

Tales of Tragedy and Terror from the Indian Sundarbans

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Mangroves and mud-filled creeks, exotic Bengal tigers, sinking riverbanks, and residents that depend on the forest for their livelihood, like *moulis* (honey collectors), crab collectors, and fisherfolk. These are some images we can visualise while thinking about the Sundarbans. Situated in the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna delta region, the Sundarbans expand to around 9,600 square km covering parts of Bangladesh and India. The Indian part of Sundarbans is located on the southern side of West Bengal and preserves the country's highest mangrove coverage. It represents an area with a rich biodiversity, ecological fragility, and cultural distinctiveness. Around 70% of mangrove species worldwide can be found here. It is also home to endangered species, such as the riverine crocodiles, Bengal tigers, and Gangetic dolphins, as well as endemic species such as the river terrapin. The precarious enchantment of the Sundarbans also lies in its intricate landscape which is characterised by hundreds of islands, rivers, rivulets, dense mangroves, erosion and deposition. To describe the fierce beauty of the Sundarbans, Amitav Ghosh and Salman Toor (2021) writes in the epigraph to his book *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban*

Thousands of islands rise from the rivers' rich silts,
crowned with forests of mangrove, rising on stilts.
This is the Sundarban, where laden waters give birth;
to a vast jungle that joins Ocean and Earth.

Similarly, the population inhabiting this region represents social diversity. As much as social stratification divides the population, so does the geography. There is a clear distinction between people residing in the urban north and those living in the islands of the south (Jalais 2014). This segregation is similar

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to the division between the developed and the developing countries. The history of human settlements in this archipelago can be traced back from the 13th century, to the British era of forest clearance, to being a shelter for refugees after the partition of India. Thus, the stories emerging from the region echo the people and their ecology, as well as their interlinked relationship.

Whose Stories Are These?

Writings from the Sundarbans is an amalgamation of several life stories written from a subaltern perspective. It reminds us of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, where readers are drawn towards the visuals of the natural landscape as well as the sociopolitical issues of the Sundarbans. Similarly, Acharya and Sengupta have assembled stories from the grassroots, touching upon issues of social justice, class and caste struggle, local politics, gender bias, social stigma, poverty, and migration. The editors have categorised this collection as an example of ecological anthropology. The stories narrate the lifestyle and belief systems of the people of the Sundarbans and how they built their relationship with nature. To describe women's life struggle in the Sundarbans, Biswajit Halder writes in the story "The Will to Live,"

These are women who by having to migrate from the bend of one river to another, end up as wives even before their adolescence is over. Their lives hinge on fishing nets which they must throw and pull daily. No one knows when their hands become stronger than these nets—even more so, their minds. (p 151)

It is also a collection of stories built around rivers such as Matla, Raimangal, Bidyadhari or Bidya-nadi, and forests. A few stories are based on the bank of the

Matla river which is considered to be furious and causes multiple casualties each year. Analogies have been used in places to compare the features of women with rivers, the forests with goddesses, and the ghosts of human beings with tigers. Mysticism and romanticism are reflected throughout all stories. To explain the abundance of natural resources in the Sundarbans, the story, "The Museum," describes this abundance as:

Look yonder, the things are aplenty. Though I do not possess cows for tilling the land, I still treasure the plough, yoke, ladder, everything! Threadbare drawing-net, khebla, phoot, ghoni—all are here, they come handy in the hour of need. While the ponds overflow during monsoon, and when the trees in the orchard are laden with fruits, I surround them on all sides by these curtains. (p 26)

The Human–Nature Relationship and the Dependency on the Forest

Stories from the Sundarbans revolve around people who are directly or indirectly dependent upon the forest. People belonging to certain occupations such as *moulis*, crab collectors, shrimp catchers or prawn seed collectors, and fisherfolk directly rely on the forest and its resources. Most of the fisherfolk belong to Scheduled Castes such as Keora, Bagdi, Muchi, Dom, and Pod and honey collectors to Scheduled Tribes, which reflect their intersectional and multi-layered vulnerability. The stories speak on behalf of these marginalised communities who are in a constant tussle with nature as well as the existing socio-political structure. In this sense, sometimes the stories portray the human–wildlife conflict while in others the political conflict takes centre stage. At the same time, those on the other end of the wealth distribution such as the *jotedars* or the landowners and moneylenders represent the antagonists in most of these stories. The evident class divisions and the politics of landownership are reflected in these stories. According to the author, Bikas Kanti Middya, one can find three economic categories of people in the Sundarbans; the local rich, the local poor, and those who had amassed riches in towns. The third category represents the migrant population, that moved to Kolkata, Bengaluru, and Andamans in

search of opportunities. Some of these migrants return to their roots only to realise that they have lost their attachment and attraction to this mesmerising space (p 144). Migration has been a continuous phenomenon in the Sundarbans, as it was one of those places for resettlement during both the British period and after the partition of India. These are the stories of people who leave their homes and migrate and the stories of those who stay back, of the wives and children of migrant workers and of the tiger widows, of people who would not leave the Sundarbans even after facing all manner of hardship and challenges. One of the stories narrates the history of a family through multiple generations, their constant search for roots and their struggle against poverty. Another narrates the story of a lonely couple who choose a life of solitude after losing their only child to a snake bite, living in isolation from civilisation, but in harmony with the forest.

While talking about the relationship of the denizens of the Sundarbans with nature, one must mention Bonbibi, the goddess of the forest, and the myths surrounding her. According to the folktales of the Sundarbans, Bonbibi is the protector of the forest and is revered by believers of different religions. The stories in this collection reflect the intricate link of the belief systems of the Sundarbans' denizens with their concept of environmental justice. Bonbibi is relevant for the people who "do the forest," that is the indigenous populations which depend on the forest for their livelihood. The honey collectors, fisherfolk, and crab collectors chant verses from the *Bonbibir Pala*,¹ to seek Bonbibi's blessings, each time that they must enter the forest. These stories contain the cultural practices, norms, rules, stigma, sanctions, and their impact on societal views. The tragic stories of tiger widows, women who lost their husbands to tigers, are also prevalent. The stories disclose the narratives of continuous deprivation, human-wildlife conflicts, and migration. The stories also bring in other biotic species such as the estuarine crocodile and the Bengal tiger along with their ecological significance and their impact on humans.

Although a major part of the Sundarbans is situated in Bangladesh, the

stories from the book take place in the Indian Sundarbans. The stories stretch across several decades from the oldest being published in 1982, "Kshantoburi's Family" to the latest in 2021 being "The Immersion March." Irrespective of the time frame, the battles remain the same: poverty, class struggle, and the struggle with nature. The translation is done with proficiency and local terms are retained so as to resonate the region's essence. The translation of "Ghost Tiger" is particularly one of the best translations, among all the stories from the book. The list of glossary helps the reader understand the connotation of the locally used words, like *bheri*, *doira*, and *gunin* among others. The verses of the *Bonbibir Pala* and the picturesque description of the Sundarbans take the readers directly to the land of tide and ebb. The language is used clearly and coherently which makes it easier for readers to get familiar with the region. Additionally, the book makes a decent attempt to give an account of the folk culture and traditional ecological knowledge embedded within sociocultural norms. Thus, the collection fulfils the need to preserve stories from this fragile but ecologically significant ecosystem.

Most of the stories from the book are tragic. However, these stories also contain life lessons such as finding happiness in life's simplest pleasures, the importance

of never losing hope, and the will to start again even if it requires migration. For example, in the story "Dokhno," a freshly appointed teacher from Kolkata who was unsure about the Sundarbans was amazed by the simplicity of the lives of the Sundarbans' inhabitants (pp 15–20). Some of the stories depict both natural and cultural landscapes so well that it feels like an invitation to visit the Sundarbans. The stories reflect Sundarbans' charms and realities. Irrespective of its natural and man-made challenges, there are stories of change, stories of resistance, and victory which is achieved through breaking social barriers. *Writings from the Sundarbans* can be referred to anyone with an interest in anthropology, sociology, or the ecological anthropology of the Sundarbans.

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NOTE

- ¹ *Bonbibir Pala* refers to the long narrative verses containing stories of Bonbibi, Dakshin Roy, and the Sundarbans. These are recited as a ritual before entering the forest to seek protection and blessings from Goddess Bonbibi.

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