matobbor*: meaning headman or a man of position, is used derogatorily in the Sundarbans. I have refrained from using the term ‘village elders’ because *matobbor*s, being between the age of twenty-five and forty-five, were far from being old. Also, I have used the word in the plural because representatives of different political groups were always present at these meetings even though they were not always its leaders.



a socio-moral issue as to whether two jatis should intermarry as from the fights between two prawn khoti owners.<sup>96</sup> The anecdote of this Hindu-Muslim marriage and its effect in the realm of kinship will be used as a foil to highlight issues of gender especially in relation to the three main socio-economic occupations the islanders practise.

### V. 1. A Hindu-Muslim marriage and its aftermath

After some ado and many heated exchanges, those who had initially opposed Gora's union six months later agreed to let Gora and his wife stay in their part of Garjontola on condition that Gora and his family be ostracised from southern Garjontola's sociality. They argued that the groom's parents too should be ostracised as they had accepted the marriage which was proof of the fact that they had 'preferred' a woman from the Muslim jati to one from their own jati and that they therefore could jolly well go and live with them. In opposition, the other group, composed of a cluster of families that counted Arati and her husband amongst them, had refused to sever ties with the couple and the groom's family, and had in turn been excluded by those who led the ostracising. The exclusion consisted of leaving them out of social and religious gatherings but did not involve any segregation on an economic level. Arati, for example, still fished with the other women of the village and her husband was still part of his team of forest workers. In any case these divisions were followed only within the precinct of the village. This means that feuding families were reunited when relatives from other villages hosted weddings or funeral ceremonies.

A couple of months later, however, Gora's father got very annoyed at being excluded from his neighbours' festivities. He went to see those who had led the ostracising campaign and told them that he had had enough and that he considered this snubbing of his family as very unfair (he pointed out that Gora's decision had been taken independently of him), and insisted that his family be reintegrated into the larger group. They accepted on condition that his offending son and wife be driven out of

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<sup>96</sup> Khotis, as I explained in Chapter II are little shacks built along an adjoining fishery by a prawn fishery owner. These serve to watch over the fishery and are used as a prawn seed transaction area.

the house and that he organise *Narayan sinni*<sup>97</sup> and feed the five sections of Garjontola (refer to the map of Garjontola on page 219).

As mentioned earlier, Garjontola consists of 975 people and about 209 households, which gives us an average of 4.6 people per household. These 209 households are divided into five geographical 'parts' (referred to by this English term) which are also connected to the arrival of the five main families of the village and their moments of settling in Garjontola. The division into parts came about because, most people being related to each other, it was a way devised by the villagers to limit expenses. Thus for a ceremony like a wedding or a feast given for the deceased, a family will invite only those who live in their own part along with a few very close blood and 'elected' relatives from elsewhere. As this system is followed in all the parts, no extended family relative is supposed to be offended about not being invited. The lines of division between these parts are more or less geographical. There is also an imperative to invite, whatever one's occupation, caste or economic possibility, all the members of one's part. Thus inviting the five parts of Garjontola to the *Narayan sinni* would have meant inviting more than a thousand people and this would have put Gora's father into financial bankruptcy. So, after some arguments, the village heads agreed, following the usual custom, that it would be enough for Gora's father to invite just his part of Garjontola. Gora's father organised the *Narayan sinni*, invited the sixty-odd hearths or nuclear families of his part (which would have consisted of about 276 people had everyone attended but usually only one representative from each family is sent, to limit costs). Gora and his wife went to live at the far end of his father's fields, and his parents were reabsorbed into the larger village fold.

But this expiatory worship and food distribution did not put an end to the feud between the two warring groups. The dissenters refused to attend this ceremony and a few months later undertook the responsibility of organising one of their members' (Jayanta) daughter's second marriage. This further complicated matters. Jayanta's daughter Ritu, already a married woman living in another village, had decided, six

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<sup>97</sup> *Narayan* is another name for the god Vishnu, *sinni* is a dish prepared for festive occasions; this worship is usually performed as an expiatory ritual. It is ironic that it should be this very worship which should be undertaken for the expiation of a Hindu-Muslim marriage because this very popular worship performed throughout Bengal is a narrative of how the worship should be celebrated by *all*, i.e. Hindus with folded hands calling Satya-Narayan, and Muslims with open hands calling Satya-Pir.

months after her marriage, to come back to her natal Garjontola, wishing to marry Gora's paternal uncle's son, who was her childhood neighbour and sweetheart. Arati's group, who had felt slighted by the way Gora's father's had sought the ostracising group's heads' approval, leaped on the occasion to reaffirm their group's difference and organised Ritu's second wedding. The leaders who had opposed Gora's resettlement in the village naturally boycotted this wedding.

I had gradually come to know, from Arati and Maloti, the details of how the sixty hearths of the part of Garjontola I lived in are theoretically supposed to be divided into two groups for all religious and social matters. Surprised that no one had mentioned this ostracism, which I had not even noticed, I was keen to know what it was all about. What further surprised me was that many villagers from the other parts of Garjontola did not even know about it and that many people of the same part said that this was just another family fight and that they had not 'ostracised' Gora but had simply ignored him because they had not been invited to his wedding. Some said it had to do with 'party politics'. Others explained that it was all about prawn collection and an ongoing feud between prawn businessmen. As I will explain, these reasons were interlinked. But whatever might have been the villagers' reasons for excluding Gora, within six months most people had stopped taking the injunction seriously. Realignments had occurred, with people from both groups participating in each others' social gatherings without bothering to ask the leaders of the ostracising campaign for their consent, and new alliances and divisions had been established.

In this row, Arati's elder brother Hori and his wife Maloti had supported their cousin Badal who was at the forefront of the ostracising group. Arati's mother and younger brother had, like her, supported Gora's marriage. It had been on enquiring about her absence at her nephew's wedding that Arati had told me this story. We had both been sitting on the top of the bund watching the celebrations in honour of god Hori. This is a relatively recent cult which has been started by some of the riverside villagers of Garjontola to counter the popularity of the yearly Saraswati *puja* (worship) organised by the school teachers at the high school each year. I was curious to know, as Arati had not been invited to her nephew's wedding and had been segregated from their part of the village by her cousin Badal, if her presence that afternoon was in defiance of her cousin or, on the contrary, a way of tacitly colluding with him by showing that

she wanted to be 'part' of them again. I was also curious to know from Arati why she had supported this wedding and why she had concluded her long story with a reference to how the sadness afflicting this damned age (*kolijug*) could be dispelled by the newfound unity between Hindus and Muslims.

She explained that the real motives for her row with Badal lay elsewhere. Her cousin Badal had become a khoti owner or a prawn businessman and had wanted her to sell him her prawn seeds. Arati, however, preferred selling them in the rival village Lahiripur and to Amina's father who was a khoti owner. The reason why Badal had shown his disapproval of Gora's marriage to Amina was, she claimed, mainly because Amina was many Garjontola prawn collectors' preferred prawn dealer. Amina's father, said Arati, always paid upfront and was honest. With Amina settling in the village, her father would now have greater reasons to visit Garjontola and establish links with other prawn collectors, something which Badal resented. Badal, she said, being of the same family as her, offered much lower rates for her prawn seeds and only paid at the end of the season. Arati explained how he had started this whole ado about the Gora's marriage because he resented the fact that Amina's father was doing better than him. Arati also pointed out that Badal had himself no qualms in taking his own prawn seeds to Bangladesh because he felt that he got a better deal trading with Muslims than he could with their West Bengali Hindu counterparts. Another reason for her antipathy to Badal was that he had recently started campaigning for the BJP and Arati was a staunch RSP supporter. By posing as the moral guardian of the village through his objection to the Hindu-Muslim marriage and by being one of the initiators the yearly Hori procession, Badal had tried to exploit the villagers' urge for a better social status. He had also done this to wrest some political power from the RSP. This was partly because Badal had felt that the RSP-leaning Prawn Collective Union leader had not done enough for those linked to the prawn industry and that he, by offering an alternative, could wring from the RSP some of its power.

When I asked Badal about the division of their part, he blamed it on prawn fishing and said that it made his cousin Arati and the other prawn collectors 'greedy' and that it was threatening 'village life' because people, especially women, were 'becoming too rich and stubborn'. Even though he himself was a prawn dealer, he

had loved dwelling on the acres of land his grandfather had owned. It was because he had lost it that he had become a prawn businessman. Badal was slightly peeved that his command to cease all social interactions with Gora's family and their allies had been so loosely followed. He had organised the Hori procession with some of his party members to redress his image. But, as it had been attended by a ridiculously small number of people, it had been a failure. The problem for Badal's potential career as a BJP leader was that it was being nipped in the bud. Arati was showing her open defiance of him by persisting in selling her prawn seeds to Amina's father, supporting, in his words, 'improper marriages' and living like the marginalised on the bund.

What in the meanwhile had started to annoy Arati was that Hori, her elder brother, had allied with Badal and had used Badal's injunction to ostracism in order to keep her out of his family gatherings. Even though this did not stop her or her children from being regular visitors to her elder brother's house, nor stop her children from eating with their cousins, neither Arati nor her husband were ever invited to share celebratory meals. Arati, however, felt that she could now take things in her own hands. She had made money as a prawn collector and spoke her grievance about her brother's refusal to share some of the parental land. When she realised that Hori would not part with his land, she had tried to get Badal's support by finally agreeing to sell him her prawn seed. But as he had done nothing about the land Arati had resumed dealing with the khoti owners of Lahiripur, especially with Amina's father. Badal, in turn, had finally relented and told her that she and her family could reintegrate their part and group if, as Gora's father had done, they also organised a Narayan sinni for the whole part. Arati had been keen they do so (or at least she said so). However, when she broke the news to her husband, he violently objected to the idea and categorically refused. Furious, he said that he would support a hundred other Hindu-Muslim marriages if need be but would not rub shoulders with 'that self-appointed guardian of our part who is no saint himself'.<sup>98</sup> If she organised a Narayan sinni and invited the leaders of the ostracising group, he threatened that he would also organise a Narayan sinni and invite the dissenters.

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<sup>98</sup> It was public knowledge that Badal had had famous long standing affairs with two of his neighbours. He was far from being the only one and it was not such an issue as long as things remained discreet but, as because of this, one of the women had been killed by her husband and Badal had nearly killed himself due to the sorrow her death had caused him (and had never married), this affair had become public and was indirectly referred to every time one wanted to discredit him.

That afternoon when the Hori celebrations were happening was a few days after this row. In defiance of her husband Arati had decided to attend it. Annoyed, he had taken their two sons to visit some of his 'elected' kin on another island.

Arati's husband's support for Gora's marriage and his vehement opposition to his wife's wish to reintegrate their village part was, as he explained it to me, for two reasons. One was because he was the 'elected' brother of one of Amina's brothers and felt that he owed it to Amina's family to support her since they had backed his wedding. Secondly, he argued, he did not see why the heads of his part of the village had kicked up such a commotion about this marriage when there had been other inter-jati marriages. His refusal to organise the propitiating worship also had to do with his personal disposition towards his in-laws. He did not like Badal but got along with Hori and Maloti and was in return very much appreciated by them. Their sons, his teenaged nephews, often borrowed money from him and he was always ready to oblige Maloti and his other sister-in-law living in the village when they requested him to accompany them to the forest. He felt he had nothing to lose by being excluded from his in-laws's social celebrations because he continued to enjoy good everyday relations with the ones he cared for and that his wife should not involve him but deal directly with them if she wanted to be reintegrated.

The reason for his refusal to ceremonially re-enter his in-laws' fold had to do with the fact that he thought it was best to keep his distance from them as he did not really believe Arati would be successful in reclaiming her brother's land. The other reason he put forth was of a political nature. It had been a BJP group who had mounted the campaign and he was an RSP supporter. In yet another conversation he told me how, as a forest worker, he had a responsibility not to be co-opted into 'divisive' ways of thinking which would surely result from getting entangled in family affairs. His wife could do what she wanted with them but, as a forest fisher, he had to remain a 'cool person' (*thanda manush*) as opposed to hot headed. One of the main prerequisites for remaining 'cool' was the avoidance of owning land, engaging in politics or family rows.

Part of Arati's dilemma, as I came to understand, was trying to figure out how she could get a piece of her brother's land and thus build a hut on a proper homestead. This would give her social status as well as enabling her to take part in her blood families' weddings and mortuary rites (*shradh*). Arati's predicament thus shows the tension between three very distinct worldviews – one supported by her husband, that of a forest worker, the other by her cousin, that of a landowner, and the third by her own role as a prawn collector – and thus different expectations of behaviour. These conflicting expectations were often the cause of family feuds. Prawn collectors, who are not under the same interdictions as forest fishers, and because they were making money which was theirs to keep, were increasingly asserting themselves against hierarchies of gender and economy. In the next section I shall address their plight and dilemmas in more detail.

## **V. 2. Women and prawn seed collection in Garjontola: practicalities and dilemmas**

The rivers and canals of the WB Sundarbans occupy a key place in relation to the fishery resources of the state. The prawn fisheries of the area have been earning considerable amounts of foreign exchange for India and tiger prawns have been called the 'living dollars' of the Sundarbans (Nandi and Misra 1987:1). Around 10,000 hectares of the Sundarbans have been converted into prawn fisheries (Anon., 1993b). But while fisheries are mostly located in the northern region of the Sundarbans, their success depends on prawn seeds collected from rivers in the southern islands (recent experiments to artificially hatch tiger prawn seeds on a large scale have so far been unsuccessful).

Prawn collection, due to its practicability throughout the year, is very popular. It has become, within twenty years, one of the most stable sources of revenue for the Sundarbans villagers, especially women. A couple of hours' net-pulling easily enables a woman to make more money than the wage she could make by working a full day in someone's fields. In the southern islands of the Sundarbans, prawn collection picked up in the late seventies and became widely practised, especially after the disastrous cyclones of 1981 and 1988. The 1988 cyclone, for example, resulted in many rivers breaking the bunds of the southern islands, leaving

agricultural land completely infertile for the next three years. Once land gets flooded by the region's saline rivers, people usually resort to working in the forest collecting crabs, fish, honey and wood. The late 1970s and 1980s was also a time during which the government came down heavily on those who did not possess forest-passes, which were relatively expensive and thus a luxury few villagers could afford. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the officials were known for their ruthlessness in extorting fines from the bereaved relatives of those tiger-victims who had ventured pass-less into the forest. Thus prawn seed collection quickly gained popularity. It has remained popular because (i) it can be practised along the banks of one's island and in-between household chores; (ii) prawn seed is easily available and sells for relatively large sums; and (iii) it is legal and, at least when it started, it was not tainted with the stigma it subsequently came to bear.

Prawn seed collection is the first link in the long chain of activities between the catching of the almost invisible and hair-like prawn seed to its final dispatch to the global market. The development of hatchery-produced tiger prawn seed is practically non-existent in WB, making the aquaculture farms of this region largely dependent on the supply from the natural resources of the Sundarbans.

#### i) Prawn collection

There are two main ways in which the villagers go about prawn collection. One is by boat which involves fixing a fine triangular net in the river, pulling up its conical-shaped end every half hour, and pouring the contents into a container on the boat. The second method, by far the most popular one, consists of pulling a three- or four-foot wide by five- to six-foot long shaped mosquito net, wading in waist- to shoulder-deep water, along the bank of a river. These two methods are practised roughly along gendered lines for economic and practical reasons – usually women and children fish by pulling nets and men (sometimes with their wives) fish from their boats. Pulling nets along the banks of their villages enables women and children to remain close to their locality so that women can easily go back to their household chores and children to their classes. Those fishing from their boats often spend the whole night on the river. Net-pulling is also undertaken along the banks of the forested islands especially as it yields a greater catch. This is usually undertaken by a group of intrepid young women or groups of men and women of all ages. They row



their boats to the large river intersections, settle on a bank, and pull for six or seven hours.

Pulling along the village banks is risky enough as the Sundarbans rivers, especially after the government efforts in the 1980s establishes crocodile hatcheries to increase the dwindling population of Sundarbans crocodile for wildlife conservation purposes. The rivers are now infested with crocodiles the largest of which grow to a length of twenty-three feet or seven metres. Pulling along the banks of the forest islands is even more dangerous as there, apart from the crocodiles, one also risks being attacked by tigers, sharks and venomous snakes. Each year, the casualties of crocodile victims – mostly women – keep increasing. The figure, estimated at 150 people killed per year by tigers and crocodiles alone by the then Sundarbans Range Officer, is plausible. However, Pranabes Sanyal, Chief Conservator of Forest (Wildlife), WB Forest Department, claimed that the number of tiger victims in 1996 fell to a single person and that this was because 30% of ex-fishermen, woodcutters and honey collectors had shifted to prawn collection (1997:1). If tigers have been taking fewer victims in recent years, casualties caused by crocodiles have sharply increased. The media coverage on crocodile victims is even less than that of tiger victims because of the differences of status of the two animals and the gender of the victim.

## ii) Counting, buying and selling

Once the collectors return to dry land, the prawn seeds are counted. This procedure entails hours of sitting along the village paths separating each individual greyish inch-long live tiger prawn seed of hair-thin diameter from the haul, using a white bivalve shell. The counting of prawn seeds is a long-drawn-out process which often erupts in fights, as sometimes dead tiger prawn seedlings (which turn reddish) or non tiger prawn seedlings (differences are apparent only to the trained eye) are passed off as the real thing. The counting is usually supervised by two parties: the collectors, who try to count as quickly as possible, and the prawn seed dealers working for the khoti owners, who tell them to slow down. The dealers walk down the village bunds with aluminium pots in the hope of coming across collectors who have returned from fishing, and buy prawn seed from them. The prices vary greatly, and change not only

in relation to seasons, the peak months being August–October, but from village to village, and often even within a lapse of hours, in relation to how good or bad the catch of the day has been in each particular village. In the monsoon months, when prawn seeds proliferate, women catch around 1,000/day and men in boats around 3,000. During this time the price for 1,000 prawn seeds goes down as low as fifty rupees. During the leanest months, January and February, when the catch falls to 200-300 per person/day, the rate goes up to 400 rupees for 1,000 seeds. However, even during the monsoon months, people can be lucky and make a good sum and vice versa during the lean months. There is thus no guarantee of the amount of money a person might make and this is considered to be yet another factor contributing to the riskiness of this occupation. If much of it is lottery, there are, however, some factors based on experience and many prawn collectors can guess the probability of getting prawn seeds not only according to the season but also in relation to the lunar cycle (whether it is full moon or new moon), the wind velocity and the wave amplitude. The dealers usually negotiate their prices with the collectors. The collectors can, to a certain extent, be choosy with dealers but they also are under pressure to sell off their seeds as soon as they possibly can to prevent their dying.

### iii) Dispatching the prawn seeds to the fisheries

Four to seven men usually work as dealers and agents for khoti owners. When dealers are not out on the bund to buy prawn seed, the prawn collectors come to the khoti. The most important items in these little shacks are the notebooks belonging to each dealer with lists carefully drawn up on the number of seedlings brought, the names of each collector, and the time and dates, so that collectors, dealers and khoti owners know fairly accurately the number of seedlings they have bought and placed in their little fisheries. They sell these off to the bigger fishery owners not by counting the seedlings all over again but by letting businessmen count the seedling from any one of their pots. For the purposes of this chapter I shall keep to transactions at the village level and will not study these bigger transactions. Khotis, in Garjontola, are relatively new and each khoti is formed by three or four men joining together in partnership by pooling around 5,000 rupees each. The money they entrust in theory to the dealers working for them each day is about 500 to 1,000

rupees – which means that fortnightly the khoti partners dispense between ten to twenty million rupees. However, in practice, this is not normally the case. Due to ties of kinship and the risks of the prawn industry, the businessmen – especially here in the case of Badal – rarely have such large amounts of money at their disposal and so offer to pay the prawn collectors the bulk of their earnings along with interest at the end of the three months' prawn season. However, it is up to the prawn collectors to agree to this deal or sell their prawn seeds to other dealers. Either way is perilous for the collectors: in the first instance they risk losing a good amount of their money if the season has been bad; in the second instance, they risk alienating a known dealer and thus having to travel to another village to sell the easily perishable prawn seed.

Its violence and risk are manifest at all stages. During collection, prawn collectors face the risk of being attacked and killed by crocodiles, sharks, tigers and snakes. Counting the prawn seed gives rise to endless charges of cheating. Pressure groups of all kinds try to establish their hegemony over the prawn collectors' wares. With the passing of prawn dealing from the management of outsiders to insiders, the fight for control has become more intense. In some places, prawn dealing has been taken up by party activists who have chased away previous prawn transactors. In the case of southern Garjontola, Badal and Dulal were trying to set up a transitory prawn fishery in front of Badal's house. Dulal owned a bit more land than the other riverside Ganjantala dwellers and also worked as a priest. Many such small fisheries of transition are starting up in the villages of the southern islands of the Sundarbans so that by the time the prawn seeds reach the larger mainland fisheries they are bigger and can be sold at a higher price.

The prawn industry is big money. Let me give an example: for two of the villages of Satjelia island – each with about 3,000 inhabitants – one night's catch brings around 150,000 rupees for the village of Toofankhali, and around half a million rupees for the adjoining village, Lahiripur. These enormous sums attract pirates and dacoits to attack prawn businessmen's boats and houses. The prawn-transacting boats which take the prawn seeds to bigger fisheries or the fully grown prawns to Kolkata or Bangladesh are regularly attacked by pirates: the transactors are beaten up and their vast amounts of cash and prawn seed looted. They are also subject to heavy fines by the BSF (Border Security Force) if they cross the border to sell the prawn seed in

Bangladesh. Yet this is often done as many khoti owners think that Bangladeshis are more honest in their dealings with them than the buyers from WB. Even the fisheries where the seeds are grown into full size prawns are known to be hotbeds of violence due to different fishery owners vying with each other for better markets and poisoning each other's fisheries. Such fisheries, which dot the landscape for two-thirds of the bus route from Kolkata to the Sundarbans, are usually owned by four or five partners who employ around forty-five labourers. Above these vast expanses of water sectioned in squares, platforms are built on bamboo poles where men can be seen holding rifles and keeping a close guard all through the day and night.

Violence and risk are understandably the two main reasons for the negative connotation of the prawn-collecting. The villagers often talked to me of the prawn industry as being 'nothing but a lottery'. There are further risks: the dealers have to take protective measures against the fisheries' exposure to the hazards of the weather. Excessive rain causes the prawn seed to die as it needs saline water to thrive; it also leads the fishery chambers to flood.<sup>99</sup> Likewise, if the ratio of food or lime and phosphate is not right or if the sun heats up the fisheries, the prawn seeds will die and a good part of the season's collection will be lost. Sarkar and Bhattacharya report that there is a mortality rate of 15-20% of the prawn seed at this stage (2003:262). Also, because this industry churns out vast amounts of money, in which local political parties, government officials and businessmen hold some share, its 'immoral' reputation has grown considerably. At all stages, the prawn industry is seen as a gamble. People either make or lose millions and, just as they are liable to gain economic and political power, they can just as easily lose their life to tigers or crocodiles or their possessions to a storm or a retributive attack. How do women cope with this?

### V. 3. Roughing it out with Kali

Once, while sitting on the bund with some women prawn collectors, I asked them why they had adopted Kali as their patron goddess. I had been given quite a few reasons, one being that violent people like dacoits and pirates are their prime

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<sup>99</sup> This is very much a possibility as the peak of the prawn-collecting season is the monsoon time.

enemies so they needed, as a group, to worship a powerful goddess such as Kali to be able to face them. In contrast to the worship of Bonbibi, the worship of Kali, because of its expense, was organised and mainly paid for by the prawn dealers and businessmen. Kali was therefore not worshipped regularly or even very fervently by the prawn collectors but was still considered 'their goddess'.

Arati started to tell me how a young woman called Kalpona had met her death the previous year. Kalpona collected prawn seed to meet the expenses of her small family. She went out each morning at the break of dawn with her three friends Arati, Shabi and Nonibala and pulled the net for about five hours along the riverbanks of her village, Annpur. The morning of her death she had pulled the net for three hours before being caught by a crocodile. As the crocodile caught her thigh and dragged her into the deeper waters of the river, Kalpona, screaming out in terror, beat the animal with her net. Her three friends ran to her help. One of them jumped in after her, trying to retrieve her from the murky waters; the others shouted for help. What follows is keeping as close to Nonibala's narrative as possible: Kalpona's frantic gesticulations, cries and loud splashes as she fought with the crocodile pierced the heavy white mist. After what seemed a horrendously long time they were replaced by the cracking of her net or bones or both. As Nonibala stood there, immobilised with shock, she swooned. When she sat up and desperately scanned the river for signs of life, all she saw were bubbles and ripples disappearing into the quieting beige-brown surface of the river. Then Nonibala saw a trail of a slowly dulling bright red moving away from her while a soft cloying wetness, the limp end of a sari, washed itself around her legs. It was as if it washed through her body a sudden soundless shard which stabbed her through the heart.

The villagers came rushing to the riverbank immediately. The news spread fast. This was the fourth person in the area to have met her death through these water monsters. Some other women had survived after losing a limb to sharks. The collectors, in fear and out of respect for the dead woman's memory, stopped going prawn collecting for the following days. The villagers agreed that the rivers were getting riskier and that they should really abandon collecting prawns by pulling nets, especially during the monsoon months. Once winter arrived, and crocodiles became less active, they could resume prawn collecting. But within a few days these resolutions were forgotten, the

men returned to work in the forest as crab and honey collectors and the women to pull their nets along the edges of rivers. The winter months follow the reaping of paddy and there is little need for cash then, but during the summer and monsoon months not only is there a greater quantity of prawn seed but it is also the time when people are most in need of money.

'In the case of tiger-victims, people make a big hue and cry but what about crocodile victims? There are no big stories for us, no explanation,' exclaimed Nonibala. She continued, 'Dokkhin Rai, according to some people, is someone one can at least pray to and plead with, but crocodiles are dumb creatures.' Going to the jungle, they explain, is to know that the forest is Bonbibi's storehouse as well as a protected part of the global environment. But the rivers, where they flow along the inhabited islands, are not as symbolically demarcated as the forest; besides these waters are not regulated by such stringent rules as when the rivers flow through the forest. The few relevant rules are mainly upheld only by boatmen. Also, the prawn collectors argue, prawn seed collection is seen in such a negative light because these hatchlings are collected for cash and not as food. In other words, if it can be argued that taking from the forest is seen as an exchange of 'gifts' where what is important is to maintain the 'relationship' between forest and humans, in the case of prawn collectors and rivers it is just an 'exchange', a kind of Sahlinsian 'negative reciprocity' in which each party tries to grab as much as they can from the other.

Prawn collectors are spoken of as being 'greedy' as they do not know when to stop pulling the net because they always hope to make 'even more money'. 'But what is wrong in that?' suddenly asked Arati. 'Am I not paying for these shrimps with the sweat of my brow? It's not as if I'm staying indoors and supervising my workers and yelling at them while my money multiplies in banks. Here I'm working my arms and legs off. Have you smelt tiger prawn, don't you think they smell of sweat and blood? It is ours. How dare people say we are greedy and have no self-respect just because we want to earn and make a decent living? Do you now understand why we need Kali on our side?' ended Arati after a well-attended and heated conversation on the subject.

If the prawn dealers, agents and businessmen are unapologetic about their occupation, the collectors, often women, even Arati, frequently presented to me the moral dilemmas they face. As seen earlier there is much criticism of the negative effect of prawn seed collecting on village life. The first of these comes from forest fishers who are always quick to point out the way in which prawn collection contravenes the 'ethos of the forest' and is seen as cursed by the forest deity, Bonbibi. Many forest fishers, themselves have family members engaged in prawn collection but even then they usually blame tiger attacks on prawn collectors presence in the forest. They argue that the prawn collectors have 'de-sacralised' the forest, transforming it into 'a big marketplace' where people unscrupulously disturb animals by walking in and out at all times of the day and night. The prawn collectors themselves share this condemnation as they genuinely believe that, by entering the forest, they bring upon themselves the wrath of Bonbibi. Many even say that prawn collectors are ultimately doomed because they flout the rules of the forest.

The second sort of criticism is put by landowners and school teachers, who condemn the fact that numerous poor parents force their children to pull nets instead of sending them to school. To these charges, the prawn collectors retort that it is unfortunate that they are stigmatised in this way but that many of them simply do not have money to send their children to school in the first place, that it is sad that people die but that options for making a living in the Sundarbans, especially for the landless and for widowed or divorced women, are so limited that prawn collection has actually saved them from dire poverty. The villagers often spoke of a time *before* prawn seed collection, when life was tough and they could not satisfy their hunger. With prawn collection, things have changed; those who have been quick to pick up this occupation are now in a better position to afford schooling for their children.

As villagers often pointed out to me, it was only after the introduction of prawn collection that people started eating two square meals a day. However, prawn collection has increasingly been criticised and attacked on moral grounds and branded as a 'greedy' and 'violent' occupation and as posing a threat to the 'ethics' of not only the environment but also of village life. The criticism raised by forest workers is rooted in local ideas of morality around the forest and its rules. But criticism was also levelled by local environmentalists, NGO activists and the

educated elite. Their disapprobation ultimately stems from an urban, middle-class understanding of gender and morality. This is expressed through remarks made by the village elite on how prawn collection is an activity purely motivated by 'greed'. While this may seem a term shared with the proponents of the forest and Bonbibī, in fact 'greed' in this discourse is seen as threatening 'simple village life', implying its fictitious neatly ordered hierarchies of class and gender. What is interesting is that prawn collectors, especially women, saw these condemnations as thinly veiled attacks on the poor and on gramer *mohila* (village women) and their bid to economic and social respectability.

#### V. 4. The 'Blue Revolution' in the poverty-stricken land of the 'living dollars'

Late one day while I was chatting with the school teachers, one of them told me that village morality had changed because of prawn collection. When I asked why this was so, he said that this occupation made women 'uncontrollable' and the poor in general 'arrogant'. They were becoming rich and were thus challenging the understood 'traditional' hierarchies of gender and society. The following anecdote is illustrative. One Friday, the day of the weekly market, while I was sipping tea with a few of the villagers from Toofankhali, a group of all ages was discussing the recent death by a crocodile of a prawn collector. One of the men, a big landowner seated on one of the two benches which surrounded the shop, turned to me and said, 'Do you know the main reason for all these prawn collectors' deaths? It is greed. So many of these villagers just run to the river at the break of dawn with their nets to pull in dollars. The Americans' and the Japanese' tastes for tiger prawn is spoiling our traditional way of life.' Later, on our way back home, Arati asked in a sarcastic tone if I had understood what the landowner had actually implied. 'He meant being able to exploit us on his fields for a meal and a few rupees. Prawn collection has saved us, prawns are the living dollars of the Sundarbans, and will help us combat the landed gentry and their ruthless exploitation.'

Prawn collection represents a major shift from traditional fishing, which was predominantly undertaken by men and by Hindus. Prawn collection, in contrast, was started in Bangladesh by Muslim communities who were increasingly disadvantaged as landless labourers and marginal farmers. It soon spread as it was relatively free of



the social hierarchies linked to agriculture and could be practised in one's own free time and with very little investment. Moreover, initially at least, it was devoid of stigma. In the Gosaba area, people narrated how in the beginning it was a craze, everybody took up prawn collection as it was such an easy way to make cash – prawn were then really the 'living dollars of the Sundarbans'. In those early days, wives of school teachers and of important politicians, like their poorer counterparts, were known to have hitched up their saris and spent days wading in rivers pulling behind them the fine net used to collect prawn seed. The threat of crocodiles in those days was remote, dealers paid well and did not follow the gender biases found in agricultural work (where a woman is paid two-thirds of what a man is paid). However, the fact that this line of work was initially started by Muslims and, both in Bangladesh and in WB, became popularised especially amongst poor women is relevant to understand why those who practise it face such disapproval. In many places it reversed not only the tacit hierarchies of caste and religion but especially those of gender, at least in certain parts of the Sundarbans of WB.

What also seems of note is that initially prawn collectors made money relatively quickly, thus bringing about the wrath of those who consider themselves too *bhadra* or 'civilised' to carry out prawn collection. The antipathy of the village elite towards the prawn collectors has to be understood primarily as a struggle for control of the economy. They resent the fact that sharecroppers and wage labourers refuse to work their fields for a pittance and that they now prefer to work as prawn collectors and to borrow money from prawn businessmen rather than the landowners. Prawn dealers are very often forest workers (usually ex poachers) or prawn collectors who 'have made it' and become rich. They are usually people of the same social background as forest workers and prawn collectors and live, like them, along the river's edge. (Building a prawn fishery in the interior of the islands would be impossible.) The prawn collectors often boast about how they are their own masters, and how they have become prawn businessmen (this was open only to men) through hard work and luck. In contrast to the forest workers and to school teachers, people who are seen to be dependent on the state for forest passes and salaries respectively, the prawn collectors take great pride in being subject neither to the hierarchies of the village nor to the patronage of the state. They strive to gain social status by cultivating links to other places – preferably 'up' ones – and by showing off their money. Even if being

a prawn collector means being subject to exploitation, the prawn collectors see it as better than being the landless labourer of the local landowner. However, while the two sectors, agriculture and prawn, vie for economic status, social status is still very much the prerogative of the landed gentry. It is in this context that we have to understand the discourses of 'greed' and 'violence' developed about the prawn collectors as ways of preventing their access to social respectability.

Historically, there has always been friction between landowners and fishers in Bengal. When the British established the Permanent Settlement in 1793, they left *jalkar* rights – that is, rights relating to produce of the water – open for the zamindar landlords to increase their income. This system increased the dominance of the zamindars even if they usually leased their *jalkar* rights to middlemen who in turn leased them out for a sum or hired fishers. Traditionally, the rights to a body of water and to the land which surrounded it were vested in two different people. When rivers shifted their course, the right of *jalkar* followed the river so that if, it flowed over a cultivator's land, the cultivator lost access to that land and did not gain any compensatory rights to fish even though his land lay beneath the water. However, as *jalkar* rights gradually came under the control of landowners, by contrast fishing in the public navigable rivers was allowed to anyone and went untaxed. These rivers were defined as the property of the state and the public had the right to fish where rivers were not leased out to individuals (Pokrant et al, 2001:96-97).

In 1859, in an endeavour to make some profit, the Board of Revenue leased out portions of navigable rivers, especially the Hooghly and Ganges, to leaseholders (Pokrant et al, 2001:99). However, by 1868, in the wake of legal disputes, the government of Bengal abandoned the policy of auctioning parts of navigable rivers in deference to the views of the Legal Remembrance and the Advocate General who, following English law on the subject, decided that the rights to fisheries in tidal rivers were vested in the crown, in its capacity as trustee, for the benefit of the public. The exclusive rights to fisheries could therefore not be granted to private individuals or to classes of persons to the exclusion of the public (Pokrant et al, 2001:99-100, quoting *Indian Law Reports*, 11, Calcutta, 434). However, customary rights kept clashing with capitalist interests. The zamindars were unhappy with this decision and pressurised the government of Bengal through the British Indian

Association to ensure their jalkar rights. Finally, the Chief Secretary of the government of Bengal established that fish, even though in public rivers, did not become the property of the person who had the fishing right as they were '*ferae naturae*' and therefore belonged to the state.<sup>100</sup>

### V. 5. Kali – the 'progressive' yet disruptive one

The staff members of the WB Forest Department's offices are usually not people from the Sundarbans, and therefore often bypass Bonbibi and focus their worship on more mainstream goddesses such as Kali or Tara (another form of Kali). The government staff explain that Bonbibi's image is placed in the Sundarbans sanctuaries' for the benefit of the 'superstitious' forest workers. The forest officials' say that they promote Bonbibi's image because she provides a sense of comfort to the forest workers because of her symbolic import in upholding a relationship of sharing forest products between humans and tigers. However, Bonbibi's presence on government terrain points to an interesting paradox: far from signifying legitimacy, those seen as believing in her powers are discredited as superstitious fools and become the butt of jokes by the very same forest officials who prefer to rely on Kali. This distinction between Bonbibi and Kali thus constitutes another marker of difference between the inhabitants of the Sundarbans and the forest officials and other bhadrak in general: while the former are seen as 'superstitious', rural and backward because they worship a local goddess, the latter see themselves as sophisticated, urbane and progressive because they worship Kali, a goddess well-inscribed within the Hindu pantheon and therefore, in their eyes, more potent.

Kali's growing popularity amongst the prawn collectors, usually explained on the grounds that their occupation is both bloody and risky and therefore requiring a violent cosmic deity, has much potential significance. To what extent is the adoption of Kali, the goddess of forest officials, by prawn collectors a way of inscribing their occupation within the bhadrak sphere? In the Sundarbans, where Kali is a goddess notoriously linked to violent male occupations, is her worship by prawn collectors, who are mostly female, an attempt to redefine notions of gender and the place of

<sup>100</sup> Pokrant et al, quoting from Ch. Sec., Bengal to Govt of India [GOI], 8/9/1888, para.3 (2001:101).

women in contemporary Sundarbans, on economic as well as on social levels? The rhetoric of the women prawn collectors, a rhetoric often pitched against the urban Bengali middle-class ideals of the *bhadra mohila* (literally: civilised/cultured woman), also offers a possibility of ‘civility’ through the association with a goddess who is not only firmly installed within the Hindu pantheon<sup>101</sup> but yet also permitted enough room for ‘deviance’.

Kali is seen by the prawn collectors as offering a space to claim a sense of urban *bhadrata*, or ‘civility’, because she does not have the dubious Islamic ascendancy of Bonbibi. She is after all, the goddess usually worshipped by the forest guards, people who represent the larger exterior world. Moreover, Kali is deemed more ‘powerful’ because her inherent violence, in sharp contrast with Bonbibi’s peaceful disposition, is perceived as offering greater potency in violent dealings. The appropriation of Kali by the prawn collectors is thus both because of a desired inscription of their work within a ‘higher’ social sphere – that of the educated urban elite – however remote that sphere may be from their daily lives, and because they see Kali’s image as fitting with the necessarily violent, risky and bloody nature of their occupation.

In the context of the Sundarbans prawn industry, Kali has been stripped of her motherly qualities. Her current urban portrayal as the magnanimous and compassionate mother, ever-ready to forgive her errant children – an image made famous by the great Bengali poet and composer of songs devoted to Kali, Ramprasad Sen,<sup>102</sup> and Kali devotee and mystic, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa<sup>103</sup> – is a stark contrast to the stories of gore and greed narrated about her in the Sundarbans, where she is depicted as the *enfant terrible* of the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses

<sup>101</sup> Even though Kali’s indigenous Tantric background and Sakta origin place her outside the Vedic Hindu pantheon, these aspects are increasingly being downplayed in favor of a Vaishnavite identity (see Gupta’s and Menon & Shweder’s account of her ‘domestication’ – in the ritual and the social realm (2003:60–79 & 80–99 respectively).

<sup>102</sup> Ramprasad Sen (1720–1781), poet and famous composer of songs dedicated to Kali as ‘Mother of the universe’, couched in the words of a wayward but repentant child. The sentiments evoked by the songs are a combination of affectionate and erotic devotion in which the singer, as a naughty child, lovingly chides the fierce Mother for neglecting him and calling her, in rural slang, *magi*, i.e., slut or hussy and threatening to eat her, making tasty dishes out of her body parts. While these intensely emotive songs, called *shyama sangeet*, were and remain highly popular in the urban sphere, they are not very popular in the Sundarbans context where mainland Hinduism is making an entry, especially through the adoption of day-and-night-long devotional songs (*kirtan*) sung to Radha-Krishna and the yearly celebration of Ras by the landed and gentrified elite.

<sup>103</sup> Ramakrishna (1836–1886) was a priest at the Kali temple of Dakhineswar. He had little formal training, but his saintliness and wisdom attracted a large following. Ramakrishna’s message of universal religion was spread to the West by his most famous disciple Vivekananda.

and is sometimes linked to Dokkhin Rai.<sup>104</sup> I argue that the choice of Kali, the violent goddess, offers a social redefinition of what it means to be a village woman with clout and economic status. By choosing Kali, the Sundarbans women prawn collectors refuse not only their relegation to the margins of civility but also reject being co-opted into the ideal of *bhadra* femininity, and choose instead to be part of 'the cut-throat world of business'. This leads to the question: how do Sundarbans women legitimise their involvement in the prawn industry in view of the local ethos of the forest?

It was in relation to the widespread belief about the sacrality of the jungle terrain, and whether the forest had lost some of its purity because of women entering that I put the following question to Sukumar, 'What about women?' I asked, 'What are Bonbibi's recommendations for them?' 'The same as for us men, they have to be pure [in its meaning of both *suchi* i.e. 'clean', and possessing 'genuine intentions'].' This reminded him of a story 'of a terrific woman' who was head of a team. Sukumar was soon telling us how, when he had gone catching crabs with a couple of friends in the core area, they had been caught by the forest guards. To enter into the formalities that such a meeting entails, their little boat was tied to the forest guards' launch. The Range Officer was having his lunch so the guards told them they would have to wait. There was another boat which had also been caught, and which had been tied along the opposite side of the launch. All of a sudden, Sukumar noticed that their leader was a woman, and what a woman! She looked like the director of what looked like a team acting in a well rehearsed play. She seemed to be holding her men in total control, silently, with her steely gaze commanding one to put the sails up, the other to ready the engine, the third to fetch and hand out the rifles, etc. Sukumar was watching, mesmerized, and felt that his hands were obeying her silent directives: 'Untie our boat' and he untied the ropes which were holding her boat to the launch. 'Whoooff, even if she had ordered me to climb in with them I think I would have obeyed, I was spellbound. Abruptly however, her deafening war cry, loud above the roar of the engine, pulled me back to reality.'

The Range Officer ran out and when he saw their boat speeding away he ordered her to stop and his men to fire. Rifle slung over her shoulders, standing tall on the deck

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<sup>104</sup> Some villagers even went to the extent of arguing that Dokkhin Rai sacrificed the human victims he made in the forest to Kali before feeding on them.

of her boat, she shouted back, 'Careful now, you are service holders, we do black, your lives are surrounded by the compassion of concerned people, our lives have no value, we are reckless. Now think twice before you come closer, because if you do, my rifle will cry out loud and clear.' 'Imagine, what a courageous woman,' cried out Sukumar. They were from Midnapur, a friend later told him, wood poachers, poor people like us [though I am not so sure about this], nice people, they had offered them tea and biscuits to ensure their silence. 'But how did you plan getting out of this [vis-à-vis both the ranger and Bonbibi]?' I asked. 'Well, when the ranger asked me, I said they would have killed me if I had not complied and, as far as Bonbibi is concerned, cutting a reasonable amount of trees is not bad for the jungle, it helps it to breathe and to get new undergrowth.' 'And what about the lie?' I asked. 'What does it mean to be self-righteous if it means giving somebody else away? Bonbibi does not want us to be heartless after all,' he said. 'But you know these black parties are rich,' I continued. 'But service holders are richer, plus they have the security and respectability attached to their occupation,' he replied. 'Tell me sincerely, how much of the fines they extract from us actually go to the government?'

Forest officers often made correlations between prawn seed collectors and poachers and they often said that these two groups helped each other. One of them said he did not believe in charms but in 'calling Mother with an open fervent heart, against the dangers of the jungle, the two most important weapons are devotion and courage'. 'Bonbibi?' I had asked. 'No, Tarama,' he replied. But he also added in the same breath that the only time he was attacked by a tiger was when he went to pee in the jungle. He made no explicit connection but I found it strange that he mentioned the reason why he had alighted, as the forest boats usually have toilets. He also said that he often entered the jungle unarmed because he believed that if he had no intention of hurting 'wildlife', then wildlife would not hurt him. 'Forest life is now polluted, you cannot speak the truth any longer.' Are tigers more important than humans? The villagers were so poor, ten-fifteen years ago they were very poor, now prawn money has made them richer but they have not been able to use that money properly. They do not send their kids to school, they steal the solar lamps and do not respect the fact the the forest is the government's property. Ten years ago WB had the second highest revenue collected from forest products but this has now come down because felling has been reduced.'

## V. 6. Replacing Bonbibi with Kali

The negative image of prawn collection is reinforced in innumerable ways. The increase in tiger and crocodile victims is often blamed on prawn collection and yet they are not seen as victims. When the villagers talk to outsiders about the difficulties of living in the Sundarbans, it is primordially those who 'do the forest' who are cited as belonging to the most vulnerable group. What is strange is that, even though it is now the prawn collectors, and therefore women, who are now as a group the most affected, and despite the fact that crocodiles are taking far more victims than are tigers, prawn collectors do not evoke the sympathy that the honey collectors or woodcutters do. The discrepancy of status between the glamorous tiger versus the common crocodile or shark is directly transferred to the inequality of status between the images of the pious and industrious forest fishers versus the immoral and greedy women prawn collectors. The motives for this are a mix of the local ethos of the forest with its laws, the ideologies of the different economies and the discrepancy between the status of men and women. As discussed earlier, when a person finds death in the clutches of a tiger, this is often attributed by the villagers to possessing one of the following traits: violence, greed, or arrogance. These are alleged to be the characteristics of tigers. Thus, as is often stated, those villagers who are careless enough to display these traits are making a mockery of the tiger's power and provoke the tigers' ire and thus become their target.

Prawn collectors often go in groups to pull nets along the forest islands, especially along the banks of large river intersections, as the catch there is substantially more significant. Those who work in the forest for crab, fish, honey or wood, argue that the presence of prawn seed collectors in the forest area threatens them all, as they enter the forest with the wrong mindset. The villagers often argue that, for the prawn collectors, everything is a 'gamble', a 'lottery', a 'risky game' in which they play hard, using their very lives as pawns. It is this supposed 'carelessness', about their own lives as well as about the jungle, which, argue the villagers, puts all the forest workers' lives at stake.

Where the forest workers take precautions, the prawn collectors are seen as uncouth and thieving, 'ill-mannered looters of the forest', as one tiger-charmer called them. They do not respect any of the forest rules, and fish at odd times of the day and night. As most of them are women, they have to look after children, send them off to school, comb their hair, etc. Arati explained, 'there are so many forest rules, which ones should we keep and which ones can be safely disposed of? As it is difficult to decide, and as we work more often along the banks of rivers flowing along villages rather than the ones flowing through the forest, we prefer ignoring these rules completely.' Moreover, although there are specific interdictions against defiling the territory of the tiger, there are no such rules for crocodiles or sharks. Nor are the rivers, where flowing outside the forest, considered 'sacred'.

Ganga, the river goddess, the patron of the boatmen and the sea fishers, might have become the patron of the prawn collectors. She is seen as a 'greedy' goddess, always grabbing land and homestead. Yet, Ganga is also seen as too 'local' and 'traditional'. One of the popular jokes about Ganga highlights her notorious greed. It goes like this: once, a boat taking passengers to the market met with a huge storm. It started rocking so dangerously that one scared woman in terror cried out, 'Ma Ganga, please let me cross safely and I shall organize a ritual feast in your honour next year.' The weather continued to be rough and the woman now implored her, adding that she would organize this ritual feast each month; she extended her mark of devotion to each week and this carried on and on until it became every day. The woman invited all her co-passengers to be witnesses to her promise. Finally the river calmed down and the boat reached the shore. On alighting from the boat, the woman turned to the river and said, 'You greedy Ma Ganga, you tried making me succumb through fright, but I defeated you with greed.'

The narration of this story and the peals of laughter it invariably begets contrasts sharply with the stories the men recount of the forest where spirits and tigers must be appeased through respecting elaborate rules. Prawn collectors who spend their days wading in river water do not choose Ganga as their deity, notwithstanding the fact that she is seen to be just as greedy and occasionally as violent as Kali. The rejection of Ganga as the preferred deity of prawn collectors because she is 'unimportant' led me to look at prawn collection and its social content from the women's perspectives.



As one of my female prawn-collecting neighbours explained, Ganga 'is neither strong nor violent enough. Who knows about her? Whereas Kali, with her reputation as a cut-throat goddess, is just perfect for us.' It is not as if all the prawn collectors worship Kali; on the contrary, she is much less worshipped than Bonbibi. Ganga too is worshipped, but as a minor deity, and mainly by those who own boats. Kali, however, is increasingly gaining popularity amongst prawn collectors on the grounds that she is powerful. Forest workers are seen by a surprising number of women prawn collectors as a generally old school superstitious lot, whereas the women see themselves as pragmatic and often express serious doubts about Bonbibi's potency. That is why, for prawn collectors, it is increasingly Kali they propitiate or make their vows to.

This sudden popularity of Kali with people who see their occupation as violent and/or marginal has parallels with the increasing attractiveness of deities such as Kataragama, Kali and Huniyam/Suniyam in Sri Lanka. Locally, these deities were traditionally linked to immoral activities or black magic and even considered to be not gods but demons. However, in Sri Lanka's tumultuous and war-torn modernity, they are considered the most appropriate deities to combat the stresses of modern life because, having fought against demons (*asuras*) themselves, people see these deities as the most resourceful in overcoming obstacles. Unlike Vishnu, seen by Sri Lankan Hindus as the unequivocally moral deity, Kataragama, for example, is seen as 'willing to do *anything*' (author's stress) to help his devoted adherents. He has hence become the god of the politicians, businessmen, and big-time crooks in the city of Colombo (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:185). Similarly, in the Tamil-dominated Eastern coastal fishing villages of Sri Lanka, where the ravages of war have left the population terrorised and deeply scarred, it is Kali who is increasingly being worshipped because she is taken to be the most responsive and powerful deity. Seen by these Sri Lankan fisher communities as 'rough like the sea', she is perceived as the only deity with the power to 'change the position' of those experiencing immediate vulnerability to violent annihilation, returning to safety family members who have disappeared (Lawrence 2003:107).

The villagers often narrate how Kali herself is business-minded because she loves to lure people into shady deals. She is greedy for human blood and offers people ponds

full of gold and fish in return for one of their children. One story recounts how Kali appeared to a poor woman and told her that she could have the pots of gold which were under her house if she gave her two sons. The next day the floor cracked and the woman saw the glittering pots. But she built a small wall around the crack, put in flowers and a lamp and each night prayed to Kali saying, 'Please Ma, I have made you a place for you to keep your possessions, but you keep them to yourself, I have no need for them.' The villagers narrated how the poor woman nearly went mad in fright as she frantically searched for another house to live in. Another common story tells of an instance when some villagers went fishing in the middle of the night and saw big pots containing wads of bank notes below the surface of the water. Some of them decided to plunge in to retrieve them but one of the elders had said, 'Today mother has taken her money out to *graze* [meaning fructify], let us leave her to do it in peace'; they all left. Kali arouses greed.

Bonbibibi is 'domesticated'. There is an image of her in every forest office – the government 'use' of her image in a way legitimating Bonbibibi. The condemnation of the prawn collectors from the local point of view, highlighting how their occupation goes against the 'ethos of the forest', the bhadrakok's comments about prawn collecting women's morality, as well as the global condemnation, has relegated them to the margins of respectability. This is why, as they often explained to me, they need a goddess who is just as 'illegal' as their occupation. In the Sundarbans context, Kali is a goddess linked to the dacoits of olden days and, to the prawn collectors and poachers of today, is thus seen as offering the possibility of a space to 'express their power', as one woman put it, because she is also the patron of violent and/or marginal activities. At the same time I have argued it satisfies to a certain extent their urge to belong to an 'urban' group separate from the forest workers and the landowners. But what is ironic is that the prawn collectors are using the goddess who is also the very symbol for state officials of what they see as illegal practices.

## V. 7. Conclusion

Is the discrimination between forest workers and prawn collectors chiefly because of gender? The difference in rhetoric about the two is based on an actual

differential treatment of woodcutting and honey collecting by the state as well as the middle-class values about the place and position of women. The occupation of prawn collecting, by provoking the reversals of village hierarchies – both of gender and of economy— offers the women of the Sundarbans the possibility of engaging in these discourses and an alternative perception of morality based on their own terms. These possibilities are expressed through their taking up Kali, the violent goddess, as their preferred deity rather than the meek Bonbibi. With Kali the strong and violent patron goddess on their side, they have more chance of fitting in with the violent nature of their occupation. By offering a contrary discourse to that of the forest workers and landowners, the prawn-collecting women have carved out a space to strengthen their position by choosing the patron of poachers. However, gender is not the only factor. The reason why prawn collectors increasingly worship Kali is because they see their work as ‘more advanced’ than that of the forest workers. Adopting Kali as their patron goddess is a way for them of inscribing themselves in the ‘modern world’ and being accepted into a collective they see as ‘educated’ – more rational and cultured.

## VI. OF 'BHADRALOK TIGERS' AND 'TIGER-FOOD VILLAGERS'

One evening, while on my way to watch a play with a group of young men, I was asked what my study of the tiger exactly consisted of. This was a few days after my arrival to the Sundarbans. The villagers always kept assuming that I had come to study wildlife and, to set the record straight, I replied yet again that I did not care about tigers and that my purpose was the study of their, i.e. Sundarbans islanders', history and culture. To which one young man replied, 'But why would anyone want to study our history and culture? Don't you guys consider us lot from the Sundarbans just tiger-food?' The representation of the Sundarbans as a 'down' place corresponds in the mind of many villagers with the idea that for the rest of the world, they are just 'tiger-food' – i.e. dispensable citizens. This leads me to address the two contrasting images of the Sundarbans mentioned in my introductory chapter. One is of the glamorous picture of flourishing flora and fauna and the other of the Sundarbans as a *moger muluk* – where there is no law and order. How do the villagers situate themselves within these two images?

In the first section I look at how representations of the Sundarbans which portray it as a biosphere reserve fit only for tigers is challenged by the villagers. For them, such an image is propagated to avoid any real commitment on the part of the state, well-wishing NGOs or bhadralok citizens to recognising that the gramer lok might have aspirations for greater social justice. I discuss how the riverside islanders feel that they are wrongly blamed for the environmental ills of the Sundarbans. In this context I will highlight how the villagers negotiate with officials about prawn collection and how they feel they are wronged. After that I will discuss the early history of reclamation of the Sundarbans.

I will also narrate the bloody story of Marichjhapi and how the villagers believe that tigers radically changed after this episode and have become more violent towards humans. The history of the events of Marichjhapi are seen by the villagers as marking a break with a time when tigers were not man-eaters and explaining how they had become so. The events of Marichjhapi are considered as a double betrayal; first by fellow urban Bengalis, who preferred the cause of tigers to that of refugees, and by extension, by tigers. In fact, the islanders believe that it was the first betrayal

which brought about the second. In other words, it was because they had been considered by the *bhadralok* as lesser mortals situated at the periphery that tigers, taking the cue, had started feeding on the Sundarbans islanders especially as they too started seeing them as *nimnobarner lok* and outside the pale of *bhadra* society. How the history of the Sundarbans and particularly the events of *Marichjhapi* are constitutive of such a feeling of betrayal will be explored in this chapter.

### VI. 1. We 'are' tigers

One afternoon, after trouble had broken out earlier in the day between the forest guards and the prawn seed collectors of the villages adjoining the forest, a meeting was hurriedly summoned. That morning, around two hundred fishing boats had laid out their nets for prawn fishing when suddenly forest guards had surged upon them and blared from their microphones that they wanted everybody out. Two men in a boat started arguing and were slower than the others in dismantling their nets. The forest guards, losing patience, had abused them in foul language and beaten them up. This had caused widespread anger amongst the villagers and the President of the Prawn Collective Union, Bhuban, called a meeting and persuaded the prawn collectors and the local forest state dignitaries to attend. There is a long history of radical politics in the Sundarbans. In contrast to other parts of rural Bengal, where such language and beatings might be tolerated by the 'depressed classes', here it was seen as a grave offence and the villagers, naturally, were furious. The offence was serious enough to call for the presence of the Range Officer himself. He came with two policemen, his subordinates.

The meeting started with the President of the Prawn Collective Union calling on each and every one's cooperation so that the meeting would not break into violence, because the aim was 'to come to a greater understanding between two groups – forest officials and prawn collectors'. He started by saying that the Rangers' first words on stepping out of his launch had been a query about the condition of the two men who had been beaten, and that this had touched him. He set the tone of the meeting by inserting the metaphor of kinship in his speech, a metaphor which ran through all the speeches of the meeting. He said, 'We live next to each other as neighbours –

meaning forest officials and neighbours, and are therefore like brothers. Yet two of us have been beaten up mercilessly. The pain is not so much physical as emotional, hurting not only two of us but all of us here.’ He ended the speech emotionally by saying how his heart went out to the families of the three prawn collectors from nearby villages who had been killed, the previous week, by tigers.

The young RSP leader, Ratan, was the next person to deliver his speech. After saying how they were honoured to have the Ranger amongst them, he thanked him for having come in person. He then said that they knew that this was a National Park, and that entering it was illegal but that, by the sudden closing of the forest, the prawn collectors had been stopped from making a livelihood. He then turned the idiom of kinship not to mark a bond, as had done the Range Officer and the Prawn Collective Union’s President, but to highlight the differences between the two groups. He asked with hardly veiled hostility, ‘Which mother’s kids are these guards who beat up and insulted our brothers? We are neither poachers nor illegal woodcutters, why treat us in this insulting way? Those who have got jobs at the forest department are an example we tell our kids to emulate. Why do they turn against us? Is it because they have put on a uniform that they have changed their blood?’ Then, on a more threatening note he added, ‘Remember that you cannot save the forest or tigers without us.’

Then Kalidas Mondol, the village ex-headman, who was famous for his fiery speeches, got up. He had the public waiting breathlessly for him. He started, ‘I have come here to do the work of street dogs and I have come to bark. Let me start with Sukanto’s idiom – “land unfortunately belongs to those who never walk on it”<sup>105</sup> and place this in the context of the Sundarbans [forest]. Who are the ones getting jobs at the forest department to save the Sundarbans? Not us. Why? Tell us, how many policemen and guards will you keep sending here to save yourselves, in the name of saving the forest? How many of us will you go on beating and killing? Remember the ex-Ranger Rathin Banerjee and the pot of prawn he kicked with his foot? Remember how he was taken into the middle of the Dutta river from where he had to

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<sup>105</sup> Sukanto Bhattacharya (1926–47), young revolutionary poet who organized student movements for India’s Independence and whose poetry is famous for being dedicated to the struggle for liberation and social justice. Sukanto’s poetry was an integral part of the Language Movement of Bangladesh, as well as the independence struggle culminating in 1971, and the movement against martial law of 1983-1990. In WB his poetry is chiefly used at rallies and painted on walls along march routes.

send desperate messages for one of you guys to come and save him? You have the power to sever the head of any poacher but you prefer using your power to break open the head of a poor prawn catcher. Now let me give you a piece of judicial information. You are allowed to arrest and seize but you have no right to beat any of us. This is a crime, a violation of human rights. And anyway, are you not ashamed of having broken open a head? The point is, we have no other options. The Prawn Collective Union does not consist of people organised along factional or political lines but is the party of the hungry, with the same spirit of cooperation and hope infused amongst us all.'

He continued, 'Hungry people are even fiercer than tigers. Those who go without food do not know any party except the party of the hungry. We have nothing to lose and are therefore ready for anything. You Kolkata people have no blood relation with us here. You have good jobs with fine salaries, how will you feel our pain, how will you feel the fire that burns our stomach? Is that why you grab even the morsels of food which we lift to our mouths? We do not do politics on a pedestal: our politics is to bark at you like roadside dogs. Yet, let looks not deceive you, though you see us as dogs, we are the real tigers of the Sundarbans.'

The villagers clapped and cheered but the speech had deeply moved one of the two policemen who had accompanied the Ranger. He asked Bhuban if he could be given permission to speak. In his short speech he was keen to re-establish the ties of kinship between Kumirmari, considered an 'up' island even though not very far from Satjelia and a relatively wealthy island because land there is of better quality, and Satjelia, a 'down' island where most of its inhabitants live as forest workers and prawn collectors. 'We are not foreigners. If you search a little, you will see that we are cousins, we have uncles and aunts in villages around here. I am from Kumirmari, from this very region, it is only the tediousness of the job which makes us behave like this. Do you know that we are the ones who get into trouble when you enter the forest? On behalf of the staff at Sajnekhali, let me tell you that I am really ashamed of what happened today.'

The officer finally got up to speak. 'We are not from outside, true. I am from Kolkata but that is not so very far you know. I am sorry for what happened. Thank you for

having kept such exemplary law and order in this organisation, and please do not mention blood shedding. You all know that if there were no law or control from the state then the jungle would go and with it your livelihood, so we are forced to set limits. You prawn, fish and crab catchers are our friends and we count on you to let us know about poachers. But recently some have used the cover of prawn collection to poach and this will not be tolerated. Two of our boats were sunk three days ago and our officials have to face a lot of insults from you.'

Here Kalidas cut him off and said, 'This is all very well but tell us concretely, what are you going to do for these men. We want them taken to Kolkata and treated in a private nursing home and not in the crowded cowsheds that are the government hospitals, plus we want compensation for the number of days they will not be able to work – what will their wives and kids live on while they recover from the beatings?' The Ranger: 'The government will undertake the medical cost of these two victims but it will not be possible to provide three days' salary to them apart from giving it from my own pocket.' Kalidas: 'Tiger victims are compensated, and these men are the victims of your tigers so...' Everybody laughed.

It had surprised me to see so many prawn collectors all assembled – and evidently across the range of political groups. Even though it had only about 500 registered members who each paid two rupees per year to Bhuban, the group was generally seen as having potential as its leader was often seen hobnobbing with the Ranger and other forest personnel. Now, Bhuban was clearly glad that the Ranger had come so far to attend the meeting – it proved his association had been given legitimacy and that his authority had been respected. The new rule was that the villagers were legally allowed entry up to two kilometres inside the jungle for the collection of prawn seed. The villagers had pressurised the forest officials to allow them further inside the jungle on the understanding that they would not be there at times it was unauthorised and would restrict their hours from dawn to dusk and never enter during the night. This was because the cover of dark was used by poachers to catch deer, tiger, collect wood, etc. They had also been given this permission on the understanding that they would not carry out nor condone poaching.



At the end of the meeting Bhuban issued a leaflet which read 'An important announcement'. In it those present were reminded that wildlife had to be protected and the amount of fines which would be incurred by anyone breaking rules. Not only would such a person be instantly caught but could also get seven years' imprisonment. Those buying illegal deer, tortoise, wild pig meat (these were greatly sought after by the landed elite and the school teachers who had the means) were also offenders and would have to pay a fine if caught. Anybody reporting an offence would be rewarded, the reward being at least 10,000 rupees for information about a tiger skin. The notice now stipulated that the fine for entering the forest rivers illegally was 1,000 rupees but the villagers who were in the Prawn Collective Union were normally released after they had paid just 200 rupees.

The Prawn Collective Union had another meeting at the end of May, where they said that the Ranger was not prepared to do this favour any longer and that henceforth the fines would be what the government had stipulated. Some of the villagers said that they were happy that fines would be augmented as that would bring some stability to the highly fluctuating prawn seed prices. It would lead to fewer people practising the occupation and therefore better prices for the prawn seeds caught. Others said that they had enough of always bearing the brunt of the officials as, of all the occupations linked to the forest, prawn collectors were always the ones blamed for poaching or at least of helping poachers. A prawn collector can make up to 30,000–35,000 rupees per year, a very reasonable sum which allowed a few of the villagers to buy rifles and cartridges and thus become poachers either during the lean months or after their daily stint as prawn seed collectors. Of course, this was only for those brave enough to face the tigers as well as the dacoits, who were notorious for their brutality.

What I would like to stress is the way kinship ties were drawn on both by the villagers and the representatives of the state. Where the government officials used it to stress that they shared a relatedness of 'brotherhood' with prawn collectors, the prawn collectors deliberately refused this metaphor of relatedness and stressed their relatedness to each other and the fact that they 'were tigers' and the ones who could protect tigers best. The village representatives highlighted the ruthlessness of the guards, and how they had changed their blood because they held 'services'. The idiom of kinship is used throughout to subtly threaten the Ranger and his

subordinates with the villagers' unity and force – the fact that they will rise in one voice – the meeting itself being a good example. The two forest officials had obvious Brahmin names and the trappings of bhadrakok comfortable urbanity unavailable to the prawn collectors. As explained earlier, for the gramer lok, the 'Babus' were of a different 'kind' altogether and were often derogatorily referred to as 'poultry' – fair-skinned and feeble, prone to heart attacks at the slightest scare or mishap. In contrast to these people, the prawn collectors – especially because they saw themselves as having to flout both the traditional rules and state laws about the forest – saw themselves as hardy and violent as tigers.

## VI. 2. State-making in the Sundarbans

A feature which struck me when I first arrived in the area was the conviction with which the villagers as a whole believed that 'within the next fifty years the Sundarbans will disappear'. In this section I shall show how the image of the Sundarbans islanders as 'tiger-food' or 'lesser people' is linked to the initial colonial perceptions of the Sundarbans as a 'wasteland'. After retracing the history of the region, I will consider its transformation from 'wasteland' to 'World Heritage Site'. The Sundarbans as a World Heritage Site has attracted considerable global funding in the last couple of decades. The representation of the Sundarbans as a nature reserve has not erased the idea that humans do not belong here; on the contrary. I believe that the origins of this representation lie, as argued by Greenough, in the negative colonial perceptions of the Sundarbans (1998).

As I described in Chapter II, even though originally from various parts and belonging to different jatis and religions, the islanders believe that their environment has bound them together in its physicality. The other important factor about their environment, especially the forest, is that it is seen as the receptacle of civilisation. The islanders are not interested in engaging with the history of their actual ancestral places but in the past of the environment they now live in. By deliberately *not* highlighting the history of the places from where their forefathers have come, they can *all* lay equal claims to the Sundarbans. Also, seeing their past in that of the Sundarbans – a past similar to that of tigers – legitimises their claim to the forest. People in the

Sundarbans do not see themselves as ‘insular’, nor do they dwell on their status of migrants even though they see it as being one of the reasons of their bond with tigers. This wish to exhibit the forest as a sort of museum of past civilisations as well as an area offering common ground for food sharing between the islanders and tigers is a way of reclaiming the forest by/for themselves. In part, their urge to have me visit the forest when they understood that I had come to write about life in the Sundarbans was to do with the fact that they wanted me to know that they lived in a place as impregnated with ‘culture’ as in the ‘up’ places.

From the accounts of Bernier (mentioned in Chapter I) and Rennell,<sup>106</sup> who travelled through the region during the 1600s and 1700s, we come to know how the Portuguese and Mag pirates had ‘displaced’ the ‘original’ population of the Sundarbans. These two communities lived off salt-making and piracy, preying on the numerous merchant ships which passed through the region (Campos 1919:105; De 1990:12-13). It seems that the large tanks, masonry structures and high embankments found in many places in the forest and cited as indicators of the former prosperity of the region might actually have been the retreat of these pirates and of dacoits. The salt manufacturing centres that were established in various places in the forest seem to be the second reason for these structures. In the opinion of *The Calcutta Review*, July 1889, ‘these two facts go some way to explain the existence of many masonry remains without resorting to the theory of a former widespread civilisation’ (De 1990:51).

Briefly, the history of the Sundarbans under the British runs as follows: as soon as the East India Company (hereafter EIC) had acquired the *diwani* or civil administration of Bengal in 1765, it started reclaiming the Sundarbans and decimating the pirates, especially the Portuguese, who had been the pioneers of European commerce in this part of the world. The Portuguese had been so

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<sup>106</sup> James Rennell (1742–1830), geographer and marine engineer who explored the Bengal river basins and mapped them for the first time. Rennell was employed with the special objective of finding a shorter passage suitable for large vessels from the Bay of Bengal to old Calcutta than through the Sundarbans. His daily journal gives a detailed account of his expedition through the delta where he records that he was repeatedly attacked by tigers, reptiles, dacoits and hostile people. His *Bengal Atlas*, published in 1779, was acclaimed in commercial, military and administrative quarters and remained important until professional maps were made available in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

powerful<sup>107</sup> that at the beginning of the seventeenth century their position in Bengal was comparable to that of the British in the middle of the eighteenth century. Various schemes were drawn up for the best use of the so-termed 'wastelands'. In 1770 the first efforts to reclaim the Sundarbans by the British were undertaken.

The beginnings of the establishment of power of the EIC in the Sundarbans was challenged by landowners who advanced claims on the basis of their 'ancient rights' against the government's claim of 'inherent title' on the grounds that, prior to their arrival these tracts were 'wastelands'. Regulation XXIII of 1817 put a stop to this litigation by maintaining the government's 'inherent title' to a share of the produce of all lands cultivated in the Sundarbans through the expedient of re-classifying these lands as 'encroached' by the zamindar landowners. Even though many landholders persisted in advancing claims, Regulation III of 1828 declared that these tracts of land had always been government property (under the Mughals, for example) and that therefore they should remain so (Pargiter 1934:22). The Sundarbans were proclaimed the property of the state – and as having in no way been alienated from landholders as the area had lain 'waste' at the time of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, and therefore not included in it (Pargiter 1934:12). Finally, the boundary of the Sundarbans was decided upon and it was called the Dampier-Hodges line after the Commissioner and the Surveyor (respectively) who had drawn the line. It still stands today as the line demarcating the whole of the Sundarbans region from the rest of Bengal.

Keen that the lands be reclaimed, and revenue extracted from them, the government granted leases. However, the hostility of zamindars, periodic cyclones and tidal bores added to the difficulty and many grantees, being speculators, made money on wood but sold off the land as soon as they found a purchaser. The grantees found it difficult to collect the labourers they needed to settle on the lands permanently. To recruit labourers, the maximum rent was fixed at the low sum of a rupee and a half per acre. The government also encouraged peasants to take up leases. This created a body of peasant proprietors holding land directly from the government. By 1810, the area

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<sup>107</sup> Chittagong had belonged to the king of Arakan; it had been almost entirely in the hands of the Portuguese (Campos 1919:101). In the 17th century, while in the service of the king of Arakan, the Portuguese were infamous for having, along with the Mags, committed 'frightful depredations all along the banks of the rivers in the Sundarbunds carrying off Musalmans and Hindus as captives. Between 1621 and 1624, the Portuguese brought to Chittagong 42,000 slaves' (Campos 1919:105).

down to Sagar island in the west and the south-east and the eastern part of the Sundarbans (now in Bangladesh) were cleared. In the centre, land started being cleared under Tilman Hunkell, Magistrate of Jessore.

To foil the lease-holders' attempts to make profit on wood and leave the land unreclaimed, rules were stipulated in 1853 by which the grantee was required to reclaim one-eighth of his land in five years, one-fourth in ten, one-half in twenty, and the whole in thirty years. Also, to make the deal more attractive, the tax was reduced to a fourth of what it was and grants were leased for ninety-nine years to the highest bidder. In 1863, the 'Waste Land Rules' further provided for exemption from tax in cases of outright sale. However, even in this case, and even though they were allowed to pay by instalments, many would-be purchasers were unable to pay the purchase money (De 1990:17).

Various schemes were drawn up for the location of a port, and several surveys of rivers and the suitability of areas in the Sundarbans were undertaken. The creation of a vast network of railway lines across India from 1853 onwards required unprecedented amounts of timber. In 1858 Port Canning was set up along the river Matla and a municipality was established there with a big scheme to develop a township. A railway connecting Port Canning to Kolkata was constructed in 1862. Soon, however, the British had to abandon their plans. The once-thriving Diamond Harbour port lost four-fifths of its population in 1864 and in 1867 Canning port and town was reduced to nothing when a huge tidal wave and storm destroyed the whole place. Also, the Matla river started rapidly silting up and the few farmers and grant holders who had been staying there left the place and stopped investing in the Sundarbans.

The British soon became dissatisfied with their ventures in the Sundarbans. An appropriate revenue system had not been easily found and so levying revenue on the cultivable lands soon became too cumbersome. On the whole, cultivation in the Sundarbans yielded such mixed results that the British administration abandoned the idea of reclaiming the south-west portions of the Sundarbans for agricultural purposes and concentrated instead on tapping it for fuel resources. In 1862, Brandis, Conservator of Forests in Burma, urged the government to conserve the forests of

Bengal. From 1871, even though the Bengal Forest Rules came into force, parts of the forest continued to be leased out for cultivation. The geographical differences between east and west were, in turn, deepened by the separate political measures concerning these two regions. In Khulna (east), the forest was 'Restricted' and thus protected. In the 24-Parganas (west), the forest was merely 'Protected' and left open either for leasing and thus clearing or for timber production. In the west, the rivers, much used by trading ships started silting up and becoming brackish, whereas the eastern soil and rivers proved to be very fertile; nearly 90% of the land was reclaimed from forests in the district of Bakarganj – the eastern-most district of the Sundarbans.

As mentioned earlier, what I found surprising is the contrast between the history narrated by the villagers and the history teased out through the colonial records. The islanders, even though migrants, see themselves as being part of the history of the Sundarbans, while the colonial records maintain an eerie silence about them. When people were finally written about, in 1875, by W.W. Hunter, they were catalogued directly after similar but longer lists of snakes, birds and fish (as we have seen in Chapter I). Otherwise, 'The southern portion of the Sunderbans, which comprises the jungle tract along the seashore, is entirely uninhabited, with the exception of a few wandering gangs of woodcutters and fishermen' (Hunter 1875:317). We learn nothing about the occupational groups such as deer-hunters, lime-preparers and ship scavengers. Greenough believes that this rhetoric of portraying the Sundarbans as a sodden largely inhabited wasteland was in fact geared towards the utilitarian needs – especially for wood – of British rule in India (1998:240). Why else, Greenough wonders, did Hunter take the trouble to write at such length about a region apparently so dismal? Greenough also argues that the widespread depiction of the Sundarbans as a risky and repulsive place is to be traced to this single Victorian essay written by Hunter. A few years later O'Malley describes the Sundarbans in a similar vein, as a region of total desolation where rivers are dying, industries languishing, villages left with no vitality, and courts deserted. In this place where 'there is nothing to induce an influx of immigrants', even the fecundity of the inhabitants seems to be sapped by endemic fevers and epidemic diseases (O'Malley 1913:26).

The British government chased off the Mag and Portuguese pirates and dispossessed the landowners (and presumably the woodcutters and forest fishers, though there is no mention of them) who laid claims to the forested areas of the Sundarbans. Those who could have eventually claimed rights over the territory and who actually worked as forest fishers or woodcutters in the area were given the equivalent of *Gästarbeiter* status by the gazetteer-writer Hunter (Greenough 1998:253). What needs to be stressed is that the practicalities of 'state-making', as discussed by Sivaramakrishnan (1999), went hand in hand with the conceptualisation of region. In such a representation, there was and is no place for humans, especially when these are poor and marginalised and seen as threats to the resources of state-owned forests.

The multiple thwarting of the grand designs of the colonial state for the Sundarbans is seen by its inhabitants as the expression of an environment which refuses to be controlled. For the islanders, the periodic destruction of the region is a generic feature of the Sundarbans; they would cite the near annihilation of Diamond Harbour and Canning port to make their point. By the 1870s these two places had been completely abandoned. Hence, the Sundarbans represent an area where struggles have been played out and where those who 'had nothing to lose' had ultimately been the only ones to stay on. The image of the Sundarbans as a locale not fit for humans thus bear important repercussions for the way the contemporary islanders of the Sundarbans feel that, both for the state and for those who live outside the Sundarbans, they are at best the 'illegitimate' inhabitants of the area or at worse mere 'tiger food'.

### **VI. 3. Growing environmental degradation in the Sundarbans**

What added to this feeling were the various public speeches made by the very highly regarded and popular NGO activist, Tushar Kanjilal, in which he would invariably mention scientists' predictions that in the next fifty years the Sundarbans will disappear. In his book *Who Killed the Sundarbans?* published in 2000 he blames prawn collection for this. Prawn collection and the disappearance of the Sundarbans have often been correlated (Sarkar & Bhattacharya, 2003; Vidal, 2003). However, there have been no real alternatives offered – especially for women. Since the first settlements in the Sundarbans in 1770, the population of the Indian Sundarbans has

risen by 200% and, as I mentioned earlier, is at present around 4.5 million. The rise of the sea level in the Sundarbans has increased by an average rate of 3.14 centimetres a year over the past two decades, while the global average has increased by only (*sic*) about two millimetres a year. Indeed, it has been foreseen that, if the sea level rises by just one metre, 1,000 square kilometres of the Sundarbans will be inundated (Bhaumik 2003:1).

Worldwide, the prawn industry is infamous for causing severe environmental degradation, especially in mangrove regions. According to Sarkar & Bhattacharya, the wastage of the by-catch as well as the methods of practice leads to several ecological and occupational hazards, namely causing: (i) immense damage to the mangrove eco-system leading to severe fish stock depletion and thus threatening the equilibrium of marine ecosystem food webs, since tiger prawn seeds constitute only 0.25 to 0.27% of the total catch and thus the major portion of the by-catch is destroyed; (ii) the uprooting of the mangrove seed and salt-marsh vegetation, thus setting off soil erosion, due to the constant dragging of nets along the coast and tidal creeks; (iii) a decrease in the quality of water, triggered off by mud erosion in the catchment areas; and, (iv) skin infections, waterborne illnesses, infertility, and many other diseases which afflict especially women collectors due to their constant contact with the salt river water (2003:260). Once fisheries, especially those made for the cultivation of the brackish water tiger-prawn species, are abandoned, they become wastelands, unfit for any other resource-extractive purposes.

While the correlation between prawn collection and environmental degradation is certainly clear, those who denounce the prawn industry – NGO activists, the rural elite, sometimes even prawn collectors – often do so from a moral perspective, highlighting its part in so-called ‘social degradation’ entailing a chain of circumstances. When land is temporarily submerged by salt water due to breaches in bunds or embankments, the easy option is to convert one’s flooded fields into prawn fisheries. However, by law, those who want to convert their fields into fisheries have to ask the permission of the landlords of the adjoining lands, especially if those landlords want to reserve their lands for agricultural purposes. (Once a field is converted into a necessarily salt-water fishery, it contaminates the soil surrounding it and greatly decreases its productivity.) As permission is not readily given, those who



want to start fisheries sometimes resort to opening further breaches in the bunds. Once an area is flooded, it becomes difficult to refuse consent to its conversion into a fishery. Thus, landowners who want to keep their land for paddy production, angered by fishery owners, often resort to poisoning fisheries. Conversely, as prawn seeds are fragile and their mortality rate very high, it is not difficult to accuse one's neighbour of poisoning one's fisheries. This gives rise to endless fights between landlords who want to keep their fields for paddy production and those who want to convert theirs into fisheries. Also, the resentment of erstwhile landowners seeing prawn dealers become rich so quickly often pushes them into bullying those landless labourers who have turned to prawn collecting into returning to work their fields. Such is the 'social degradation' portrayed.

#### VI. 4. The importance of taking part in 'party politics'

As I had occasion to see during my time there, taking part in 'party politics' was seen as a prerequisite to keeping checks and balances on different groups of people. Notably, the other issue which was discussed at the meeting mentioned earlier was the prawn collectors' demand that they be allowed in the forest for longer hours. Secretly however, the Prawn Collectives' Union's President Bhuban and the RSP leader, young Ratan, had struck a deal with the Range Officer. The Range Officer had offered Ratan and Bhuban the contract to build a fine fence along the forest islands adjoining the villages if they managed to stop prawn collection in the forest. This had evidently annoyed a section of the prawn collectors and this was another reason why Badal had thought he could be the alternative.

A few days after these events, the Gram Sansad meeting was held.<sup>108</sup> This meeting is supposed to provide a forum for village-level political leaders and the general public to meet and discuss.<sup>109</sup> I was curiously asked by different people which path I would take to arrive at the little club-hut (which had been built by an NGO and was

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<sup>108</sup> The Gram Sansad meetings were launched in the late 1990s to strengthen local-level government. It meets about once a year to discuss and approve projects for the coming year.

<sup>109</sup> It has been argued that these meetings were rarely quorate and that it was questionable whether they contributed to any meaningful participation (Hill 2003:16; Bhattacharyya 2002). In the 'down' islands the most insignificant political meeting became the hub for secret meetings and visits both before and after and was always heavily attended, as both groups came to each house to recruit people to come with them to make a show of *dol bhar* – the 'heaviness' or 'importance' of the group'.

therefore ‘neutral’ ground) chosen for the meeting. Surprised, I asked why, and soon realised that the RSP, the TMC and the BJP supporters took different routes and shouted different slogans while on their way there. Upon arrival, they even sat on opposing sides. The whole village, especially married men and women between the ages of 25 and 45, was attending and I followed my hostess’s path and sat in her group amidst loud cheers from that group and heckling from the others. It goes without saying, when I returned on my house-to-house surveys in the days following, I was given a lot of unsolicited advice on whether I had made the right choice. The meeting, after starting off well, ended in a scuffle, with the RSP and the BJP coming to blows. The meeting had to be called off. But the villagers were actually proud that in their village they had debated for two hours before breaking into a row and that the meeting had not been called off even before they had sat together as in many of the other villages. In the other villages the various parties had marched up and down the village with their ‘weapons’, ensuring the boycott of the meeting. This was partly done to attract the attention of the politicians and administrators of Kolkata.

Participation in politics took up a substantial amount of people’s time and energy. Even the innocuous issue of the school vote to elect parent representatives to its governing body became the occasion for all the leaders and active supporters of the four main parties to congregate around the school. They sat in little groups along the four paths leading to the school and exhorted the villagers to vote along party lines. All the parents had come to vote – the fields lay empty and the fishing temporarily given a respite. There were long queues outside the school and the whole day was marked by febrile excitement over which party would dominate. At the end of the day, once the votes had been counted, the TMC and RSP members, following their usual habit, took different paths, the TMC breaking the still night air with shouts of ‘*Bande Mataram*’ (Hail to the Mother[-land]) and the RSP with ‘*Inquilab Zindabad*’ (Long live the Revolution).

Politics is an important part of life in the Sundarbans because, as the islanders saw it, they had to ‘bite and bark’ or their voice would never reach the government officials of Kolkata. They mentioned how one of their politicians, a landowner, when offering a plan to reduce the number of crocodile victims amongst the prawn collectors, had ridiculously suggested they be given rubber boots. They talked about how the WB

Irrigation Department, is more concerned about the Ganga-Padma erosion in Malda and Murshidabad than with repairing the breaches in the embankments of the Sundarbans. *The Statesman*, a Kolkata based newspaper, in its edition dated 17 June 1995, published a report of how a Dutch-based organisation's offer to cooperate with Tushar Kanjilal's NGO had ended in fiasco. They were offering to provide technical and financial assistance to the government but this met such hostility from the engineers and contractors of the Irrigation Department that finally the scheme had to be abandoned. The article concluded with Tushar Kanjilal saying – as maintained in the previous section – that, if there was no concerted effort from the government to ally itself with NGOs to solve the bund and embankment problem, the region would be wiped off WB's map within fifteen years.

#### **VI. 5. The brutal evacuation of East Bengali refugees from Marichjhapi**

The villagers often spoke about being 'second-class' citizens of the state. As a prime example, they would highlight the events that occurred in the late 1970s on the island of Marichjhapi. What had happened in Marichjhapi was, for many villagers, a betrayal – as much by the state, the forest officials and city dwellers as by tigers.

After Partition in 1947, many groups of East Bengali refugees had entered WB and they had been sent to various inhospitable and infertile areas, with the promise by the CPIM that, when the party came to power, the refugees would be settled in WB and that it would most probably be in the Sundarbans.<sup>110</sup> In 1978, when the Left Front came to power, they found their refugee supporters had taken them at their word and sold their belongings and land in Dandakaranya (a semi-arid and rocky place situated between Orissa and Chhattisgarh) to return to WB. In all, 150,000 refugees arrived from Dandakaranya (Visharat et al. 1979:100 in Mallick 1993:8). Fearing that an influx of refugees might jeopardise the prospects of the state's economic recovery,

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<sup>110</sup> During the B.C. Roy government in the 1950s and early 1960s, Jyoti Basu, then the leader of the Opposition, had presented their case in the legislative assembly. As late as 1974 he had demanded in a public meeting that the Dandakaranya refugees be allowed to settle in the Sundarbans. In 1974-75 leading members of the subsequent Left Front government, including Ram Chatterjee, the Minister of the State Home (Civil Defence) Department, had assured the refugees that, if the Left Front came to power, they would arrange their resettlement in WB. At a meeting of the Eight Left Front Parties in 1975 it was resolved that the refugees would be settled in the Sundarbans.

the government started to forcibly deport them back. Many refugees, however, managed to escape to various places inside WB, one of these being the Sundarbans where they had family and where they would be able to survive by working as fishers in the forest. From the month of May 1978 onwards about 30,000 refugees sailed to Marichjhapi and set up a settlement there (Sikdar 1982:21 in Mallick 1993:100).

Briefly, the wider history of the Bengali migration during the partition of India is as follows. Threatened by their Muslim and lower-caste tenants, the upper-caste landed elite formed the first wave of immigrants from East Pakistan into WB. Subsequent migrants from the rural middle class: cultivators and artisans. While the richest amongst them found a niche amongst relatives and friends in Kolkata and its outskirts, the poorer refugees squatted on public and private land and tried to resist eviction. All through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (after the Bangladesh war of Independence in 1971, Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975 and Zia coming to power communal agitation started to be directed against the poorest and low-caste Hindus who had remained in Bangladesh. They now sought refuge in WB.

Unlike their richer counterparts, who were backed by family and caste connections, many of these poorer migrants did not find a way of living in Kolkata. According to most sources, around 30,000 people settled in Marichjhapi. The islanders however believed that if 30,000 were from Dandakaranya, there were another 6,000 recently arrived Bangladeshi migrants, and around 4,000 from the villages adjoining Marichjhapi. For a few hundred rupees, you could get some land at Marichjhapi, so many people from the islands of Kumirmari, Mollakhali and Satjelia had tried to buy a piece of land on this new island, many of them later settled on the bunds of these islands or in Jharkhali – an area of the island of Basanti which was cleared for them.

Marichjhapi, an island in the northern-most forested part of the WB Sundarbans (shown on map on page 218), had been cleared in 1975 and its mangrove vegetation replaced through a government programme of coconut and tamarisk plantation to increase state revenue. The settlers – both refugees and those from adjoining villages – initially located themselves along the cultivated area of the island, beneath the coconut and the tamarisk trees. Their houses were makeshift, made with four sticks and some coconut and arum leaves as walls and roof. 'We got used to that lifestyle,

three tube-wells for the thousands<sup>111</sup> that we were, and hours of queuing, but at least there were tube-wells; in Garjontola there were none [and there still are none!].’ The refugees, he said, were very qualified people and had established a viable fishing industry, salt pans, dispensaries and schools.<sup>112</sup>

However, the state government was not disposed to tolerate such a settlement, stating that the refugees were ‘in unauthorised occupation of Marichjhapi which is a part of the Sundarbans government Reserve Forest violating thereby the Forest Acts.’ It further said that the refugees had come ‘with the intention of settling there permanently thereby disturbing the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance.’<sup>113</sup> This government prioritising of ecology was, however, widely believed the villagers to be more about legitimising their ejection from Marichjhapi in the eyes of the Kolkata bhadralok. The argument that the Marichjhapi settlement might set a precedent for an unmanageable refugee influx from Bangladesh was also heatedly denied as baseless. Indeed, as Mallick argues, by 1979, the last wave of East Bengali migrants had been forcibly driven out of the state. Those who had sailed for Marichjhapi were thus, at most, a potential rather than an actual threat and they would not have been a financial liability for the state government (1993:100-1).

The refugees from Dandakaranya were joined at Marichjhapi by people from the villages of the adjoining islands. Being the descendants of immigrants from Khulna in East Bengal brought by the British even as late as the 1930s and 1940s to reclaim the forest, the islanders of Satjelia with whom I lived had completely identified with the recent refugees. Many also shared close blood ties which were revived when they arrived. Some of the young landless couples were urged by older family members to settle with the Marichjhapi dwellers: their intimate knowledge of that part of the forest and generosity in lending boats was recompensed by the refugees’ eagerness that they too settle on Marichjhapi to strengthen their case. When narrating their

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<sup>111</sup> People from the adjoining villages remember that there were so many of them that when they crossed over to fetch water from their village, the ponds were left dried up!

<sup>112</sup> This accords with the information provided by Mallick (1993:100).

<sup>113</sup> Letter from Deputy Secretary, Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Govt. of WB. To Zonal Director, Ministry of Home Affairs, Office of the Zonal Director, Backward Classes and ex officio Deputy Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Eastern Zone, Subject – ‘Problems of Refugees from Dandakaranya to WB’, no. 3223-Rehab/DNK-6/79 (in Mallick 1993:100).

memories, while some of the islanders spoke their dismay at having their ponds emptied of water in the initial period, most islanders drew on memories of fraternal bonding. Marichjhapi island, being 125 square miles, was so big that the refugees were keen that the islanders join them so as to have 'hands raise bunds and voices carry our pleas to Kolkata.'

Most of the settlers survived by working as crab and fish collectors in the forest and, with the help of the islanders, by selling their products in the nearby villages. In the memories of their time there the Sundarbans islanders often underlined not only the feeling of unity they shared with the refugees but their immense relief at finding some vocal leaders. In contrast to the ruling elite of their villages, composed principally of large landowners who aspired to migrate to Kolkata, they saw the East Bengali leaders as more apt to represent them. This was because they were poor, rural, and lower caste and hence not afraid to take up manual work, such as fishing, and knew, through the twists of fate, what it was like to fight. As a whole, the refugees were looked up to by the islanders of Satjelia because they were better educated and more articulate than themselves and because, having lost everything, they were seen as having strength to face the Kolkata ruling class with their rural concerns.

The villagers often expressed their awe at the way the East Bengali refugees rapidly established Marichjhapi as one of the best developed islands of the Sundarbans – tube-wells had been rapidly dug, a viable fishing industry, saltpans, dispensaries and schools established. This contrasted lamentably with the islands they came from, where many of these facilities were, and are, still lacking. The villagers also explained that they saw the refugees' bid to stay on Marichjhapi as a dignified attempt to forge a new respectable identity for themselves as well as a bid to reclaim a portion of the West Bengali political rostrum by the poorest and most marginalised. They had also hoped that this event would be taken up by the government as an opportunity to absolve itself of the wrong it had done to the poorer refugees by sending them away from WB in the first place.

Rather, the government persisted in its effort to clear Marichjhapi of the settlers. Thirty police launches encircled the island and the community was teargassed, huts

razed, and fisheries and tube-wells destroyed, thereby depriving the refugees of food and water. To fetch water, the settlers now had to venture after dark deep into the forested portion of the island and were forced to eat wild grass. On 31 January police opened fire, killing thirty-six persons. The Calcutta High Court ordered a two-week truce but this was not properly implemented. We do not have the correct figures for the number of people who died but Mallick reports that several hundred men, women and children were believed to have been killed by the police in the operation and their bodies thrown in the river (1993:101). Others put the figures even higher: '4,128 families perished in transit, died of hunger, starvation, exhaustion, and many were killed in Kashipur, Kumirmari, and Marichjhapi by police firings' (Sikdar 1982:22 and Biswas 1982:19 in Mallick 1993:100-101).

Due to the remoteness of the area, media coverage was not good. The media initially underscored the plight of the refugees of Marichjhapi and wrote in positive terms about their progress and their rehabilitation efforts. Photographs were published in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on 8 February 1979 and the Opposition members in the state Assembly staged a walkout in protest at the way the government was treating them. Fearing more backlash, and seeing the public growing sympathetic to the refugees' cause, the Chief Minister declared Marichjhapi out of bounds for journalists and condemned their reports, saying that these contributed to the refugees' militancy and self-importance and suggesting that the press should support their eviction on the grounds of national interest. No criminal charges were laid against any of the officials or politicians involved. Even Prime Minister Desai, wishing to maintain the support of the Communists for his government, decided not to pursue the matter.

The refugees saw the brutality of the government as made possible because it was backed by the bhadralok, who perceived the refugees and the Sundarbans islanders as lesser beings who came after tigers in their classificatory scheme of importance. Marichjhapi was seen by the villagers as a betrayal of the poor and marginalized. With the betrayal of Marichjhapi, the distinction between the urban as central and the rural as peripheral, and of the bhadralok versus the *nimnobarner lok*, was reinforced.

## **VI. 6. Marichjhapi: a double betrayal**

In the villagers' memories, these events were recounted as a 'war' between two groups of people, one backed by state power and modern paraphernalia, the other made up of the dispossessed who had only their hands and spirit of companionship. Jayanta, an islander who had gone there as a young man with his wife and baby child, gave a poignant narrative of the course of events at Marichjhapi. He remembered how, when the refugees saw their children dying of cholera and starvation, they tried to break the cordon formed by the police and the military launches. They fired arrows made of wood, aimed pieces of brick and dried mud from their slings, and verbally abused the government officials. The officials urged the police to retaliate by throwing tear-gas bombs and use firearms. Police camps were established in the surrounding villages. A 'war' was on, one group fighting with wooden arrows and stones, the other with tear-gas, guns, and loud-speakers. For greater protection, the thirty police launches were covered with a wire netting (and described as looking like 'stinging swarms of floating bee-hives').

'But the worst was their non-stop twenty-four hour loud-hailer broadcasting of the voice of the Chief Minister declaiming: "Under the government Forest Laws, you have illegally occupied this territory which is and will remain government property. If you try to move or assemble we will shoot"' remembered Jayanta. Parikhit too, recalled that the government had stressed the ecological angle and to hearing the microphones blaring: 'Get out, get out, get out, leave the place, this place is for tigers, it is not yours, it never was, and it never will be.' The ease and brutality with which the government wiped away all signs of the bustling life which had been going on there during eighteen months was proof for the villagers that they were considered completely irrelevant to the more influential Bengali community, especially when weighed against tigers. In two weeks' time all the plots had been destroyed and the refugees 'packed' off. 'Were we vermin that our shacks had to be burned down?' rhetorically asked one of the villagers. The refugees were then forcibly put in launches and sent to Hasnabad where lorries carried them back to Dandakaranya. Many of the islanders who had been rounded up along with the refugees now fled, sometimes with some of their new found refugee companions from the lorries taking them back to Dandakaranya. They came back to their former islands and settled



along the bunds. Many others built shacks along railway lines or in places like Barasat, Gobordanga, or Bongaon – in WB.

To understand the identification of the islanders with the refugees, the social context of the differences between Kolkata and life on these islands has to be underlined. The Sundarbans are also referred to as ‘Kolkata’s servant’ (*Kolkatar jhi*), due to the large number of islanders working as servants in the houses of Kolkata’s affluent. Before the introduction of prawn seed collection, the islanders had barely enough to eat. For many islanders, especially those who own no land, apart from working in the forest and rivers, the only other way of making a living is to work in Kolkata peoples’ houses. Jayanta, reflecting on the hope of the settlers, had longed to start a new life in Marichjhapi where, for once, he had hoped that the aspirations and rights of the lowest would have been established. But he and his family had barely been there five months when their shack was burned down by the police. He wondered why the government was bent on reclaiming Marichjhapi for tigers when it wasn’t even part of the tiger reserve. The other sore point was that the refugees had actually been promised land in the Sundarbans. He saw the betrayal by the government as proof that, for the Kolkata bhadralok, they were just ‘tiger-food’ – disposable people who could be shot and killed just because they wanted the homestead they had been promised.

Why had Jayanta gone there, I asked. ‘Did I have a choice? With twelve brothers and sisters, some working their bones out in Kolkata at rich peoples’ houses and others starving at home, did I have a choice? We had no land. I was good in the jungle and had managed to make 300 rupees which I had used to buy half an acre of land in Marichjhapi. How can you imagine me being in a position to leave that place?’ he cried out hoarsely. ‘But a “choice” was forced down my throat. We had not been there five months when our house was burned down by the police,’ he added. They had been threatening to do it, but we hadn’t really believed it; what valid reasons did they have? That forest wasn’t even part of the area for tigers, it was an island where the government had a plantation of coconut and tamarisk trees to generate revenue for the state. Hadn’t the CPIM promised land in the Sundarbans to the refugees? All we are for the government is “tiger-food” – dispensable people who can be shot at because we wanted the homestead we had been promised.’ Jayanta laughed in

sarcasm, making the grim reality of the Marichjhapi massacre even more poignant. He then explained that in a way he too saw himself a 'refugee', as his father had no land. Stressing his affinity with them, Jayanta recounted how, during the time they had settled in Marichjhapi, they had 'all become one big family' as they had 'the same hopes, went through the same ordeal, fought on the same side.' That was, until the moment Kolkata let them down; after that, he said 'we each went back to the islands or camps we had come from with broken hearts and bloody hands; a broken, disunited and utterly weakened family.'

The chapter was quickly closed. A few journalists questioned the capacity of the upper class people, whether they called themselves Communists or something else, to represent the poorest strata of Bengali society. As noted by a journalist in the Bengali paper *Jugantar*, 'The refugees of Dandakaranya are men of the lowest stratum of society (...) They are mainly cultivators, fishermen, day-labourers, artisans, the exploited mass of the society (...) So long as the state machinery remains in the hands of the upper class elite, the poor, the helpless, the beggar, the refugees will continue to be victimised.'<sup>114</sup> 'Why have our dead remained unaccounted for and un-mourned by the bhadralok babus of Kolkata, forced to hover as spirits in the forest, while a tiger who enters our village and then gets killed puts us all behind bars?' rhetorically asked one of the villagers bitterly.

Now half-broken embankments and the few fruit trees planted by the refugees during their stay remain as the only vestiges of past human habitation on Marichjhapi, the rest having been reclaimed by the forest. The drastic measures adopted by the government took their toll, though we will never know exactly how many lost their lives. According to Jayanta only 25% of those who had come returned to their former homes. This figure is important not so much for its factual veracity but because it reflects what Jayanta, like many others, feel. People would often say that tigers had become man-eaters after that episode.

As an old woman explained, tigers initially were fine animals that were afraid of people. They used their magical ability for gentle non-aggressive ends and fed on grass by taking the form of inoffensive animals like deer. They were compassionate

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<sup>114</sup> Sikdar, quoting *Jugantar* 29/5/1979 in 'Marichjhapi Massacre' (1982:23 in Mallick 1993:101).

and were agreeable to the fact that the products of the forest and rivers were to be shared with people. But now, she lamented, due to the legitimising of killings in their name, they had turned egotistical and did not hesitate to attack people. Now tigers were no longer the neighbours with whom the forest had to be shared but 'state-property', and backed by the ruling elite they had begun to treat the islanders as 'tiger-food'.

Some villagers explained that tigers, annoyed at the disturbance caused, both because of the Marichjhapi and the police firings had started from then attacking humans in greater numbers. Others argued that it was the corpses of killed refugees that had floated through the forest that had given the tiger a taste for human flesh. Many of the forest workers and prawn collectors thus claimed that it was erroneous to put the blame for tigers' man-eating habits on the refugees. It was not they who had 'disturbed' tigers, explained the villagers, but the state by unleashing this violence in the forest and 'defiling' it by their fire arms. It was this brutality which had taken place in the sacred (*pobitro*) place that is the forest that had 'transformed' tigers. These measures which were believed to reflect the government's inherent conviction about tigers being more important than forest fishers, honey collectors and woodcutters of the Sundarbans was believed to be one of the more important reason for tigers turning man-eaters. 'After Marichjhapi, tigers just became 'arrogant'', I was often told.

The prawn collectors were the ones who saw themselves as still continuing the struggle against the government. They felt that the new laws were trying to squeeze them out of their livelihood. If the forest fishers still pleaded for a peaceful interaction with the forest, many argued that tigers had 'lost faith' in humans from that time on. Marichjhapi was for them a marker between a before and an after. Now tigers were no longer 'brothers' but 'state-property', and assured of the power of the state they had begun to treat humans as 'tiger-food'. In a final show of anger, the refugees had cut down the government plantation of coconut and tamarisk before leaving the island of Marichjhapi, just as now, every time they were angry with the representatives of the state they destroyed public property – cut down trees, broke solar lights and looted greedily from the various schemes launched by the government. A reason why Jayanta had said that they now had 'bloody hands' and

‘broken hearts’. Their ‘broken heart’, he explained, had made them distrust other fellow human beings. Many of those who had felt the brunt of the state deployed violence said that they couldn’t continue working with ‘peace in their hearts’ and had started to also work as poachers on the side.

The jungle was conceptualised by the poachers as the property of the state. The idea of a state controlled geographical terrain brings in new questions. Do the villagers see the state as regulating along fair lines between the two main groups who are seen to depend on it, i.e. tigers and people? What is interesting is that, whether the overseer is Bonbibibi, the state, or the WWF – a foreign multinational – people in the Sundarbans take it for granted that tigers are part and parcel of the different worlds they wish to inscribe themselves into, an integral part of the picture(s) they inhabit. Yet, the tigers of each group were different and an understanding of the Sundarbans has necessarily to be linked to the way tigers are viewed and connected to the human world in relation to these world views.

#### **VI. 7. Conclusion: is the tiger the bhadraloks’ animal silencing the voices of the subaltern?**

Faced with people getting killed by tigers, the only remedial procedures the WB government has come up with is geared towards changing a tiger’s ‘nature’ – a ‘nature’ understood along the bhadralok’s views of tigers and nature. There was absolutely no engagement with the local ways of understanding the reasons for tigers having become man-eaters. Such a privileging of one understanding of tigers’ nature over another continues to establish hierarchical divisions between peoples. In other words, a discourse on tigers’ man-eating nature’s ‘naturalness’ was (and still is) a way, as the villagers explained, of legitimising, by the bhadralok leftist government, of the relative unimportance of the *nimnobarner lok*, especially when measured against the tigers. The decline of the Namasudra movement, which started with the bhadralok’s call for the partition of Bengal,<sup>115</sup> and which led to the killing of thousands of refugees in Marichjhapi, not only marked a growing unequal access to WB in general, and Kolkata in particular, and the associated disparate resource

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<sup>115</sup> After the Communal Awards and the Poona Pact (Chatterji 1994).

distribution, but also heralded a dilemma of a greater order – that of being a Bengali yet not a bhadralok.

## VII. CONCLUSION: BENEATH THE TIGER MASK, THE HUMAN FACE OF THE SUNDARBANS

‘Before writing about us you have to understand the *ways of the forest*,’ Mihir had said when, sometime during the first week after my arrival, I had told him I was not interested in tigers and the forest and that I wanted to write about the lives of the *people* in the Sundarbans and especially the ‘down’ islands. I had also initially mistaken the eagerness with which villagers offered to take me to the jungle as their misunderstanding of the reasons for my presence amongst them. The main attraction for any visitor to these parts of the Sundarbans is the forest and its formidable wildlife. Visiting relatives are often packed into little boats and taken for short excursions through the criss-crossing rivulets into the forested archipelago. ‘Wait till you have seen the forest and understood its ways,’ I was ominously warned, ‘you will then believe us and this will help you write about our lives’.

Until I took on the force of the islanders’ remark that I had to ‘start with the jongol and their daily struggle with tigers if I wanted to ‘understand’ and write about them, the people’, my sense was that I needed to correct the dominant perceptions of the Sundarbans as the realms of nature – a wilderness, a preserve of wild beasts – by a simple reversal. So I wanted to write about the Sundarbans ‘collectives’ as ‘people’ versus ‘tigers’. I learnt, however, that neither people nor tigers fit into the neat rubrics I knew them as belonging to. It did not make much sense to the villagers that I look at just one side of the river, that of the abad. They wanted me to look also at the jongol and understand ‘their’ tigers.

For Mihir, this world of the forest and of its beings had to be experienced, and ultimately believed in, to be properly understood. As the days went by, the villagers made great efforts to explain the risks entailed in the different occupations they practised and how I should learn to look for differences – especially in their approach to the forest – rather than similarities. Towards the end of my stay, Nonibala (mentioned in Chapter V), who worked as a prawn collector, came up to me and said, ‘You’ve accompanied the forest working groups many times but you have never come and pulled the net for tiger prawn seeds with us, meet you tomorrow at four a.m. We want you to know how difficult it is.’ I realised that it had never occurred to me to try working in the river to fish tiger prawn seed because it did not seem terribly

interesting and especially because I was terrified of crocodiles. I had on a few occasions seen one basking in the sun or floating just below the surface of the river – whereas I never saw a tiger.

It was only when I actually pulled the net that I realised how strenuous it is to collect prawn seed. I had to deploy super-human efforts to walk against the current in fast flowing hip- to chest-deep water without slipping. This experience, like going into the forest to cut wood, always struck me with the sheer physicality involved. It was this physical intimacy with the elements that many islanders saw as the reason why, in the Sundarbans, the salt water and earth impacted upon their behaviour just as they saw their behaviour, impacting upon the environment. Such incidental occasions lead me to stress that, for the islanders, it is crucial to understand the intimate *symbolic and* physical connections between the *abad* – the inhabited world of humans – and the *jongol* – the sphere of the non-humans – if one wants to write about the Sundarbans and its people. This is the reason why my primary concern in this thesis has been to give a systematic account of the processes by which these two aspects are negotiated within daily life.

### **VII. 1. Are tigers, finally, good to think with?**

The Sundarbans islanders believe they share with tigers not merely a unique geography, a shared history, and a set of common laws but also ‘interactive experiences’. Tiger-charmers are those most apt to take up the responsibility of negotiating with tigers. Tiger-charmers are able to do that because they are understood to have similar qualities to tigers: tigers understand them best because, like tiger-charmers, they have very strong ‘egos’ and are inclined to greed and short-temperedness. Tiger-charmers, especially in the old days, were believed to be able to shout back at tigers and, like them, take on magical forms and transform themselves into animals, birds or insects. Indeed, all those working in the forest saw their ‘interactive experiences’ with tigers as potentially possible because they saw themselves as sharing with tigers a certain fearlessness, but also saw tigers, like them, as invested with ‘human’ dispositions and emotions. This brings me to reflect on the

islanders' differing perceptions of 'self' and 'other' and the importance they vested in 'relatedness' in the construction of social relationships.

There is not one singular basic underlying pattern of understanding 'relatedness' in the 'down' islands of the Sundarbans. The Sundarbans islanders have different ways of positioning themselves in relation to tigers as well as their environment. What is remarkable is how forest fishers' belief that they share with tigers a history of displacement and a terribly dangerous environment makes them very protective towards 'their old tigers'; their stories of oratorical battles of wits are dwelt upon not without some fondness. But, if forest fishers are able to empathise with tigers, at the other end of the spectrum, the prawn collectors and poachers, have redrawn the lines of relatedness between tigers and people. Far from finding some sort of identity or empathy with the tiger, they see the events of Marichjhapi and the state's investment in tourism and wildlife sanctuaries as instituting an unequal distribution of resources between humans and tigers and therefore a betrayal of them, the inhabitants of the Sundarbans, by the state. Correspondingly the tigers have become *bhadralok*-tigers, moved onto the other side of the overarching status division.

This gives rise to contrasting kinds of interactions both with the forest and in patterns of 'relatedness' to tigers. If the forest workers persist to this day in their belief in continuity, that the best way forward is still to pacify tigers and keep on treating them as 'conniving mates', the prawn collectors, on the other hand, believe that the relation between tigers, and by extension to the other non-humans of the rivers and forests, and to each other, has been irretrievably broken. They see tigers as now transposed into the symbol of a state ruled by the rich and powerful *bhadralok*, a state in which they feel that, as *gramer lok*, they have very little place. The *bhadralok*, in turn, stress the vestiges of past civilisations when talking of the Sundarbans. Many of them hoped that they would come across old coins and statues when digging up their fields and any 'find' which was thought to be 'ancient' was neatly arranged in glass show cases. These objects reassured them about belonging to the greater 'imagined community'<sup>116</sup> of cultured and educated Bengalis.

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<sup>116</sup> As famously developed by Anderson in his book on the origin and spread of nationalism (1983).



That the realm of nature and the environment, the forest and its non-humans, most important of which in this context are tigers, is evidently socially constructed leads us to consider the ‘social objectivation of nature’: ‘the process by which each culture endows with a particular salience certain features of its environment and certain forms of practical engagement with it’ (Descola 1996:85). Descola identifies a common feature in all conceptualisations of the natural world – that it is always predicated by reference to the human domain and that ways of thinking about it are ultimately informed by ideas and practices concerning ‘self’ and ‘otherness’ (1992:111; 1996:85). Descola suggests that anthropologists should analyse different patterns that societies have elaborated to represent the non-human just as they would different kinship systems. These patterns, which can neither operate nor be studied independently of cultural and historical contexts, provide a framework within which a study of the conceptualisations of the tiger in the Sundarbans can be deployed as a way of understanding social bonds in the Sundarbans.

The structure of the thesis implicitly draws largely on Descola because his insight offers an alternative way of approaching social relations not only in the South Asian realm, where caste and religion are important analytical grids for researchers, but also in grasping North-South relations in the domain of wildlife conservation. An understanding through different societies’ perception of animals, or the complex relationship between particular social systems and their deemed ‘natural environment’, lags behind in the social sciences. Similarly, instead of looking at discrete entities whose boundaries are set by administrative or social units such as the ‘village’ or the ‘district’, I have structured this thesis through the categories of ‘up’/‘down’, *bhadralok*/*gramer lok*, human/non-human, etc, to reflect categories which made more sense for the villagers.

I believe that the contribution of an anthropologist, when studying the social organisation of a place like the Sundarbans, lies in tracing how the ecological/environmental dynamics of a place are interwoven in its specific history, culture, social and political institutions, and indigenous meaning systems. This is the reason why, instead of approaching the Sundarbans within the boundaries set by the socio-political definitions of the village, the district or the state, I explore differences

between people in terms of their narratives of tigers and interactions with their respective environments – land and forest.

## VII. 2. Whose Sundarbans and whose tiger story?

The conventional literature on the Sundarbans focuses principally on physical as well as metaphorical transformations, i.e. how, from being a ‘waste’ or ‘drowned’ land under early colonial administrators, it has metamorphosed into ‘a beautiful and exotic garden’ culminating in a ‘World Heritage Site’. Yet this remains a story of ‘nature’. It is often predicted that the Sundarbans were inhabited – wrongly – before its geography was fully formed and, equally, that the Sundarbans will soon disappear. What therefore is not addressed in relation to these dire scientific predictions is that this place is also home to 4.5 million people, that barely three hundred years ago, the Sundarbans extended to the outskirts of Kolkata, and the extent to which these ‘scientific reasons’ are comforting justifications for the lack of any master plan for the Sundarbans population.

In his article ‘The Commons and its “Tragedy” as Analytical Framework: Understanding Environmental Degradation in South Asia’, Herring argues that ‘the “tragedy of the commons”<sup>117</sup> has become a metaphor for a persistent and severe contradiction in the interaction of natural systems and social systems’ (1987:1). The clash between individual interests in the use of ‘open access’ common natural resources and the preservation (or regeneration) of the commons, whether at the local, nation state, or global level, he argues, raises complex, enduring questions of institutional political economy and social values that transcend traditional political-administrative and disciplinary boundaries.

Yet the lesson of Descola is that we cannot properly address these issues without first entering into a study of social relations as rendered through the discourse around the tiger in the Sundarbans people’s understanding of it as a non-human which is part of both the cosmology of the forest and the embodied reality one might face when working in the forest. Environmental plans for the Sundarbans have been dominated

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<sup>117</sup> As developed by Hardin – the local societal failure to control individual access to grazing and the subsequent destruction of this resource on the village commons (1968).

by discourses dictated in the name of eco-science: they now need to be addressed also from the point of view of Sundarbans inhabitants. In the villagers' different images of tigers, the new increasing popularity of the vision of islanders is that of having to stand up against 'tourist tigers', or tigers which had 'opted out' of their historic connivance with the islanders to ally themselves instead with urbanites and state officials.

The history of conflict in the Sundarbans, or, rather, the battle between subaltern groups of people who live in the Sundarbans and dominant groups (the zamindars, the British, the Left Front government), is one very often referred to in discourses by islanders about their perceived marginalisation. A rumour which widely circulates in the Sundarbans today is that the WB government has given the tender of the Sundarbans to a powerful rich foreign multinational called the WWF which has no love lost for people but very much wants to see tigers flourish. This is the context in which to understand the violence that often erupts in the Sundarbans today. It is seen as a fight against a state representing only the urban middle class and not the Sundarbans villagers' interests.

The location of the history of the Sundarbans within the frameworks of influence of successive polities is important. The earlier negative connotations of 'wilderness' have today been replaced by the idea of 'wilderness' as positive – validated – in the name of ecology and wildlife preservation – and the implications of such a transformation are significant. But so too is the continuity, the inference that humans do not belong in the Sundarbans remains and needs to be addressed most urgently. The establishment of spatial meanings – the making of 'spaces' into 'places' – is always implicated in hegemonic configurations of power (Foucault 1980:149). The Sundarbans have been 'territorialised', not only in the decisions made about land use, but also in 'giving meaning to a place'.<sup>118</sup> Today the Sundarbans are hailed as the world's largest remaining tropical mangrove forest. Since the 1970s, the Sundarbans' 'unique ecology' has stimulated numerous programs of conservation. In 1973 it saw the launching of Project Tiger. As mentioned earlier, the Sundarbans now houses a National Park and a Bird Sanctuary which in 1985 entered the World Heritage List of International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, and is now

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<sup>118</sup> I adopt this meaning from Sack (1986:2) in Sivaramakrishnan (1997:78).

the fifth Biosphere Reserve in the country. In the depiction of the Sundarbans as the 'stately abode of the Royal Bengal Tiger' (IUCN 1989:454), humans continue to be at best ignored, at worst condemned just for living there.

It is important to draw the links between how administrative classifications, law-making and discourses on nature and science have 'represented' the Sundarbans and in turn have 'evolved' a particular perception of the Sundarbans islanders. These links need to be highlighted because it is only by spotting them that the new imperialisms propagated in the name of conservation can be discerned and denounced. Over the last two decades, 'natural' science studies in India have accented the link between the process of imperialism and techno-scientific development (Kumar 1991:6; Worboys 1991:13-15; Arnold and Guha 1996; Sangwan 1998). Guha has described how, in their pursuit of a self-professed brand of forest preservation, the British colonial administration of the forest broke with the traditional pattern of authority which was normative and flexible (1989). However, in the Sundarbans, there never was a 'traditional pattern of authority which was normative and flexible' before the British: there were merely landlords usurping the products of the forest.

There has been a growing emphasis in the series *Subaltern Studies*, especially following the publication of Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), on rural communities' consciousness, as shown through the study of rural movements in colonial Bengal.<sup>119</sup> However, as Das Gupta argues, these studies focus overwhelmingly on the religious discourse of peasants, especially in relation to resistance (2001:76).<sup>120</sup> While understanding religion is important, privileging it over all else distracts attention from the equally important economic and political spheres, and from alternative, less well known, cultural spheres. In the case of the Sundarbans the framing of community consciousness is undertaken not so much through the valorisation of religion, caste, ethnic or communitarian identity per se but through an overarching divide along the lines of

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<sup>119</sup> See studies by Sarkar (1985; 1987); Dasgupta (1985); Cooper (1988); Bose (1993); Bhadra & Chatterjee (1997).

<sup>120</sup> Though I am inspired by its tremendous contribution towards rethinking the role of groups such as peasants, lower castes, labourers or women and by its having brought to the fore issues of culture, ideology and consciousness in social science studies, I feel, like Ruud, that the tendency to consider 'the subaltern' in light of overpowering cultural or structural domination severely reduces the scope for understanding subaltern action (1999b:690).

bhadralok/gramer lok. It is through this main distinction, which is expressed through the local narratives of tigers, that the different groups of Sundarbans islanders highlight their perceptions on 'self' and 'other'. In other words, the narratives of the non-human world are a very good indicator of focal social distinctions.

If the contending elements in being both 'Bengali' and 'Muslim'<sup>121</sup> have often been highlighted, those of being 'Bengali' and a gramer lok – in West Bengal very similar to 'Dalits'<sup>122</sup> in the rest of the Indian subcontinent – has rarely been addressed. As brilliantly developed by Mallick, the reasons leading to the Marichjhapi massacre have to be understood in relation to the long history which led to the partition of Bengal and the intricacies of caste, class and communal differences (1999:105). Briefly, in the colonial period, the movement led by the East Bengali Namasudras was one of the most powerful and politically mobilised Dalit movements in India. In alliance with the Muslims, they kept the Bengal Congress party in opposition from the 1920s. By the late 1920s the bhadralok press started to view them with hostility and suspicion and were worried that the low-caste leaders might follow the separatist politics pursued by Muslim leaders. Gradually, seeing that they were becoming a minority, the Hindu elite and eventually the Congress party pressed for the partition of Bengal at Independence, so that at least the western half would return to bhadralok control. Partition, however, meant that Dalits lost their bargaining power when divided along religious lines of Hindus and Muslims and became politically marginalized minorities in both countries (Mallick 1999:105).<sup>123</sup>

Hence, the reason why in this thesis I stress the divide between the bhadralok and the gramer lok is because there is a deep line of division between the two groups. Indeed, to speak of a single 'Bengali Hindu community' is to invoke an 'imagined community' (Chatterji 1994:43). What I would like to highlight in this context is how narratives of the tiger and of the forest are used to subvert dominant categories of caste and class. The story of Bonbibi against the Brahmin landowning Dokkhin Rai could well have been penned in the early stages of a peasant consciousness against high-caste bhadralok domination – just as today stories of hybrid tigers made

<sup>121</sup> As discussed by Chatterji (1996), Ahmed (1981), Islam (1973), Roy (1970).

<sup>122</sup> Mallick uses the term 'Untouchable'. As this group excludes the non-Untouchable SCs, STs and OBCs, I prefer to use the term Dalit – which means 'oppressed'.

<sup>123</sup> This is in line with the arguments made by Bandyopadhyay (1997) and Chatterji (1994).

in laboratories by scientists and released by the WB government are a way for the villagers of giving their version of what they consider to be a highly unjust situation.

### VII. 3. Tigers and Sundarbans islanders: 'conniving collectives'?

For any one society, and specifically in the case of the Sundarbans, the 'animal world' is never seen as an indivisible category but as an historically constituted and morally loaded field of meanings that derive from the human habit of extending/imposing social logics, complexities and conflicts onto the natural world, and particularly onto animals other than ourselves (Franklin 1999). The possibilities for differentiations in meaning and practice in human-animal relations are everywhere multiplied by the social differentiation that stem from class, ethnicity, region, gender and religion (among others). Once we acknowledge that ideas of nature both have been, and currently are, fundamentally intertwined with dominant ideas of society, we need to address what ideas of society and of its ordering become reproduced, legitimated, excluded, validated and so on, through appeals to nature or the natural. And the project of determining what is a natural impact becomes as much a social and cultural project as it is 'purely' scientific (Macnaghten & Urry 1998:15).

The Sundarbans islanders are divided along occupational lines which are reflected in different positionings in relation to tigers and the forest, and not so much along the stricter communitarian lines of caste and religion. To reflect these groups more appropriately, I propose the term 'collective',<sup>124</sup> as I feel it makes more sense than the terms 'community' or 'society'. Community and society, as pointed out by Latour, mark a division of 'men-among-themselves' from 'things-in-themselves' and brings about a very lopsided understanding of what actually is a 'society' (Latour 1993:106-7). Latour argues for 'collectives' because they can be compared with each other as they all distribute what will later, after, what he calls 'stabilization', become

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<sup>124</sup> From Latour's 'collective' which describes the 'association' of humans and non-humans and which is made up of 'natures-cultures' set against 'society' which, for him, designates only one part of our collectives as it is based on a division invented by the social sciences (1993:4; originally published in 1991). 'No one has ever heard of a collective that did not mobilize heaven and earth in its composition, along with bodies and souls, property and law, gods and ancestors, powers and beliefs, beasts and fictional beings' (1993:106-7). This common matrix, argues Latour, defines the point of departure of comparative anthropology. 'The fact that one collective needs ancestors and fixed stars while another one, more eccentric, needs genes and quasars, is explained by the dimensions of the collective to be held together' (1993:108).

elements of nature and elements of the social world. This division between ‘men-among-themselves’ and ‘things-in-themselves’, or the ‘Great Divide’, argues Latour, should be abandoned as it always reflects what the Western society interprets as Nature and where it decides to draw the lines between humans and non-humans.<sup>125</sup> This idea of Nature is assumed to be unattached to a particular culture and is the result of what he calls a ‘particular’ type of universalism, a universalism which, ironically, overlooks the fact that all natures-cultures or ‘collectives’, are similar in that they construct humans, divinities and non-humans (Latour 1993:106). However, the practical means that allow some collectives to dominate others, says Latour, are based in a dominating world view of Nature.

But then on what basis are anthropologists to construct boundaries, how are they to divide up the initial whole they confront and are confronted with when they start fieldwork, and how are they supposed to ultimately interpret their data? There is, after all, ‘an enormous gulf – one mostly of power – between those who write and produce textual representations and those who do not, even if the latter are involved in the wider process of representation and creation of meaning’ (Moore 1994:xix). I do not intend to expand on this difference nor ignore its effects on local representations; what I do want to lay bare is the role played by those who are studied in the construction of meaning, and by extension, in the construction of texts. Because if anthropological texts can thankfully ‘never be completely realised as the straightforward product of cultural domination and disciplinary convention’, it is precisely because these texts are ‘the product of a complex dialogical process’ (Moore 1994:xix).

The other problem with keeping to a Western notion of Nature is that it is used to justify the means employed by conservationists, i.e. it is in the name of protecting ‘Nature’ that governments come up with conservation laws. In other words, can we ask if, in this case, the protection of Royal Bengal tigers is silencing the Sundarbans islanders’ ways of engaging with non-humans? I would like to conclude this thesis by highlighting how I have tried to give an account of the islanders’ life that reflects the local way of understanding what ‘a relation of conniving with tigers’ means when

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<sup>125</sup> Latour, develops Goody’s ‘Great Divide’ (1977) – which is about the ‘grand dichotomy’ the Western world draws between nature and society – and says that ‘its self-righteous certainty should be replaced by many uncertain and unexpected divides’ (1986:2).

also living out practical day-to-day 'relations' with them. This is partly to demonstrate why it is crucial we study the 'the association of humans and non-humans' and how they form various 'collectives' (Latour 1993:4) if we want to escape the Great Divide way of thinking about the forest and Bengal tigers; and also to highlight how thinking along the lines of the three different Sundarbans 'collectives' can become a way of rethinking environmental issues because, as Latour says, the greatest factor that unites different collectives is their ability to 'mobilise themselves'.

The Sundarbans islanders often explained that the *locale* had got more violent for them all. But the villagers also believed that the violence of the environment, both as a *locale* as well as a *landscape*, had unified humans and non-humans by investing them both with a common cantankerousness. This in turn, believed the villagers, increased each group's aggressiveness, which again affected the both *lived* and *thought* environment. These constant threats to the other's existence were therefore in reality like threats to one's own existence, and had adverse effects on the 'psychology' of all beings – both human and non-human, who lived in this environment. This was the reason why, argued the villagers, they shared with non-humans, especially tigers, an irritable, aggressive, angry or 'cantankerous' nature.

Also, just as they saw the *locale* as influencing them and making them more cantankerous, they believed that the violence witnessed in the politics of the Sundarbans was increasing the harshness of the *locale*. In other words, the growing violence of humans expressed through their polluting paraphernalia like motor-boats, shrimp-fry collectors' mosquito nets, and poachers' rifles, and the more dangerous religious and political violence, explained the villagers, affected the *locale* of the forest which in turn affected tigers and other non-humans' need for peace and security. This made tigers even more ferocious and increased the danger of the *locale* making it even more risky for the villagers.

The two (humans and non-humans) are 'sealed' together by this common environment as *locale* or geography. However, what seems to be separating them is the *landscape*. The *locale* of the Sundarbans is constructed – thus becoming a *landscape* – by people who have control over its management (state, NGOs,



urbanites) as an area for tigers, or as a 'natural' place where humans did not fit. It was this image, argued the villagers, which they were trying to fight against and not tigers. As Mihir once concluded 'Our old cantankerous tigers are not daft, the bhadrak come along to see a circus animal and they think it will parade in front of them, but it never does. It has seen through the bhadrak trick and keeps well hidden in the forest.'

## GLOSSARY OF SELECTED TERMS AND ACRONYMS

*Abad* – refers specifically to those Sundarbans islands which were reclaimed and cultivated.

*Adivasi* –member of an Schedule Tribe group.

*Babu* –middle or upper class male elite. It is seen as a badge of *bhadralok* status, and is a frequently used term of respect all over West Bengal when addressing a social superior.

*Bagda* – refers to what is commonly known as the ‘tiger prawn’ hatchlings. The tiger prawn is considered to be one of the most delicate in taste. It is the largest Indian marine penaeid prawn to be farmed. Its scientific name is *penaeus monodon*. The bagda hatchlings are usually at the postlarval stage PL 20, 9-14 mm and are commonly known as ‘prawn seed’, though the literature also refers to them as ‘shrimp’ ‘post-larvae’ / ‘juveniles’ / ‘seedlings’.

*Bauley* –tiger-charmer. Term previously used for woodcutters.

*Bhadralok* – i.e. ‘gentle-folk’; from *bhadra* which is translatable as ‘civility’ with resonances of middle-class sensitivity to culture and refinement, and *lok* which is ‘group’ or ‘people’. The word carries connotations not only of landed wealth, but also of being master (as opposed to servant), and frequently of upper caste exclusiveness and of possessing education, culture and Anglicisation. This word has its origin in the rentier class, called *zamindar*, who enjoyed tenurial rights to rents from land appropriated by the Permanent Settlement introduced by the British in 1793. The Permanent Settlement set up a system of parasitic landlordism that led to the subinfeudation of the peasantry. Shunning manual labour, the *bhadralok* have always been very careful to keep social distances between themselves and their social inferiors.

*Bhatbhati* local name for mechanised boats.

*Bhite* – homestead. It is the consecrated piece of land where one’s house is built and includes the courtyard and the adjoining non-cultivated land surrounding the house.

*Bigha* – unit of land measurement roughly equal to one-third of an acre.

*Bonbibi* –name of the deity of the forest from *bon* which means forest and *bibi* woman.

*BJP* –Bharatiya Janata Party.

*Bund* –raised mud quays called *bādh* in Bengali which protect islands from the saline tidal rivers by holding back their twice daily high tides.

*Bunding* –the process of enclosing an island with a bund. There are 3500 kilometres of bund around most of the southern inhabited islands of the Sundarbans.

*Chor* – sandbars created from newly deposited silt.

*Commons* – the local societal failure to control individual access to grazing and the subsequent destruction of this resource on the village commons (Hardin 1968).

*CPIM/CPM* – Communist Party of India-Marxist. Largest party constituting the WB Left Front government; often simply referred to as ‘party’.

*Cycle-van* – three-wheeled cycles with raised platforms which carry goods and people.

*Dacoit* – Anglicised version of the Bengali word *dakat*. Dacoits are infamous as armed robbers or pirates who not only plunder and loot but also perpetrate atrocious cruelty, defy local authorities, rob entire villages, and sometimes even murder their victims. They are notorious in rural Bengal.

*Dalit* – means ‘oppressed’ and widely recognised both by Dalits and non-Dalits in both social and political spheres.

*Dargah* – literally ‘court’; the seat of spiritual authority represented by the shrines and tombs of pirs or sayyeds.

*Dokkhin* – south.

*Gram sansad* – village council.

*Jaghir* – revenue assignment.

*Jati* – The Bengali *jati* is especially used, like ‘caste’, to mean ‘genus’, ‘kind’ or ‘ethnic groups’. It also provides room for other collective identities such as those established along the lines of religion, regional affiliation and gender.

*Jongol* – commonly used for ‘forest’ but specifically meaning ‘wilderness’; in the Sundarbans specifically the sphere of non-humans. From it comes the English ‘jungle’.

*Khoti* – are little shacks built along an adjoining fishery by a prawn fishery owner. These serve to watch over the fishery at night and are used as a prawn seed transaction area during the day. They also become temporary living spaces for prawn dealers during the busy months.

*Mal* – Traditionally it meant land held on which revenue was required to be paid. Here referred specifically to the piece of earth on the forest ground which was ‘checked’ when tiger-charmers said their charms on alighting from boats.

*Matir manush* – literally ‘people of the earth’ or ‘earthen people’; refers more specifically to a gentle, amiable person.

*Maun* – unit for measuring wood. It represents about forty kilograms.

*Modhuwala* – bee-keeper.

*Mohal* or *mahal* – administrative unit; roughly equivalent to county or subdistrict. It is a term which gained currency during the Permanent Settlement and means ‘one’s own place’ from its literal meaning of ‘palace’. In the Sundarbans it strangely denotes both a loose group of families all related by blood and also a geographical part, like a ‘village mohal’ or a ‘forest mohal’. By extension, the islanders often refer to the forest with this term.

*Mouley* –honey collector.

*Nishana* – pole erected in the forest where a person has been killed. Usually a thinly spun towel called *gamchha* or a garment of the dead person is attached to its top. It is interesting to note that it also refers to the flag and pole erected in the compound of a *dargah* which marks the *qutb*.

*OBC* –other backward castes.

*Panchayat* –elected self-governing body at village cluster, development block, and district levels.

*Parganas* - unit of revenue administration equivalent to subdistrict or county/basic territorial unit of administration of the Mughals.

*Patta* – certificate of landholding.

*Pir* – ‘saint’; respectful name given to Saiyeds alive or dead; Saiyed lineage name; ‘teacher’.

*Puja* – Hindu worship.

*Qutb* – the North Pole; a pole or centre around which anything revolves; the title given to the chief of an invisible hierarchy of mystics or holy man (commonly Pirs).

*Rai* or *ray* – king or lord. It was a title many zamindars took up and it subsequently became a surname.

*RSP* –Revolutionary Socialist Party. The most widely prevalent political party in the Sundarbans.

*SC* – People belonging to a schedule (list) of castes or parts of groups within castes that are economically and socially disadvantaged and are therefore entitled to protection and specified benefits under Article 341 of the Indian constitution in order for members of such groups to be eligible for positive affirmative action. The bulk of Scheduled Castes were former ‘Untouchables’ – called ‘Harijans’ by Gandhi – who prefer to be called ‘Dalits’ (meaning ‘oppressed’ or ‘broken’) in self-recognition of their historical oppression. The 1991 census tabulated 138 million Scheduled Caste members throughout India, representing about 16% of the total Indian population. The schedule in the constitution does not list the Scheduled Castes by name.

**ST** – Schedule (list) of tribes or tribal communities that are economically and socially disadvantaged and are entitled to specified benefits guaranteed by Article 342 of the Indian Constitution. The tribes are listed in the Fifth Schedule. The 1991 census tabulated 67.8 million members of Scheduled Tribes throughout India, representing about 8% of the total population.

**TMC** – Trinamool Congress. Party headed by Mamata Bannerjee who allied with the NDA to fight against the Left Front government. Mamata was briefly minister of transport in the NDA government and is infamous for her histrionics.

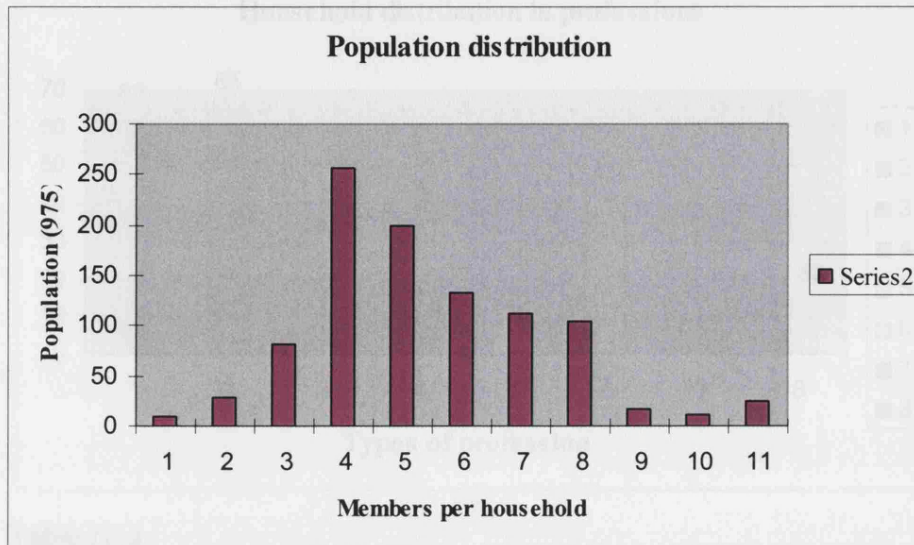
**Tiger prawn** – (see *bagda*).

**TSRD** – Tagore Society for Rural Development. NGO headed by Tushar Kanjilal. Projects carried out by this NGO have worked specifically in Orissa, Jhargram, Bihar and West Bengal.

**WB** – West Bengal.

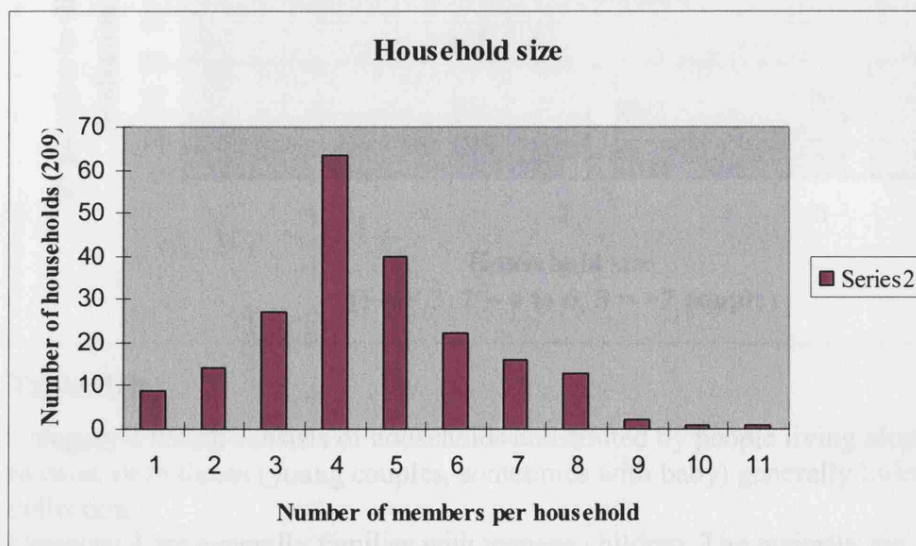
**Zamindar** – ‘landlord’, especially those that emerged with the introduction of the British Permanent Settlement (Landlease) Act of 1793. Many were former revenue collectors of the Mughal period (1526-1858); (see *bhadralok* for more details).

## APPENDIX I



**Table I. a.**

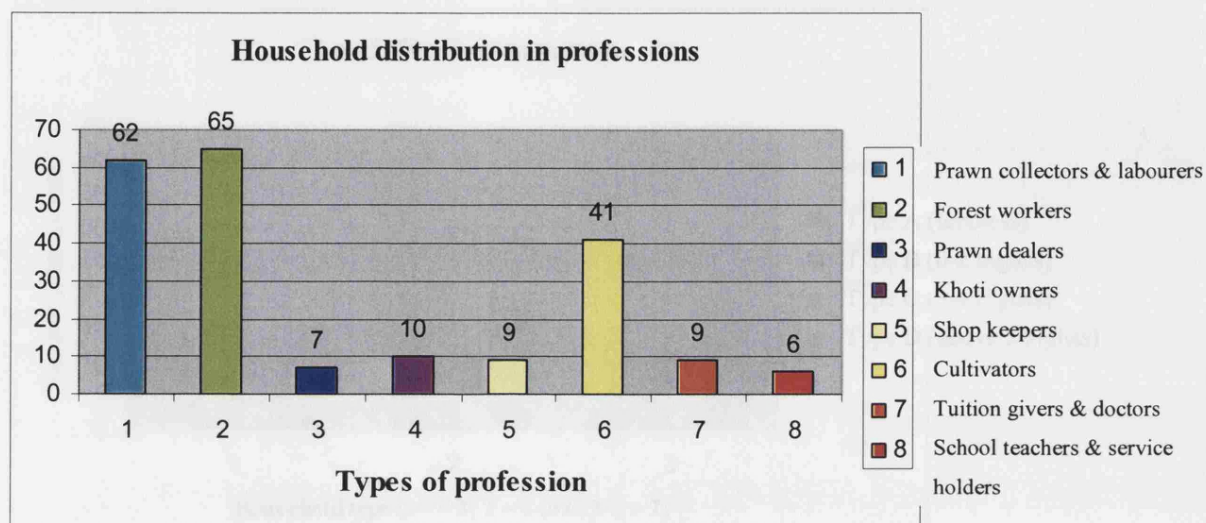
Population distribution in relation to members per household – more than half the population of Garjontola (975 people) live in households of four, five or six members.



**Table I. b.**

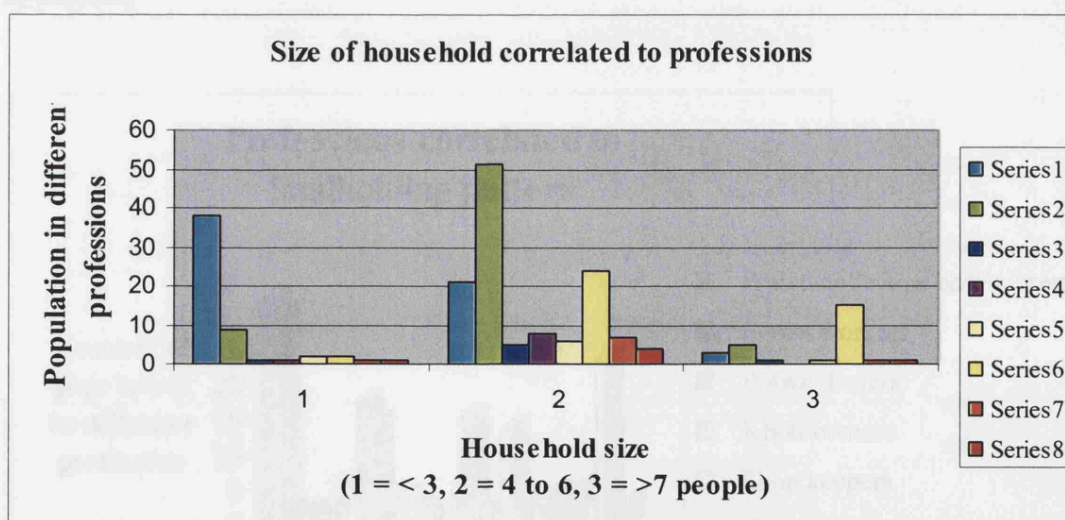
Number of households in Garjontola – 209. This table shows the relatively high proportion of people living in households with only one, two or three members.

## APPENDIX II



**Table II. a.**

Table showing individual household involvment in each profession.



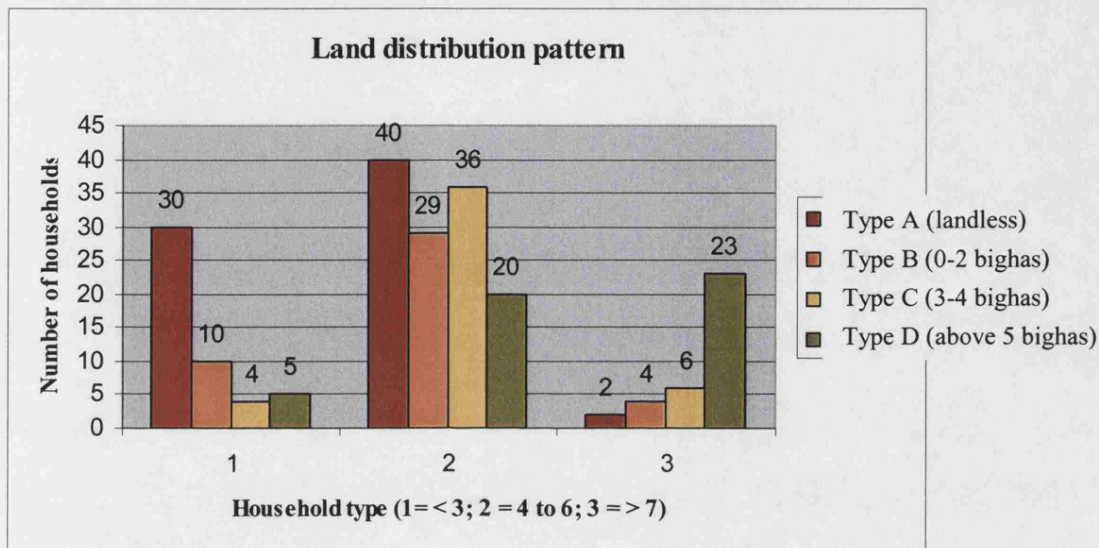
**Table II. b.**

Category 1 which consists of households constituted by people living alone (the aged), in twos, or in threes (young couples, sometimes with baby) generally living off prawn collection.

Category 2 are generally families with teenage children. The majority are either forest workers (both fishers and those 'doing the forest') or cultivators.

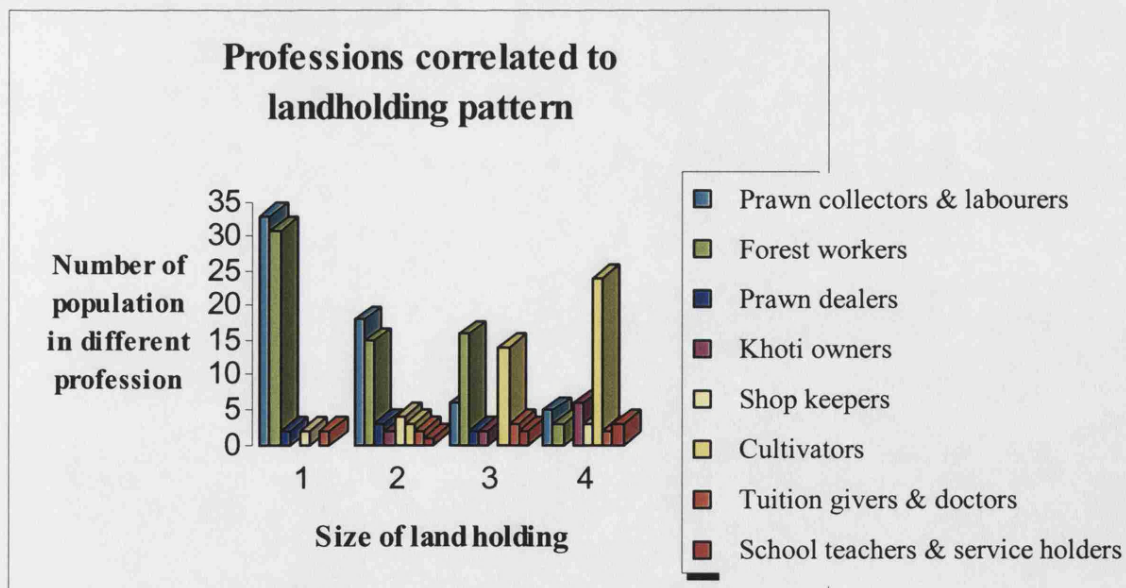
Category 3 consist of large families – the majority of them are cultivators and landowners. This is partly affected by age, i.e. succesful forest workers or prawn collectors sometimes become landowners with when they grow old.

### APPENDIX III



**Table III. a.**

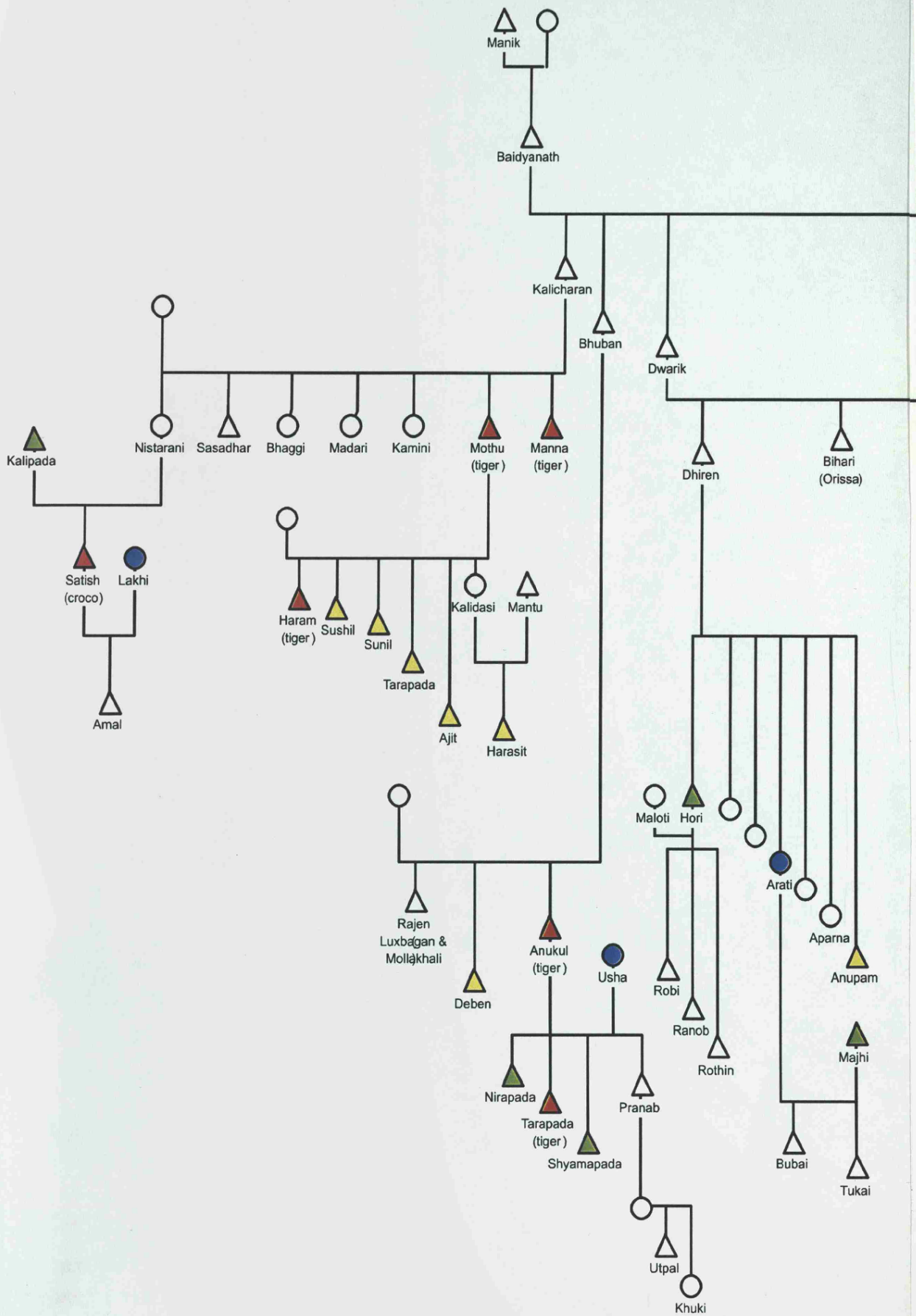
Landless people generally live in small households – as mentioned earlier these are young couples and sometimes the aged. The more the access to land the bigger the household.

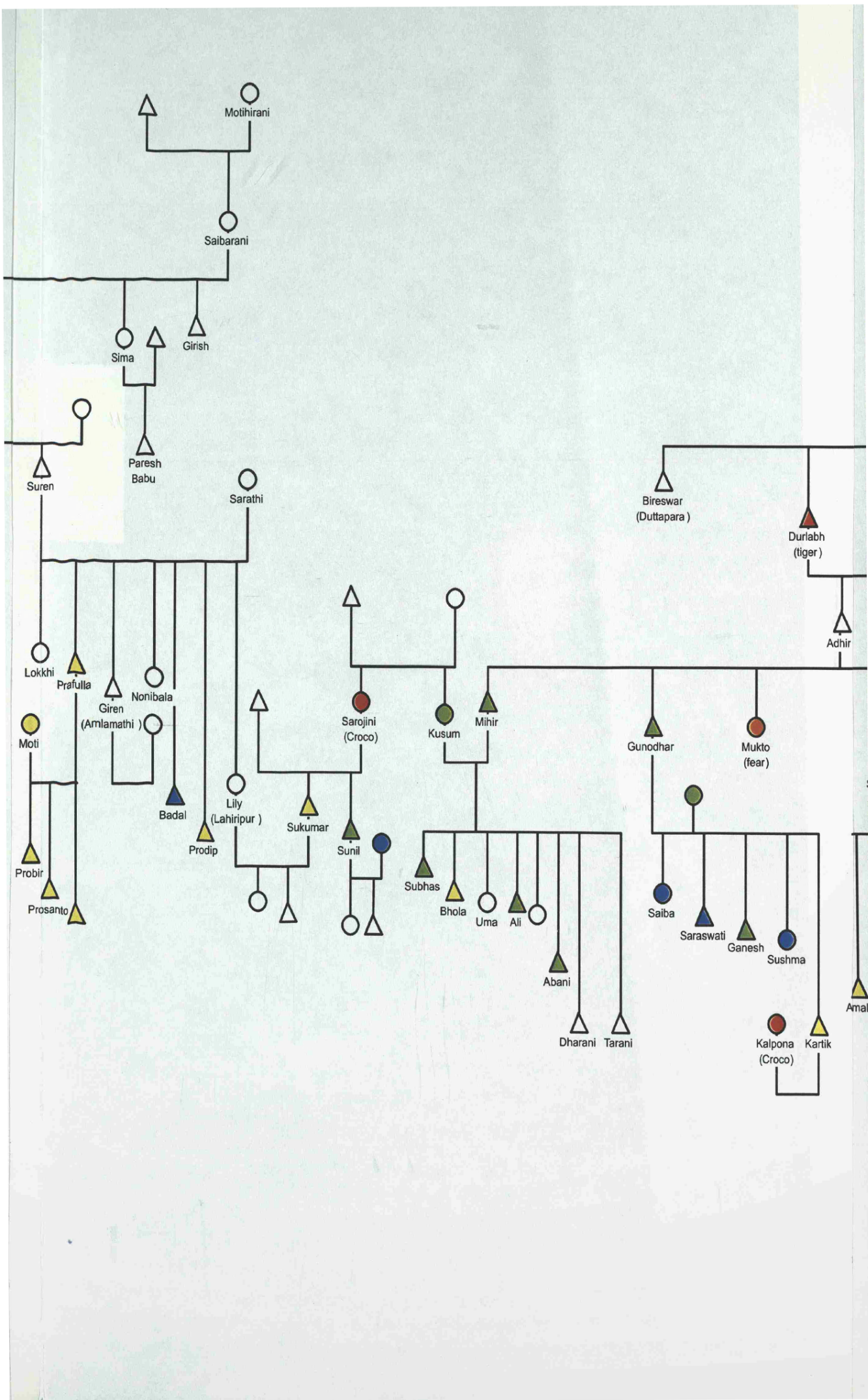


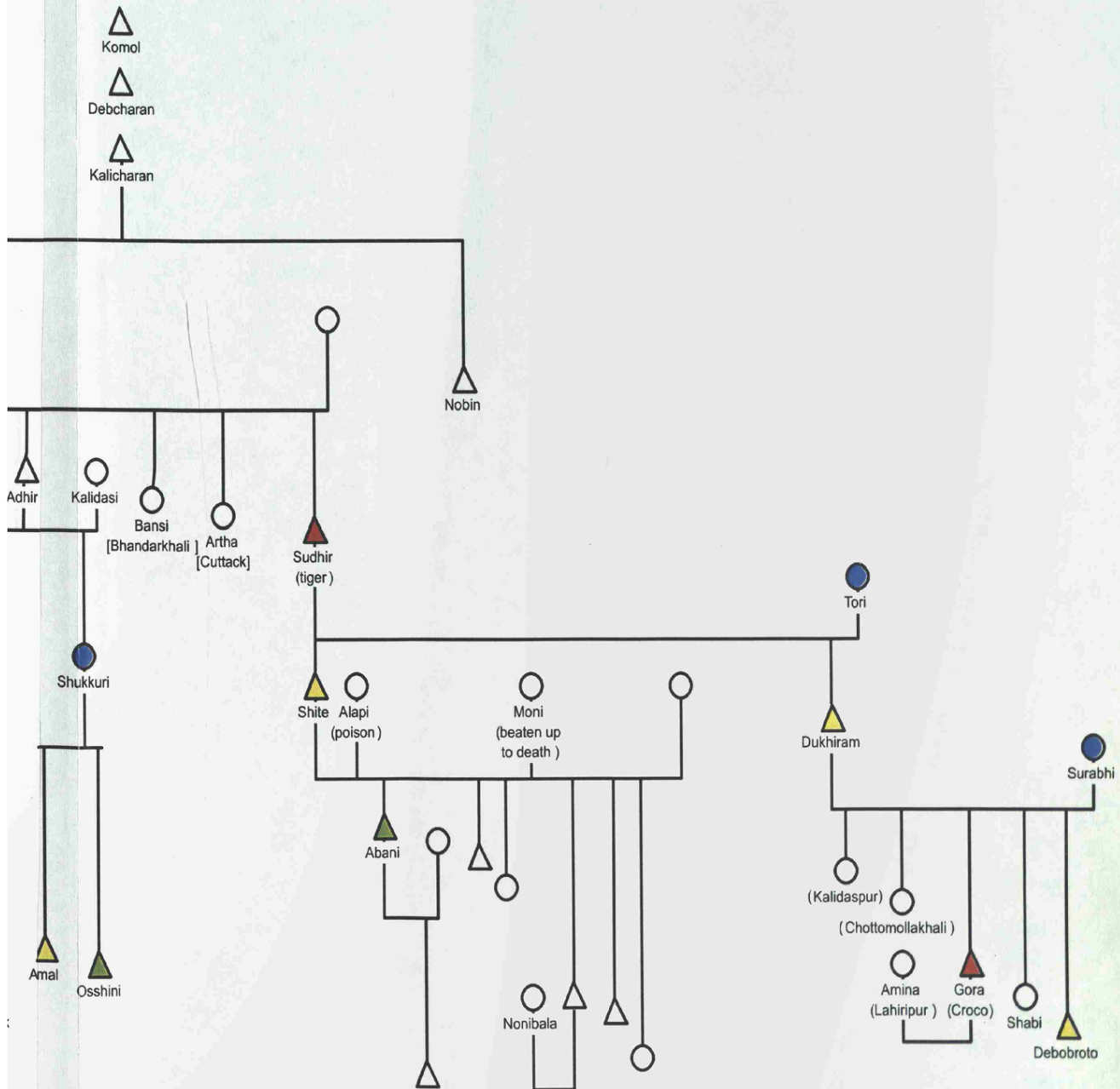
**Table III. b.**

Size of landholding 1 = Type A (landless) above. This table shows type of profession in relation to landholding pattern, i.e. prawn collectors and forest workers are those who own the least land; in contrast, cultivators, khoti owners, and school teachers and service holders own the most land.





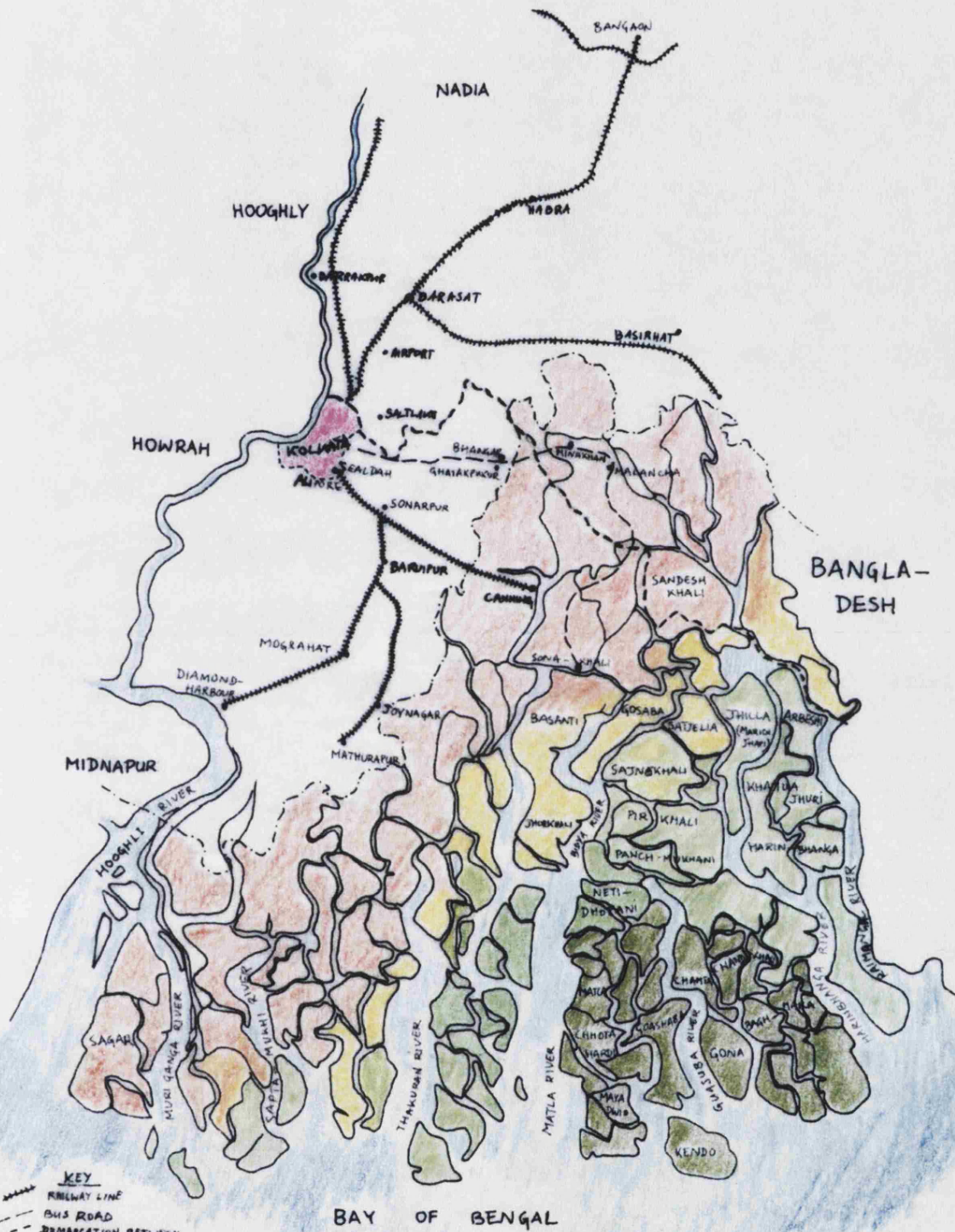




## GENEALOGY

Genealogy of some families of Garjontola showing:  
 those who have been tiger- and crocodile victims (in red),  
 those who have died of fear (in orange);  
 forest workers are shown in green;  
 prawn collectors in blue;  
 and cultivators and landowners in yellow.

It has been arranged according to age group – the youngest are those at the bottom; those unnamed and unmarked are those for which information was not available.



- KEY**
- ..... RAILWAY LINE
  - - - - - BUS ROAD
  - - - - - DEMARCATION BETWEEN NORTH & SOUTH 24-PARGANAS
  - - - - - DAMPTER-MUDGEK LINE
  - CORE FOREST
  - BUFFER FOREST
  - SATNEXHALI SANCTUARY
  - 'DOWN' ISLANDS
  - 'UP' ISLANDS
  - RIVERS
  - SEA
  - ★ KOLKATA
- } THE SUNDBANS

**THE SUNDBANS**

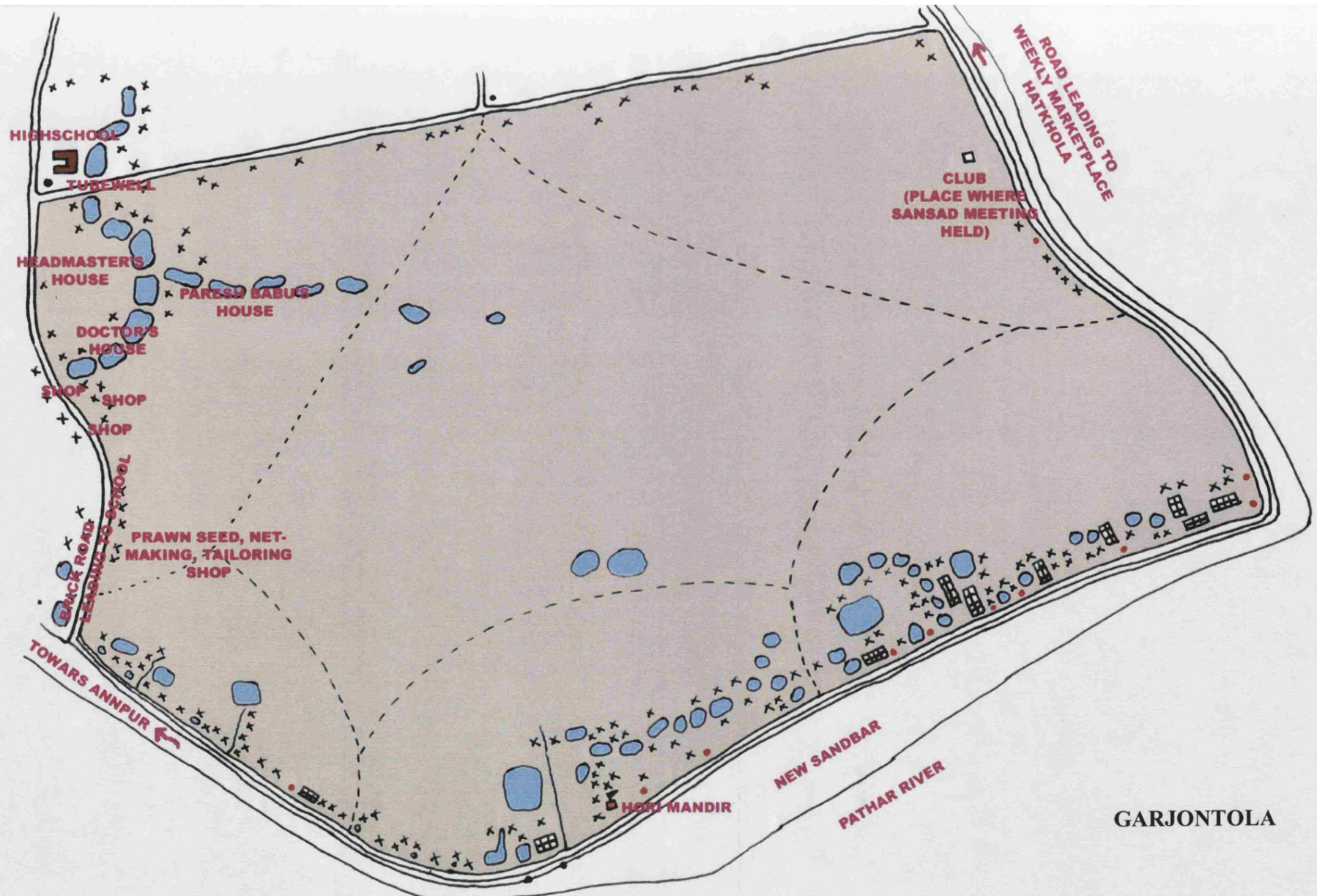


**GEO-POLITICAL MAP OF THE SUNDBANS**  
(Source: Nelles Maps - Northeastern India Bangladesh 2001)

SATJELIA AND ITS SURROUNDINGS



Map showing the islands of Basanti in the north-west, Mollakhali and Kumirmari in the north-east, Gosaba, Rangabelia, Satjelia in the centre, Sajnekhali Sanctuary to their south, and Marichjhapi in the east.



219 The Garjontola rectangle with the divisions between the five 'parts'. The red dots are Bonbibi shrines; the blue circles ponds; the partitioned rectangles prawn seed fisheries

## BHATBHATI AND BOATS



Bhatbhati picking up passengers for Gosaba



Huts and boats separated by bund. During high tide, river water reaches dangerously near the top of the bund.



## BONBIBI, KALI, GANGA, & OTHER DEITIES



Dokkhin Rai and the Ghazi mounds on the outskirts of Kolkata



Saraswati puja organised at school teachers' house; note bounded courtyard with garden in the background



Ma Ganga



Dokkhin Rai being chased away by Shan Jongoli, Bonbibi rescuing Dukhe



Filling in the last touches on an image of Kali



Bonbibi shelter in the forest



Shah Jongoli chasing away the half-tiger half-human Dokkhin Rai; Bonbibi and Shah Jongoli on left, Bonbibi and Dukhe in the centre, the three mounds in front symbolising the Ghazi's tomb



Worshipping Bonbibi along the village path

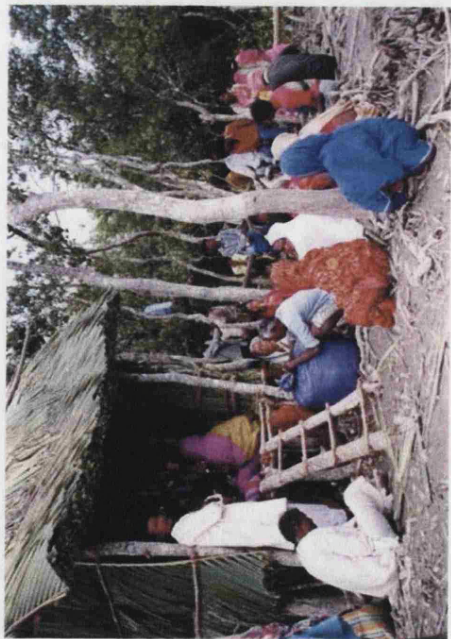
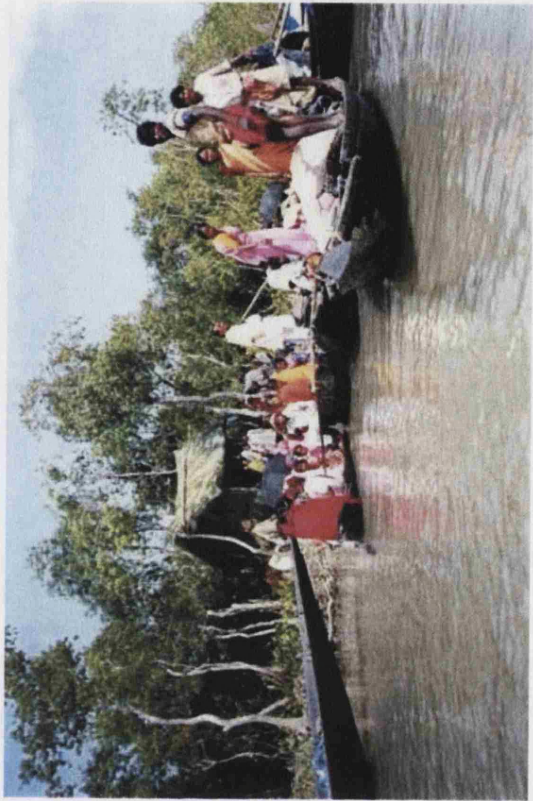
## BONBIBI



Images of Bonbibi and Shah Jongoli.  
The Ghazi's mounds and Ghazi on the right.

## EXCURSIONS TO THE FOREST FOR BONBIBI'S WORSHIP

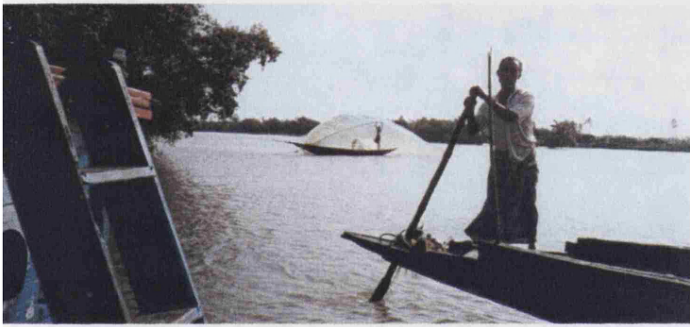




## PRAWN COLLECTION



Women collecting prawn seed at the confluence of the Pathar and Bidya rivers

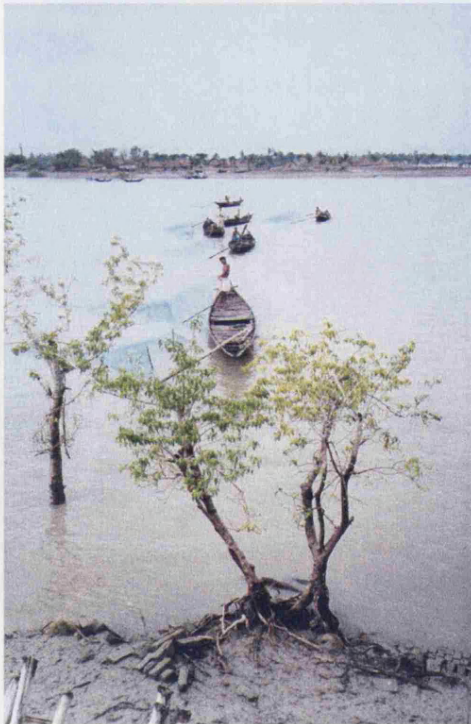


Counting the prawn seeds along the bund

Size of fishing nets deployed from boats seen in the background



Temporary, local-level prawn seed fisheries



Men collecting prawn seed



On one's way to the confluence of the Raimangal river through the forest

## WORKING IN THE FOREST



The forest rivers when the tide is low; roots (stilt on left and pneumatophoric on right)



Waiting by in annoyance while the bhadralok help themselves to the choicest crabs



Mihir crab-collecting with his wife Kusum; she holds a three-cornered landing net



Laying out fishing nets to dry on one of the forest islands' banks



Back from the forest after wood collection

## THE TIGER IN ITS MANY FORMS



Enacting Bonbibi's story; Dukhe at Bonbibi's feet, Shah Jongoli in the background content after having chased away Dokkhin Rai



The Ghazi pleading with Bonbibi to accept Dokkhin Rai as her son (here shown as a zamindar or king, his head hanging low in repentance)



Tipoo's Tiger, c. 1795  
(Mechanical organ of wooden tiger killing a British soldier  
commissioned by Tipu Sultan of Mysore, India)  
Photo © Victoria and Albert Museum

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