

BOOK REVIEW

Indranil Acharya and Sayantan Dasgupta, *Writings from the Sundarbans* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2023), xxvi + 203 pp.

Nestled at the meeting point of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers in the Bay of Bengal, the Sundarbans are renowned for their evergreen mangrove forests and complex network of tidal waterways. While this deltaic region is dominantly known for its flourishing wildlife, rich biodiversity and versatile ecosystem, the prevalent sociocultural and popular discourses and tourism-centred narratives often overlook the precarious daily realities of the social and cultural fabric for the people who inhabit these islands. The governing discourses on the Sundarbans often neglect to mention that the Sundarbans are not just a pristine wilderness but also an inhabited region, home to diverse communities and cultures. The lives of various communities, whether they are honey-collectors, forest workers, fishermen or landowners, are intrinsically interwoven with the region's ecological cartography. Given the resounding and disconcerting silence enveloping the existence, lives, cultures and beliefs of the people residing in this region, this edited volume seeks to rectify this oversight by focusing on the often forgotten and suppressed voices of the local inhabitants.

The volume comprises 24 short stories, originally written in Bangla and translated into English, delineating the region's rich social, cultural and ecological history. Central to the stories is the theme of how various ecological forces are intricately enmeshed with the sociopolitical structures of quotidian lives in this region. As a series of vignettes, these narratives provide glimpses into the precarity of everyday life in the Sundarbans. In view of limited opportunities to break free from such challenging circumstances, the stories illuminate the profound impacts of poverty and destitution on those inhabiting this expansive delta.

'The Father and the Mother' (pp. 34–44) offers a compelling narrative depicting the interdependence and symbiotic relations binding local inhabitants to their environment. The allure of honey, fish, medicinal herbs and other resources provided by the sacred forests constitute an indispensable part of their livelihoods. The physiognomic depiction of local rivers, like the Raimangal and the Matla, often occupy a central presence in the texts, almost assuming the role of characters. This story also highlights the tension between traditional means of navigating the risks and threats of the forest on an everyday basis and government-driven development plans (p. 36).

These plans, manifested in the proposed construction of a ring dam, not only jeopardise the fertile lands, the primary source of sustenance for the poor, but also the entire local ecological framework.

The uneasy relationship between ecological violence and other systemic forces of oppression is explored in stories like ‘Neader’ (pp. 1–7), which depicts the precarious existence of riverine villagers when sudden unexpected bursts of torrential rain and flash floods can wreak havoc, rendering people homeless within seconds. The story emphasises that such hapless individuals are not vagabonds or gypsies, but homely householders forced to live the lives of wanderers, as the entropic forces of nature render them landless and destitute. The story presents a narrative of forced displacement and also highlights how lack of government aid specifically responsive to the needs of flood-affected victims exacerbates their plight. Focused similarly on the harrowing experiences resulting from cyclonic storms, ‘The Immersion March’ (pp. 164–70) shows how this destruction of lives and property also strips individuals of their identity and citizenship, as their farmlands, essential belongings and documentary proofs get submerged under the assault of salt water. ‘The Chronicle of Hariya Dom’ (pp. 92–9) and ‘Silt’ (pp. 127–35) further depict how the hostile geo-climatic system and biophysical environment render the local people helpless and hopeless in the face of adversities.

Several stories draw attention to the perilous livelihoods of the impoverished people in this deltaic region who share the space with wild animals. ‘The Second Death’ (pp. 45–53) is a gripping tale about the protagonist’s encounter with a tiger. This gives insight into the peril of poor islanders who routinely venture into the forest in pursuit of sustenance, risking their lives to procure high-quality timber and other forest products. Similarly, the ‘Ghost Tiger’ (pp. 100–8), ‘The Will to Live’ (pp. 151–8) and ‘The Maneater, or Merely an Account of My Travel’ (pp. 136–50) reveal the complexities of tiger protection legislation and rules for those who are faced with the life-threatening risks posed by man-eating tigers. ‘The Shrimp-Catchers of the Mangrove Forest’ (pp. 54–60) explores the drudgery of shrimp-catchers in Gayenpara as they navigate waist-deep waters, hauling their nets through salty muck in search of the shrimplets that constitute their primary means of sustenance, while facing saltwater sharks. These narratives seamlessly integrate the personal with the political, foregrounding how the ecological tapestry of the region shapes narratives of the self, community dynamics and complex forms of individual agency.

Some stories illuminate how the integration of sociopolitical structural violence and systemic oppression with everyday ecological hardships aggravates the already vulnerable and marginalised conditions of the locals. Stories like ‘Bhushon and his Family’ (pp. 109–19) and ‘Tulsi’s Chronicle’ (pp. 120–6) depict the slow violence and forces of aggression inflicted on individuals as they address questions of class, caste, gender inequality and social injustice. The narratives also raise larger questions about political structures of capitalism and how governmental, industrial and other neo-colonial forces assert their hegemony and authority over local natural resources.

This often results in displacement, migration and recurring uprooting of local inhabitants, adding to a deeply disorienting sense of loss, feelings of rage and despair (pp. 118–9).

While most narratives are painted with hues of ecological and structural violence, the collection also includes glimpses of hope and optimism, unique bonds and strong interpersonal relationships. Stories like ‘Dokhno’ (pp. 15–20), ‘The Museum’ (pp. 21–7), ‘Shaplas’ (pp. 28–33) and ‘Sueliman Fakir’ (pp. 81–6) depict how people come together in times of crisis, supporting each other and forging bonds of solidarity. Narratives like ‘Kshantaoburi’s Family’ (pp. 67–74) and ‘Pathshala’ (pp. 75–80) are particularly poignant and evocative, as they urge readers to confront and take action against the various forces of oppression haunting the lives of these marginalised people.

Overall, this anthology constitutes an important study in the ecological anthropology and cultural ecology of the vast deltaic region of the Sundarbans. While addressing the diverse range of social justice issues affecting the local people, some stories offer pertinent insights into the rich folkloric traditions of the Sundarbans. They depict myths, songs and cultural beliefs as local support mechanisms, connected to goddesses like Bonbibi and Dakshin Rai as well as various folklore characters, all intricately intertwined with the deltaic region’s everyday life. Centring on the trials and tribulations of those living in remote regions of South Asia, *Writings from the Sundarbans* compels its readers to acknowledge the privileges of their own sheltered urban lives. Researchers and scholars interested in reading these narratives in the original Bangla will find relevant details at the end of every story.

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