Negotiating Human- Nonhuman Relationship: An Ecological Study of Literature on Sundarban

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, Jadavpur University, Kolkata

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Philosophy in English

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MPhil 2017- 2019

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May, 2019

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled, "**Negotiating Human- Nonhuman Relationship: An Ecological Study of Literature on Sundarban**" submitted by me towards the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy (Arts) in English** of Jadavpur University, Kolkata is based upon my own original work carried out under the supervision of **Dr. Nandini Saha**, Professor, Department of English and there is no plagiarism. This is also to certify that the work has not been submitted by me in part or in whole for the award of any other degree/diploma of the same Institution where the work is being carried out, or to any other Institution. A paper out of this dissertation has also been presented by me at "**International Conference on Livelihood Promotion, Bio-diversity Conservation and Social Security in Indian Sundarbans**" thereby fulfilling the criteria for submission, as per the M.Phil Regulation (2017) of Jadavpur University.

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On the basis of academic merit and satisfying all the criteria as declared above, the dissertation work of Ms. **Ankana Das** entitled "**Negotiating Human- Nonhuman Relationship: An Ecological Study of Literature on Sundarban**" is now ready for submission towards the partial fulfilment of the Degree of **Master of Philosophy (Arts) in English** of Jadavpur University.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Acknowledgement……..…....…..…i

2. Glossary of non- English words…….……..…iii

3. Introduction…….…..…...……1

4. Chapter I
   Exploring Human Interaction with Nature in Sundarban…….…...9

5. Chapter II
   Studying the Relationship Humans share with Animals in
   Sundarban……..…….……33

6. Chapter III
   Nature- Religion Dialectic in the Literature on
   Sundarban…….....……61

7. Conclusion…….……85

8. Bibliography……...……v

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I express my profound indebtedness and deepest reverence to my supervisor Prof. Nandini Saha, H.O.D., English, Jadavpur University, for her guidance, support, encouragement, care and immense patience which has enabled me to write this thesis. I feel blessed to have got her as my guide.

I would like to thank the Departmental Library of English, especially Bishu Da and the office staff of the Department as well. I also thank the staff of National Library at Alipore, Kolkata, the Lokosongoshkriti O Adibashi Songoshkriti Kendra Library at Lokogram and the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat Library for their support.

I am also very grateful to Dr. Amites Mukhopadhyay and Dr. Rafat Ali for their feedback during my pre- submission seminar. Dr. Mukhopadhyay's insights have helped me reshape many of the ideas of this thesis. Thank you.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to the P.I.s of the Research Project titled "Literary Ecology in 19th Century Bengal," Dr. Saswati Halder and Dr. Sutanuka Ghosh, who allowed my absence at work for many days owing to my research work for this thesis.

I thank my MPhil classmates for the brilliant team work and also Surojit Da, who have been very supportive throughout these two years, without whom I wouldn't have had the confidence to finish this work. I also thank my friends - Tushar, Aishani, Angana, Amit, Madhurima and Abhiri who stood by me despite all the strain that the writing of this work put on their lives.

Finally, I also thank my Ma, Baba and Bon for supporting me in every way, sometimes even beyond their capacity, to make this work possible. Seldom do we recognize the little

privileges we are endowed with, and I take this opportunity to thank the two of them immensely for patiently bearing with me for all these years. Thank you.

Lastly, but most importantly, I thank Lalu, Kalu, Fyasfyas, Brownie and the late Leni - cats with who I share / shared my living during the past two years. They will never be able to read or understand this the way I intend it perhaps, but their friendship has allowed me to see the world differently and has also helped me in ways unimaginable and without whom I wouldn't have been the person I am today. Thanking the non- humans also remind me to thank the abstract presences in my life. I thank my mental health for not getting worse during the last stages of the writing of this thesis. Without its support, perhaps I wouldn't be writing this acknowledgment in the year 2019.

GLOSSARY FOR NON- ENGLISH WORDS

Abad-	the human inhabited islands of Sundarban
Bada-	the forested islands of Sundarban
Bagh-	tiger
Bahon-	pet
Banabas-	exile or banishment to the forest
Batasha-	solid crude sweets
Baule-	witch doctors of the Sundarbans, known for their indigenous knowledge about the forest and animals. Every group of woodcutter or honey collectors would be accompanied by one *baule*.
Bhadralok-	prosperous, educated and members of high social class Bengalis
Boro beral-	big cat (tiger)
Boro miyan-	big brother (tiger)
Boro sheyal-	big fox(tiger)
Dingi-	small boat, ideal for small scale fishing. Dingis are also used to traverse through the shallow creeks of the SRF
Khnari-Sundarban	shallow trench like waterways which connect each island of the
Kumir-	crocodile
Macha-	a makeshift platform created on top of a tree
Mag-	Portuguese merchants. It can also refer to migrant peoples from the Arakan coasts, who frequented the Sundarban pre colonization. These people are characterized as ruthless pirates from whom the term

	‘Mager Mulluk” is derived. It refers to a state of complete anarchy and lawlessness.
Mahajan-	wealthy individuals of the village who had in possession lands or boats to lend out to the poor.
Mouley-	honey collectors
Norokhadok-	man eater.
Pachali-	traditional way of reading religious scriptures
Palaagan-	dramatic performance in the form of theatre, indluding songs and scriptural elements connected with worship of cult figures
Palimati-	soft soil consisting mainly of silt and clay. This kind of soil is not very fertile.
Poush-	mid December to mid January of the Bengali calendar
Pronaam-	prayer
Punthi-	book or ancient manuscript.
Salwar kameez-dupatta.	three piece garment for women, consisting of a trouser, a kurta and a
Saree-	one piece traditional garment for women.
Thhan-	sacred place
Zamindaar-	a landowner, especially one who leases his land to tenant farmers

INTRODUCTION

…Defined by water, the definition of land keeps shifting

The grammar of tides keeps meaning on its toes…[1]

Fiction on the Sundarban both in Bengali and English has been in abundance since long. *Punthis* or vernacular literature thrived in the Sundarban during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. These emerged from popular local beliefs where religion played a dominant role in both the narrative and content. The main theme of the *punthi* literature was to depict the struggle between humanity and nature and it catered to the tastes of the marginal sections of the population of Sundarban. *Johurnama* or the *Banabibi'r Johurnama* was the first *punthi* from the Sundarban to have been written.[2] It can be traced from the earlier oral tradition of *palagaan*, which contained stories of Bonbibi's divinity and her benevolence for the humans of Sundarbans and her authority over the animal kingdom. This genre of literature sprang up at a time when the British occupation in the Sundarbans had not yet become fully hegemonic, and expectedly, is practically unaffected by politics of the mainland. It grew in popularity throughout the Sundarbans mainly due to its religious character which has continued till present day.

[1] Manisha Sobharajani, Preface in *Forest of Tides: The Untold story of the Sundarbans* (Noida: Hachette India, 2018)

[2] Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar in her book *The Sundarbans: Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals* writes of the history of *punthi* literature that existed in the Sundarbans in the 17th and 18th centuries. She recounts the *Raimangal* by Krishna Ram Das, *Banabibi Jahurnama* by Banayuddin and another version of the same written by Munshi Muhammad as primary *punthi* texts from the Sundarbans.

Modern Bengali writers took up the cause of the Sundarban much later in time. The first Bengali novel to have been written by a native was *Alaler Gharer Dulal*, which was published in the year 1857. But it was more than half a century later, when writers noticed the Sundarbans to have the potential of basing their novels in. The first fictional work to have been based in the Sundarban is *Damaru Charit* by Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay. Mukhopadhyay writes a fantasy fiction around the protagonist Damaru, who ends up in the Sundarbans to engage in one humorous adventure after the other, though the writer's approach to describing Sundarbans was far from reality. But it is a very important text to study in terms of understanding the politics behind representation of the Sundarbans as a heavily mystic yet utterly dangerous place. After Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay, the Sundabans has provided plots to several writers like Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay, Shib Shankar Mitra, Suchitra Bhattacharya and more, who took to writing on the Sundarban, exploring various pertinent topics.[3]

Unlike in Bengali, fiction in English on the Sundarban has been scarce, with only a few writers attempting to touch on the region as possible bedrock for their stories. The first name which comes to mind, while discussing fiction writers on Sundarban in English is of course Amitav Ghosh. His novel *The Hungry Tide* successfully introduces the twenty first century readers to the mud banks of the numerous creeks and rivers of the region. This was also practically the first time when modern readers of English language came to know how life for the settlers is like in there. The rural had often been represented by Indian writers in English in the past, but this was the first time it dawned on the Sundarbans. Ghosh writes of the Sundarbans not at all regarding the settlers as the 'other,' but rather takes up a typical stance where his text brings the reader to understand the people and their culture and religion

[3] Books to be mentioned here are *Sundarbane Sat Bachhar* by Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay, *Sundarban Samagra* by Shib Shankar Mitra, *Bagh Kumir Sundarban* by Mita Singha and *Sharpa Rahashya Sundarbane* by Suchitra Bhattacharya.

from close quarters. It is also remarkable to note the way in which literature for children based on the Sundarbans was narrated. Mitali Perkins' *Tiger Boy* is situated in the Sundarbans and revolves around a boy in his teens and a new born tiger cub that he found. The book falls chiefly in the genre of Children's Fiction and in it we find an overtly simplistic account of narratives construed without giving much thought into the rationale of the depiction. Tannaz Daver's *One Night in the Sundarbans* also is one such book to be explored in this study.

In fiction, the representation of the Sundarban by these abovementioned writers differs hugely from how the colonizers had written about it in the past. Pargiter[4] for instance described the region to possess no beauty at all. He talks extensively about the lack of an aesthetic appeal about the Sundarban, which is visible in the bland and unappealing nature of the trees of the forests and the rivers being full of mud and impurities. Many would assume that the native writers during and after colonization would naturally follow suite, but it was not so in this case. All those who described the Sundarbans in their writings, talked about it in terms of the beauty of the forests, especially the 'Sundari' tree, the nomenclature of which itself attributes to the 'beauty' of the tree. This brings to mind the fact that for the colonizers, the Sundarban was yet another land from which they could extract revenue. For this purpose, they forcefully transported troops of people from the hinterlands, especially the tribal belts of the country to the Sundarban- people who can till the land and make it arable. But even if we go back in the history of human settlement in the Sundarban, we will find that the area never saw stable or permanent settlement pattern before the advent of the colonizers. It was a region

[4] F.E. Pargiter, A Revenue History of the Sundarbans (1765- 1870), Calcutta 1855, Superintendent of Government Printing. http://www.southasiaarchive.com/Content/sarf.143839/210602
Pargiter wrote of the Sundarbans as a region which "possesses no beauty… few of the forest trees display a handsome bloom… at all times of the year except during the rains… the water throughout the Sundarbans is necessarily very dirty, being full of mud and impurities brought down from up-country." Taken from Suparna Bhattacharyya's introduction to her thesis.

where people from various backgrounds came and settled for short periods of time before they moved on to other places.

Rationale of Research

The rationale behind pursuing this particular topic of research lies in the fact that there is a rich agglomeration of fiction written about the Sundarbans both by native and non native writers, which has not been adequately analysed to understand the social ecology of the place. This research is primarily confined to three very important aspects related to the ecology of the region, as is represented by modern Bengali and English writers of fiction. Exploring the human- nature relationship, along with the relationship of humans with animals, and also with that of religion and finally placing these aspects within the broader understanding of social ecology are the main features of this research.

Accounts of colonizers have often been examined by researchers from humanities to refer to routine studies of land use patterns or settlement histories of and in the Sundarbans. Many writers have even remarked on the existing modern Bengali fiction on the Sundarbans, only in passing. Such studies though are successful in amassing important works of fiction written on and about the Sundarbans into one rubric, there were unfortunately no such study found which dominantly invests in fiction on the Sundarbans as the sole approach to interpret and examine the human- nature relationship in the region. Thus the primary aim of this research will be to acknowledge the Sundarbans as a region which is a unique 'multi-faceted' land in many ways, a region where ecological forces have been an important marker in shaping the lives of people who reside there, along with shaping their cultural habits and religious beliefs.

When the Sundarbans is being referred to as a unique region and as a 'multi- faceted' land, it mainly eludes to a lot of facts. One among them is that, it is till date, the largest remaining continuous block of a mangrove eco-system in the world. It is also a treasure house of very rare and exotic flora and fauna, which has a rather uncommon (if not directly unfortunate) relationship with the human residents of the region. It is a National Ecological Park and a Tiger Reserve; a Wildlife Sanctuary and also home to thousands of people. Simply put, these are equations that symbolize the peculiarity of the character of the interactions between the indigenous human communities of the region with their immediate environment.

As mentioned, earlier the Sundarban region boasts of a distinctive interrelation between its human and non- human counterparts in a way which can be treated as a basis to delve into an understanding of social ecology. Theories of social ecology are used to refer to the study of relationships between humans and their environments on the basis of inter-dependency. It also takes us further back to the history of interaction between humans with their natural environment, i.e. the soil, the water and the forest on one hand and on the other, the economic, political, social, cultural and organizational life.

Existing state of Research

Both the Indian and Bangladesh parts of the Sundarbans have been taken up by researchers from the humanities in the past to study different aspects of life in the Sundarbans. While some works focused on religion, others studied several social factors related to the study of the region. There are extensive studies done on the tiger-widows of the Sundarban, the fishermen, folk medicine practitioners, etc., where these works have included fieldwork as an important part. But fiction on the Sundarban had not naturally enticed researches much. There are exceptional works done by Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, Annu Jalais, and others who

conducted research on the socio cultural aspects of the Sundarbans touching on the fictions as a source of its existing knowledge. Sutapa Chatterjee for instance researched[5] on modern Bengali fiction on the Sundarban. She dedicates an entire chapter on her findings of the *punthi* literature. Annu Jalais, though had not attempted to consider fiction as a source of studying the region, has many essays, where she talks of several social and cultural aspects of the Sundarbans. Her book titled *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* is for this research, more like a handbook of facts, which helps in understanding minor and major factors about the place.

These works to some extent revive interest in taking up research work pertaining to the Sundarbans. Most works are in some way or the other based on the flora and fauna of the region, or to the most, settlement history, but the region never has been brought under a critical lens of ecocriticism or the like. In other words, these works do not attempt to demonstrate how fiction written on the Sundarbans is equally critically important for scholars from the humanities to take up and analyze several literary and environmental aspects, thereby connecting the literary to the environment.

Present Day Relevance and Limitations

Present day discussions on environment are among the hotly debated topics. Along with this, social ecology and global warming are also dominating. And considering the Sundarban to be a hotbed of such debates, owing to its location in the southernmost tip of Bengal, overlooking the tumultuous Bay of Bengal, it is even more important to engage in discussions about the

[5] Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar did her PhD in the sociological, anthropological and economic geography of the Sundarbans. Her PhD thesis is currently available in the Shodhganga depository under the reference number 155356. She also published a book based on the findings from her research under the title *The Sundarbans: Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals.*

Sundarbans in major discourses such as environmentalism. It is also a region which saw the first scientific forest management plan to be implemented under colonial rule. Sir Daniel Hamilton's formation of the very first of its kind cooperatives in the islands of Sundarbans is also a remarkable feature. The whole delta is often said to act like a shock absorber for deadly storms which would have otherwise hit the mainland, i.e., Kolkata. Considering these, the area should become one hot topic for fiction and prose writers, to bring more consciousness into the people about the effects of deforestation and other pertaining issues. But as mentioned earlier, very few writers actually take up the Sundarbans as the backdrop for their works, let alone researchers working on the existing fiction. So this work is meant to invest in the resources of environmental humanities (more importantly humanities) in turning our attention to the Sundarbans to take up the fiction written on it as primary study material.

Methodology and Research Questions

The method of research is strictly limited to qualitative and hence based on printed and digital primary sources such as published works of fiction, and secondary materials such as district handbooks, revenue reports, etc. Archival data, articles from journals also were used. I have studied for primary texts, fictions written with Sundarban as a backdrop to analyse few research questions, such as (1) what kinds of relations between humans and non- humans do these texts envision? What are the ways in which the authors represent this human vs. non-human conflict? (2) How are myths and folklore fictionalized? The research will also look into aspects how religion is appropriated in fiction and is used as a base for understanding a unique nature- religion dialectic.

Outline of Chapters

The work is divided into three relevant chapters. It begins with an introductory chapter on the geographical location of the Sundarban, and on the existing state of fiction written on it both by native and non- native writers. This introductory chapter is followed by the 1st chapter, titled "Exploring Human Interaction with Nature in the Sundarban" is based on the relationship of humans with their immediate environment, as is represented in the prose writings on the Sundarbans. Here I make use of ecocritical theories such as the theory on "deep ecology" to understand the complex relationship of man and nature. The second chapter titled "Studying the Relationship Humans share with Animals in Sundarbans" is based purely on human – animal interactions. Drawing inferences from both Bengali and English prose, this chapter deals with the relationship of humans with the animals of the region. The conflict and intimacies between humans and tigers remains the focus point in this chapter. Both the first and the second chapters also offer detailed and ecocritical reading of all the fictions in question. The third chapter titled "Nature- Religion Dialectic in the Literature on the Sundarban" is based on the religion of the region as is expressed in the prose writings on the Sundarbans, and the influence it has on the humans, and how much the environment has shaped the religion. In short, it plays out the nature- religion dialectic and studies how the fiction represents the religion to be influencing the ecological lives of the human population in the area. All the texts in question remarks at the unique Hindu Muslim syncretiscism as an important cursor of understanding humans' relationship with nature, and thus, this chapter will offer a detailed analysis of the same. The work ends with a conclusion, discussing the need for environmental humanities in present day and how fiction plays an important role in spreading awareness among people.

CHAPTER I

Exploring Human Interaction with Nature in the Sundarban

We do not see nature with our eyes

But with our understanding and our hearts…[6]

The cave paintings made by early humans or even paintings done on the walls of their houses mainly consists of man's stories of survival amidst nature in myriad ways. In modern times as well, literature has been an important medium with the help of which humans explored the relationship with their immediate environment. The fact that modern lifestyle has been weaning humans away from nature and that this distance thus created affects the psyche and overall well being of humans has been a very important concern for humanity in general. Along with this, the anxiety over depletion of natural resources has been another burning concern in the Anthropocene.[7] Post the deadly world wars, when capitalism is at its peak and has really threatened the earth's natural resources, many authors wrote of the changing times, portraying the evils of human civilization. The 1960s can be termed as the decade of environmentalist movements in literature, however, these writings were scattered and the movement never materialized. It is only since early 1990s, when "ecocriticism" as a

[6] William Hazlitt, *Sketches and Essays* (London: John Templeman, 1839), pp. 249

[7] The Anthropocene is defined as the geological epoch in which we are living currently. The Anthropocene is characterized by man's dominance over all of nature, and it also proposes that man is the reason behind global warming.

discipline started to grow. The movement can be best described in the words of Buell, et al,[8] who chose to define it as:

> …an eclectic and loosely coordinated movement whose contributions thus far has been most visible within its home discipline of literature but whose interests and alliances extend across various art forms and media.[9]

Ecocriticism defines works of literature through a critical ecological angle, where it questions the representation of nature and also the relationship that humans share with the environment. While sharing roots with humanities largely, ecocriticism never stood out as a standalone discipline. According to Buell, "ecocriticism converges with its sister disciplines in the humanities such as Environmental Anthropology, Environmental History, and Environmental Philosophy."[10] Together with these ways of thinking, ecocriticism emerges as a discipline which transgresses those aspects of interpreting nature which involves relying on solely a science centric or technological reasoning into a more holistic one. It is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. Scholars engage in questions regarding anthropocentrism and the mainstream assumption that the natural world be seen primarily as a resource for humans.[11] Ecocriticism as an academic discipline began in earnest in the 1990s, although its roots go back to the late 1970s. Owing to the newness of the

[8] Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise and Karen Thornber, "Literature and Environment" in *The annual Review of Environment and Resources*, (2011) accessed on March 29, 2019, http://environment.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Buell_Heise_Thornber_ARER_2011_Lit_and_Envt.pdf

[9] ibid

[10] Ibid

[11] "Deep Ecology," in *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, (2008), accessed on March 29, 2019, http://www.uky.edu/OtherOrgs/AppalFor/Readings/240%20-%20Reading%20-%20Deep%20Ecology.pdf

subject, it gives scholars an opportunity to work on it and produce original works, often defining it in their own terms. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the pioneers in the field, has defined ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," and Laurence Buell says that this study must be "conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis."[12]

Most of the theoretical aspects of this paper are drawn from the influence of my study of the concept of 'deep ecology.' This reading has helped me understand the complex relationship of man and nature, more when the two are often pitted against each other. The concept of Deep Ecology was introduced by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, when in 1972,[13] he raised the issue of the ethics of ecological movements and the worth of other beings in the article- "The Shallow and the Deep, Long- Range Ecology Movement: A Summary." According to Naess, there are two streams of environmentalism: one, which he termed as the "Long- Range" or "Deep Ecology Movement" which is characterised by some important questions on environmentalism, such as: 1. what are the values one associates with environmental movements? and 2. Why are they important, or what is the purpose of such movement? Naess' second stream of environmentalism is what he calls "Short- Term" or "Shallow Ecology Movement-" the kind of environmentalism, which according to him stops before the ultimate level of fundamental change (which only relies on temporary and short term solutions for environmental problems). He also said that this kind of 'shallow' environmentalism engages in the promotion of technological fixes (such as recycling, or

[12] Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture and Environment in the US and Beyond*, (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 20

[13] Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long- Range Ecology Movement. A Summary," accessed on May 1st, 2019, https://iseethics.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/naess-arne-the-shallow-and-the-deep-long-range-ecology-movement.pdf

encouraging organic agriculture, etc.)[14] Implementations of environmental policies, recognition of the values of all living beings are the true characteristics of deep ecology. In this theory, one has to value humans and human occupation in a particular environment as much as they value nature.

At the core of the deep ecology principle is the strong claim, that humanity has the right to survive and flourish just as the environment does. The question is not regarding humans or nature, but rather humans with nature. These two overlap each other in layers of understanding both humanity and environmentalism. One cannot justify the flourishing of one over the other and a holistic approach is the only way one can reach to a conclusion about the relationship of human and nature on earth rather than a narrow view of ecology as a branch of biological science.[15] The ecosystem cannot be separated in any ways, and the only way of studying it is to study the whole of it, that is, while studying one aspect of it, miscellaneous factors have to be considered, because they all are inter related. Scholars collectively agree to an eight point platform of the "Deep Ecology Movement" which is congruent with the social and political aims of the movement. The first point of the deep ecology movement specifies that man and environment are tied in an intrinsic bond. Naess describes this interdependence through a simple equation, such as …"an intrinsic relation between two things [say for example,] A and B is such that the relation belongs to the definitions or basic constitutions of A and B, so that without the relations, A and B are no longer the same things."[16] He says that when this dependence is shaken, it results in the total disruption of both man and environment. In Naess' words, "the total field model dissolves not

[14] Alan Drengson, "Some Thought on the Deep Ecology Movement," in *Foundation for Deep Ecology*, accessed on April 28th, 2019, http://www.deepecology.org/deepecology.htm.

[15] "Deep Ecology" in *Environment and Ecology*, accessed on April 29th, 2019, http://environment-ecology.com/deep-ecology/63-deep-ecology.html

[16] "The Shallow and the Deep," in *Alamut*, accessed on April 29th, 2019, https://www.alamut.com/subj/ideologies/pessimism/Naess_deepEcology.html

only the man in environment concept, but every compact thing- in- milieu concept, except when talking at a superficial or preliminary level of communication."[17]

In the majority of fictions on Sundarbans, the writers seem to collectively express one principle- that human domination over nature is not a heroic deed, but rather seems to reverberate the thought that "man does not stand at the pinnacle of nature, but is a bridge…"[18] Is it possible to live in harmony with nature? What does it mean to live in harmony with nature, and does that mean nature can no longer be considered natural? These are some of the questions that arise while reading fiction on the Sundarban. I wish to address in this chapter on the relationship of Humans with their immediate environment as is represented in the select fiction on Sundarban, to show how studying nature in these fictions is of the utmost importance to environmental studies, especially that of deep ecology. An implicit assumption is that in the Sundarban, humans live solely in conflict with the natural elements which are manifested through environmental disasters like cyclones and other hazards. Thus to study the nature of the Sundarbans, one would have to analyse the system of meanings embodied through human activities in the region. Not one aspect can be studied as separate, detaching it from the other. Human lives or any one aspect of humans can never be looked as a complete and isolated subject. Neither can the flora or fauna be studied free from the influence of human activities on and around them. This chapter also offers eco- critical reading of important fiction on the Sundarban, which helps to establish an understanding of the ways in which nature is intrinsically related to the lives of humans and also vice versa.

[17] Ibid

[18] Joseph P. Vincenzo, "Nietzsche's Animal Menagerie: Lessons in Deep Ecology," in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 39, no. 4 (2006), pp. 61-67, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030437

The Sundarbans

The Sundarbans is the largest mangrove wetland in the world,[19] and it is also the only place on earth where tigers regularly maul humans for food. At present the tiger population is under threat, and so are the lives of the humans; partly due to natural hazard. The declining status of ecology is a growing concern among the people whose lives are based on the Sundarbans and also among environmentalists because this crisis does not just limit to affecting only the Sundarbans, but is a threat to the nerve centre of West Bengal- the city of Kolkata as well. The development agenda over the years have been characterised by mainly encouraging tourism on one hand and sustainable development on the other. It should be mentioned here that, whatever human settlement we have now at the Sundarban is due to colonization. Owing to the colonizers' records, we know that the uncultivable land of the Sundarban only began to be reclaimed during the late 18th century and it continued majorly till late 19th century, and early 20th century.[20]

Historically, the ecosystem of the Sundarbans has been shaped by man's involvement with the natural environment in a sustainable way of life. But it is imperative to mention here that the Sundarban never saw any permanent settlement pattern before the advent of the colonizers in the mid 18th century. Prior to this, several efforts has been taken to reclaim the forests and set up human habitation, but those were largely individual and left little impression on the topography. Before colonization, the areas experienced human settlement in temporary forms when people various travelling groups, especially the *Mags* from the Arakan coasts. Hamilton recounts in his writings about the Mag pirates, who came to the

[19] MR Rahman, M Asaduzzaman, "Ecology of Sundarban, Bangladesh," in *Journal of Science Foundation* 8, (2013), pp. 35-37, https://www.banglajol.info/index.php/JSF/article/view/14618

[20] Government documents, such as Pargiter's *Revenue History of Sundarbans 1765- 1870*, Ascoli's *Revenue History of Sundarbans 1870- 1920*, Hunter's *Statistical Account of Bengal* can be referred to.

Sundarbans, cleared forested tracts and started agriculture.[21] It was in common knowledge that, "… settlements had occasionally appeared and had again disappeared"[22] before the British started reclaiming lands for the purpose of extracting revenue from it. It was only with colonization, that the lands of the Sundarban went under the control of the British which introduced a number of laws and regulations, all to the convenience of the colonizers.

The arrival of the European colonizers led to rapid changes in the Sundarbans. The English got Zamindari Rights over the 24 Parganas, somewhere around 1765 when they had acquired full proprietary rights over the region. Henckell was the Judge and Magistrate of Jessore at that time, who initiated reclamation work in the Sundarban. And it is also when the portal to tribal migration opened. Tribes like the Oraons, Mundas and Santhals from the Chota Nagpur were brought in to reclaim the forested land and convert them into fertile rice fields. Since Henckell worked towards the betterment of these peasants, and the people remain still indebted to Henckell, after whom they named the area- Henckellganj, which later came to be colloquially known as Hingalganj.[23] The mangrove forests of the Sundarban came under commercial purposes for the first time at the peak of colonial exploitation, and here also, huge numbers of labourers were required to cut down trees to make way for development. In H.H. Risley's book, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, it is mentioned that the Oraons and the Santhals, from the Chota Nagpur Plateau were 'forcefully' uprooted from their homeland and were brought to the forest region of Sundarban in South Bengal to clear

[21] Sutapa Chattopadhyay, "Colonial Agrarian Policy and Socio Cultural Change in the Sundarbans: Late Eighteenth to early Nineteenth Century," at Shodhganga Thesis Repository (1998) Chapter 2, pp. 26 http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/155356

[22] J. A. Westland, *A Report on the Districy of Jessore: Its Antiquities, its History and its Commerce* (Calcutta: 1871) in the thesis of Sutapa Chattopadhyay, "Colonial Agrarian Policy and Socio Cultural Change in the Sundarbans: Late Eighteenth to early Nineteenth Century," at *Shodhganga Thesis Repository* (1998) Chapter 2, pp. 27 http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/155356

[23] "24 Pargana," *Daricha*, last modified 19 April 2018, http://www.daricha.org/districts.aspx?ID=29&Name=24%20Parganas

the forests and build up embankments.[24] Anuradha Banerjee in her book *Environment, Population and Human Settlements of Sundarban Delta* reflects on the Scheduled Tribe population of Sundarban, which mainly comprised of the Santhals, Oraon, the Munda, Bhumij and others, who lived along with different caste groups like the Brahmin, Kayastha, Baidya, etc.[25] In the South 24 Parganas, the Oraon population itself forms the second largest tribe of the State, who constitute about 11.5% of the total tribal population.[26] They also had played very active role in the agriculture of the region. In the book, *The Oraons of Sundarban*, the writers believe that a considerable population of the Mundas and Oraon were brought by local Zamindars from their homelands during the British period, who had employed them in agricultural and other similar works.(Das and Raha 1965) Since agriculture was the primary occupation of these tribes even in their native lands, they did not find it very difficult to acclimatize in the new environment. Thus it was an added benefit for them to acclimatize with the new lands they ended up in. Added to this, these people were given land for settlement and cultivation by the *zamindars* of the areas. But the contracts with which they were brought in still remains a mystery, since nothing of that sort was available in government records or is archived anywhere, which can elaborate on the nature of contract that the tribals might have agreed upon. Whether it was by force, as mentioned earlier or compulsion or whether they themselves willed to migrate is something yet to be traced. Many academics have commented on 'colonial agents' being at work here, who were responsible

[24] H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Caste of Bengal.* Vol.I. 1891.Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, accessed October 19, 2018, https://ia801903.us.archive.org/3/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.42709/2015.42709.Tribes-And-Castes-Of-Bengal--Vol-1.pdf.

[25] Anuradha Banerjee, *Environment, Population and Human Settlements of Sundarban Delta* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1998)

[26] Ajit Kumar Sil, "Process of Socio Economic Changes of the Oraons of West Bengal," *Shodhganga*, accessed October 20, 2018, https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/168388/6/06_chapter%201.pdf.

for bringing labourers from tribal belts to plantation areas.[27] Reclamation of forested lands were made necessary and it was always framed in such a way which facilitated the needs of the government. Reclamation Rules of 1897 also mentioned penalty for non- clearance of lands. The people toiled very hard to sustain themselves amidst the dangerous environment, and modern day authors pen down the struggle of these people in their writings. As can be understood from this, the Sundarban was particularly devoid of the Bengali *bhadralok* culture. *Damaru Charit*,[28] by Trilokyanath Mukhopadhyay narrates the adventures of Damaru in the Sundarban, especially his struggle at coping with the life and culture of the place. But he did not have that difficulty in being part of it, since he was an outcaste of the *bhadralok* culture himself.

The Sundarban in Modern Fiction

While describing the Sundarbans in their own words, authors and scholars mainly describe it in terms of its natural flora and fauna. Sutapa Chatterjee writes that the Bengali literary imagination drew most of its inspiration from the exotic flora and fauna of the Sundarbans (Chatterjee Sarkar 6). Modern prose on the Sundarbans differs slightly from the earlier *punthi* writing tradition. In the *punthis*, the activities of Gods and Goddesses were given more priority though it was based on ecological footing. Here, "…nature was part and parcel of the undifferentiated mythical and existential world." (Chatterjee Sarkar 6) But in modern fiction, more priority is given in narrating the lives of the people who regularly battle with natural

[27] Ajit Kumar Sil, "Process of Socio Economic Changes of the Oraons of West Bengal." *Shodhganga*, accessed October 15, 2018, shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/168388/6/06_chapter%201.pdf.

[28] Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay, *Damaru Charit* (Kolkata: New Age Publishers, 2008)

elements. Chatterjee writes about the Bengali modern prose which was written on the Sundarbans:

> The new prose literature was in the nature of a direct social narrative of the middle class. The new prose literature was in the nature of a direct social narrative of the life of the region. Here, stories had a definite structure, form and social message. Most of the stories depicted the life of the settlers in the Sundarbans while continuing to draw on the old and intimate relationship between man and nature. Nature even shaped the life cycle of the people and their religious practices, human bondages and finally it explained the social dependence on the jungle for livelihood. Yet at the end, there was a sad tone in these stories lamenting the steady disappearance of the jungle that sustained human life in the region. (Chatterjee Sarkar 163).

For some, the Sundarban holds a distinctive aura. The merging of the land and water, along with the lush greenery of the forests provide a scenic escape in the most romantic manner. Some write about it as a mystic land, while some choose to describe it as a dark land. Manisha Sobharajani in her memoir titled *Forest of Tides*,[29] describes the Sundarbans as:

> Sundarbans: where the river rushes to meet land for six hours a day, until, like a jealous lover, the sea claims it for the next six. Known as much for the rise and fall of tides as for its mangrove forests, it is a land where the eager moon sometimes appears at 4 p.m., and where, on a clear night, the seven sisters of the Pleiades seem surprisingly within reach. Where, as the sun

[29] Manisha Sobharajani, Preface in *Forest of Tides: An Untold Story of the Sunderbans* (Noida: Hachette India, 2018)

> rises and sets, it presents vivid oranges, fiery reds, passionate purples and vibrant pinks across the sky and water… [30]

Sobharajani's description of the Sundarban is unique, because she chose to associate the 'beauty' of the Sundarbans with an imagery of a saree clad woman. The erratic, uncertain and unstable nature of the Sundarban is reflected in her writing.

> …between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands… the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the achol that follows her, half- wetted by the sea... There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea… The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily- some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times, it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before. (Sobharajani 9)

It seems synonymous of writers to describe the beauty of the Sundarbans with nature. Sobharajani continues with her depiction of the Sundarbans, where she writes that the place is "an example of an "endangered ecological system that is highly populated and both fragile and economically valuable."[31]

The Sundarbans appeared for the very first time in the Mahabharatas, when Yudhisthira and Bhima visited the Gangasagar at Sagar Island for pilgrimage. Kalidas Dutta

[30] Ibid

[31] "Indian Sundarbans Delta," "Planned Retreat and Ecosystem Regeneration as Adaptation to Climate Change" accessed on May 3rd, 2019, https://d2391rlyg4hwoh.cloudfront.net/downloads/issue_brief_1_planned_retreat_and_ecosystem_regeneration_as_adaptation_to_climate_change.pdf

in his book *Dakshin Chabbis Paraganar Ateet*,[32] writes of this episode in the Mahabharata as the very first instance of the Sundarban being represented in written literature. In the Mahabharata, the Sagar Island is depicted both as damnation and reverence. As the myth goes, Kapil Muni, the incarnation of Vishnu caused the Goddess Ganga to come down on Earth to wash away the curse fallen on the 60000 sons of King Sagar. Ganga did, with the persuasion of Shiva, and the souls of the sons were liberated. It can be read as an act of reverence since this episode embodies the liberation of the soul. But the origin of this liberation is through the act of damnation or cursing. Apart from the episode of Yuthisthira and Bhima visiting the Ashram of Kapil Muni, the Mahabharata also records the sage as a noble man with modern world view. Kapil Muni is the portrayed as a staunch believer against animal sacrifices. He raised his voice against animal sacrifices and cruelty towards animals and he also preached non violence to his disciples.[33] The image of Kapil Muni, along with the myth associated with him reveals two aspects about the Sundarban, which talks about the idea of the Sundarban in the realm of literature- 1. It is represented as a faraway land; Yudhisthira and Bhima, had to journey for many days to reach the Ashram of Kapil Muni. 2. The character of Kapil Muni is endowed with eco- consciousness. Though it shares similar roots with other mythologies, it still speaks of the deep relationship that humans shared with nature in the Sundarbans.

Apart from its descriptions in epics, the Sundarban features fully in the Bengali novel *Damaru Charit*.[34] Written by Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay in the year 1923, *Damaru Charit* contains the earliest Bengali middle class fantasies about the Sundarban (Chatterjee Sarkar

[32] Kalidas Dutta, *Dakshin Chabbis Paraganar Atit*, to be found at Sundarban Anchalik Sangrahasala (1989), Baruipur, Kolkata.

[33] Arti Dhand, *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahabharata* (Albany: State University of New York, 2008) pp. 41

[34] Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay, *Damaru Charit* (Kolkata: New Age Publishers Private limited, 2009)

166). The protagonist of the novel is Damaru, a middle class Bengali man in his mid forties, who establishes *abad* in the Sundarbans in order to escape the realities of the city. Mukhopadhyay paints the character not in the form of a noble hero, but as just the opposite. Damaru steals money from a neighbour, deceives his father in law and wife, and misleads his friends throughout the novel. On one occasion he boldly steals a sum of money from a neighbour and takes refuge at the Sundarban in order to protect himself from getting caught by the police. There he establishes *abad*, and proceeds to cultivate the land. Here, Abad is meant by habitable land. The terms *abad* and *bada* recurs through the stories on Sundarban. Abad is habitable land while *bada* is the forest. In the novel, Damaru did not have an easy way out with his *abad* though. He had to fight with mosquitoes the size of sparrows, tigers, and also crocodiles. The novel further takes the story forward with accounts of ghosts and demons living in the Sundarban. Nature recurs as a backdrop for Damarudhar, and in this novel, there is a minimal consciousness about natural elements. Conservation also does not play a very important part for Mukhopadhyay. This owns to the fact that when he was writing the novel, the Sundarban had not emerged as a sensitive ecological space as it is today. The Sundarban for post independence Bengali modernity was a vast stretch of mushy river laced land, where tribal people lived, and which had not yet been touched by any agents of modernity. It was the quintessential rural which Mukhopadhyay seeks to fictionalize.

Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay is known for his travel cum adventure stories, the most famous being *Chander Pahar*. In a very lesser known novel, *Sundarbane Sat Bachhar*,[35] Bandopadhyay writes about the journey of Nilu, a Bengali boy to the mela at Gangasagar, where from he gets kidnapped by *Mag* pirates. In the history of Sundarbans, *Mag* pirates were a real group of dacoits who were characterized by their ruthless activities in and around

[35] Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay, *Sundarbane Sat Bacchar* (Kolkata: Saibya Pustakalaya, 1983)

the villages. Though the literal translation of *Mag* from Bengali is Portugese, researchers are of the opinion that these dacoits were originally Arakan people, who took this as a profession owing to abject poverty in their own lands. But the *Mags* who kidnapped our protagonist Nilu did so not to torture him or sell him off as a slave. The motif behind the abduction is to take Nilu as a playmate for a *Mag* child, Monu, who was of the same age as Nilu. During his stay at the *Mag* household, Nilu quite promptly adapted to the hermit style of life. He learnt the use of weapons to kill animals and catch fish. He also learnt about the ways of the forest from Monu, and their neighbourhood friend Nibaran. In turn, Nilu tried to educate Monu. He told him stories from the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* and taught him to write as well. During one particular episode, Nilu met Kalibar Ray, who was a very learned man. Ray taught him oceanography and geography, and ways of survival in the forest. When Nilu finally returned home after seven years, he was a smart man. He remembered his time at the Sundarbans as an enriching experience which led him to become a successful business in the future. This novel was left unfinished by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay and was completed by Bhuban Mohan Roy.

The most famous writer, who wrote about the Sundarbans throughout his life, is Shib Shankar Mitra. His novels and short stories tells about the life of people from the Sundarban in a very realistic manner. All of Mitra's stories can be read in the light of deep ecology as he positions his characters and narrative in the broader network of nature. Mitra writes on varied topics. It is also my belief that he can be written an entire PhD thesis on, owing to the rich depository of issues his stories touch upon. His narrative style is also unique. Belonging from a time periods in transition to nature conservation and the bountiful of the dame,

In "Bede Baule,"[36] Mitra writes about Bede, who is a *baule*, a man in his early twenties, who miraculously becomes a *baule*. A *baule* is a person who holds very exclusive knowledge about the forest and the forest animals. It is said that taking a *baule* with a group of woodcutters or honey collectors is very necessary. The people of Sundarban swear by the knowledge of the *baules*, and since very few special people can acquire this knowledge, the profession of *baules* is also much respected. Mitra arms Bede with guns with which they hunt down tigers and other animals either as a form of adventure or often as a mode of revenge on the animals for having killed humans in the past. Here, Mitra's portrayal of the *baules* tells a very strong message- that of settlers in the Sundarbans acquiring modern means of taming the wilderness. In this particular story, the gun plays an important role. It was this gun which gives Bede the courage to go out in the forests for the sheer joy of hunting. Later, the gun loses importance as Bede shots to fame with his acts of bravery, though it remains an integral part of the plot altogether.

Mitra's "Duggo Sardar"[37] is a story of the protagonist Durga Sardar, a woodcutter renowned for his bravery in the forest. Mitra describes his physique being deceiving of his personality. Though muscular bony, Durga Sardar has a big heart and is a spontaneous man. Mitra correlates Durga Sardar with the *palimati* of the Sundarban. Along with detailing accounts of the forest, the trees and the animals, Mitra in this story sketches out the intrinsic ways in which nature and the natural world shape the human lives of the Sundarban. Durga Sardar later in the story kills a tiger single handedly, and Mitra has the perfect justification for it- the tiger was a *norokhadok*. Killing a *norokhadok* is not as much a crime as killing any

[36] Shib Shankar Mitra, "Bede Baule" in *Sundarban Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1995)

[37] Shib Shankar Mitra, "Duggo Sardar" in *Sundarban Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1995) pp. 457

other animal perhaps. Revenge plays an important role in the fiction on Sundarban, and in this particular story, Mitra uses the theme of revenge to strew his stories around,

"Sundarban" is also a beautiful story by Shib Shakar Mitra, which features in the *Sundarban Samagra*,[38] about the life of the people of the Sundarban and their struggle with nature. Mitra recounts several incidents of tigers being killed by man in these struggles, but what stands out from the narrative is his description of the Sundarbans. The description is from the perspective of woodcutters or honey collectors, who frequent the forest for its produce on several occasions. Mitra writes: "সুন্দরবন দুর্গম ও দুরধিগম্য। মিথ্যা কথা, এমন সুগম ও শহজ- অতিক্রম্য বন অন্য কথাও মিলবে কিনা সন্দেহ। জলপথ ধরলে এ বনের যে কোন অংশে পৌঁছান যাবে অতি সহজেই। স্থলপথ ধরলে নাতিদীর্ঘ স্পষ্ট গুঁড়িগুলো যেন আহ্বান করতে থাকে। এগিয়ে যাবার নেশা ধরে যায়। কি যেন এক মায়া ও মোহ মনকে আবিষ্ট করে, ভুলিয়ে দেয় অতীত ও অনাগতকে।" [Trans: It is a lie that the Sundarban is a distant and a difficult terrain. No other forest is so open and has such an easy exposure. If you take the water- way, you can reach any part of the forest easily. If you are on your foot, the fat tree trunks invite you to move forward… This fascination will help you to forget all things past and future.] (Mitra 354)

Mitra employs not a distant stance while narrating his story but owns the locals' perspectives at seeing the Sundarban, which is evident in his writing. One is reminded of Naess' thoughts on deep ecology here, where he said that humans only realize their full

[38] Shib Shankar Mitra, "Sundarban" in *Sundarban Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1995)

potential as human beings only when they are in close proximity with non- humans.[39] Mitra it seems, understands this, and accordingly implements such thoughts through his writing.

On a different occasion, in the same story, Mitra refers to the forest as a ferocious one. "সুন্দ্রবন হিংস্র বন। হিংস্র বনেরও বুঝি মায়া ও মমতা আছে।" (Mitra 360). [Trans: Sundarban is indeed a violent forest. But even this violent forest has compassion in it.] By endowing compassion and feelings to the forest, Mitra not only humanizes it, but also offers a different viewpoint of understanding the forest. According to him, the forest is indeed deadly where one moment of carelessness can result in lives being lost. Yet, humans have to tread on it for their livelihood. Understanding the fear factor here is of little importance to the people of the Sundarban, who regularly take on the risk to enter it on their own risks. Thus, humanizing the forest becomes essential in instilling the people the hope that the forest is not all evil and has human qualities in it too.

Mita singha authored *Bagh Kumir Sundarban*[40] is an interesting book, which offers an exclusive viewpoint for the Sundarban. A compilation of ten short stories, these provide to the reader firsthand experience of the lives of the people of the Sundarban since the author herself is a resident of the place and also an activist for environmental causes. All her stories are based on real incidents, and all have at their backdrop, the Sundarban. The introduction to the mentions Singha having accompanied the woodcutter troops to the forests in *kyup.* She acknowledges to have learnt several things about nature from the forest itself. '… [লেখিকা] ... কাঠুরিয়াদের সঙ্গে পায়ে হেঁটে তিনি শিখেছেন জঙ্গলের মাটি চেনা, শুলোর মধ্যে দিয়ে হেঁটে চলার কায়দা রপ্ত করা, গাছ চেনা, কাঠ চেনা, তাদের উপকারিতা জানা। ... মৌলেদের

[39] Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 183

[40] Mita Singha, *Bagh Kumir Sundarban* (Kolkata: New Script Publishers, 2016)

চোখ দিয়েই পর্যবেক্ষণ করেছেন মৌচাকের গঠনশৈলী, চাক কাটার পদ্ধতি থেকে মধু সংরক্ষণের খুঁটিনাটি... ।" [Trans: the writer has learnt to tread on the forest floor from the woodcutters; she learnt to identify honey combs from the honey collectors, etc] Singha was also the first woman to have been part of the Project on tiger counting.

In "Sundarbane Kumir Dhora," Singha recounts an incident of capturing/ rescuing a crocodile from a village pond and setting it free in the wild. Narrated in first person, this story also contains detailed descriptions of the daily life at Sundarban. Tidal activities play a huge role here, where people have to arrange their daily activities around it. During low tide, the boats cannot ply to the shores, and in order to embark, one has to tread on mushy mud knee deep in order to read the shore. Singha beautifully details that, along with realistic descriptions of boats and steamers in the Sundarban. Owing to her familiarity with the life, it becomes an added benefit for Singha to situate herself as an author so close to the natural scenario of the Sundarban. In this particular story, Singha narrates how the protagonists were on their way to study the breeding pattern of Olive Riddley Turtles at the island of Kalashdweep, where they have been coming from the faraway Antarctica to lay eggs, but were stopped midway when they were required to aid in the rescuing of a crocodile from a village. Said crocodile had mistakenly entered an inhabited village, and stranded itself in a shallow pond. The villagers were terrified of the animal owing mainly to it being known as a threat to human life. Singha carefully outlines the procedure of getting the crocodile out of the water and finally setting it free in the wild. The description of the forest during full moon nights is also compelling.

Human nature conflict

Owing to the geographical location of the Sundarbans at the tip of the Bay of Bengal, the Sundarbans is characterized by deadly cyclones and hurricanes. Together with the effect of climate change and rapid deforestation in the area, the Sundarban witnesses very damaging storms. Originating in the Bay of Bengal, these storms often pick up a speed of 200km an hour and lasts for days, often weeks. The cyclones cause devastation to both human and animal life. More importantly, these storms destroy mangrove cover, which further results into more devastating storms in the future. Many are of the opinion that the mangrove cover of the Sundarbans along with the dispersed islands on the Bay of Bengal provide a cushioning effect to the cyclones and hurricanes which otherwise would have hit the populated city of Kolkata, also the capital of the state of West Bengal. In the year 2007, the cyclone Sidr ravaged the Sundarbans. It blew with a speed of 220km an hour, and affected more than 5000 people. After Sidr, the Aila in 2009 was the worst cyclone to have caused extensive damage to the Sundarban. Though it has been a full decade, the people of Sundarban still shudder at the memories of Aila. It was responsible for uprooting the population of whole families due to flooding and torrential rains.

In fictions in this study, Mita Singha's "Ailar Dine Manush o Bagh"[41] tells the story of a pregnant tiger's trouble at finding shelter during the Aila storm. The tiger eventually shares the same roof with that of a human. Singha also recounts instances of relief work as a social worker after the Aila destructions.

Amitav Ghosh's book *The Hungry Tide*, also expresses concern about climate change. The climax of The Hungry Tide also presents before the readers, an episode from the Sundarbans, where the protagonists are caught up in a deadly storm. Ghosh also belongs to

[41] Mita Singha, "Ailar Dine Manush o Bagh," *Bagh Kumir Singha* (Kolkata: New Script, 2016)

the group of writers who take climate change and other environmental issues very seriously. When asked about the significance of the climate change in India, he said that it will be:

> … Life-threatening, to say the least. The Pentagon has done a study that predicts by 2030 state institutions in South Asia will be close to collapsing. Very few state institutions will be able to cope with disruptions of this scale. Unfortunately, we have become so used to growth numbers - politicians giving us good news of development - that we are just not paying attention to what is happening around us. Why is it so hard for people to think about climate change? I am from the East, we are accustomed to seeing natural disasters on a great scale? Sensitised to it to some degree. I have seen what Hurricane Sandy did to New York. Once you see that, you can't help but ask yourself what about Indian cities? Are they at all prepared to deal with such situations? Mumbai, for instance, is extremely vulnerable...cyclonic activity is increasing in the Arabian Sea because of climate change. Unprecedented things are happening."[42]

The conflict between human and nature does not only limit to the cyclonic activities ravaging over the Sundarbans but extends also to the changing nature of the islands as well. At the Sundarbans, islands submerge and emerge from the water at particular times of the day, owing to tidal activities. Out of the 102 islands which fall on the Indian side of the Sundarban, only 54 are said to be inhabited, which is home to more than five million people.[43] These islands are said to change shape and size every day. The shifting courses of the rivers, tidal

[42] Sarika Malhotra, in *Business Today*, last modified on August 28th, 2016, https://www.businesstoday.in/magazine/features/amitav-ghosh-interview-climate-change/story/235873.html

[43] Sayantan Bera, "Shudder Islands" in *Down to Earth*, last modified on June 7th, 2015, https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/shudder-islands-35862

waves eroding banks of the islands and sea level raise all amounts to the reasons behind this change. Here, people live under the constant threat of submergence. Already, two inhabited islands have submerged- the Lohachora and the Ghoramara along with other islands like the Bedford, Kabasgadi, Suparibhanga, etc. Parts of the Ghoramara still exist, but humans have long abandoned the place. [44] In this situation, question arises: how are the fiction writers articulating the anxiety of this threatening change? How much of their storytelling is dependent on these factors? Is there a romantic perception towards these changes?

Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* mentions the changing landscape at the beginning of the novel when Kanai meets Nilima at the Canning Station and the duo discuss their way forward. It should be mentioned here that there are several entry points to the Sundarban from the mainland. Every time one route is obstructed, the other is availed. The Matla River, which has once been a tumultuous one, used to ply people on boats and streamers from Canning to the Sundarbans easily. But at present, it is a dried up river with exception in the Monsoon season. Kanai was unaware of this change, and Nilima pointed it out to him:

> 'Kanai, I'm very glad you're here at last,' said Nilima. 'But there's one thing I don't understand.'
>
> 'What?'
>
> 'Why did you insist on coming through Canning? It would have been so much easier if you had come through Basonti. No one comes this way nowadays.'
>
> 'Really? Why not?'
>
> 'Because of the river,' she said. 'It's changed.' (Ghosh 25)

[44] Sayantan Bera, "Shudder Islands" in *Down to Earth*, last modified on June 7th, 2015, https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/shudder-islands-35862

It was not just the change of the course of the river that is important to note here, but how life of the people change accordingly. Kanai reminisces about the time when Matla was a happening river as he was reminded of earlier times when he would visit the river with his uncle, Nirmal. Ghosh's description of the change goes as follows:

> "… on reaching its end Kanai saw what Nilima had meant when she said the river had changed. He remembered the Matla as a vast waterway, one of the most formidable rivers he had ever seen. But it was low tide now and the river in the distance was no wider than a narrow ditch, flowing across the centre of a kilometre- wide bed…" (Ghosh 26)

Tidal activity is a major cause for rivers to be used for transportation. During low tide, the river would reveal its bed with sparse water here and there. Boats plying on the river go by the time measurement of the tides, and seldom by clock time. Unfortunately if a boat miscalculates the tides or if it is anyhow late, it would be stuck in the mud of the river till high tide comes to sweep it off the floor. This problem persists not only with passengers across the river but also with honey collectors and woodcutters who frequent the forest in search of produce. The islands in the Sundarban are separated from each other by creeks of waterways. These creeks are called *khnari* in Bengali, literally meaning a narrow path. During high tide, these creeks allow small boats or *dingis* pass through; though bigger boats or launches can never enter through these. When forest officials need to access the hinterlands, they take help of smaller boats to invade through these *khnaris*. Tidal activity is of utmost importance in case of accessing *khnaris* because if by chance, boats with its people get stuck in the mud during low tide, they lose agency to move, and thereby become vulnerable to tiger attacks. During low tide, the forest or the land become higher and the boats sink to the bed of the *khnari*. Thus, even if the humans cannot see the tiger from below, the tiger can very easily spot them from a higher ground from far away. This natural setup which privileges animals

over humans is noteworthy. Humans are intelligent- they possess knowledge about artillery and other such tricks but when it comes to a battle between them and the natural world, it is always the humans who loose.

An Overview

Nature is intricately related to every human activity in the Sundarbans. Unlike in urban spaces, nature functions in the rural setup very differently, more in this case because of the overwhelming pressure of living in and around a reserve forest. Here, the people cannot as much exploit natural resources as other inhabitants of general rural regions might do. But they live in constant fear of the changing laws and regulations of the forests.

The forest resource of the Sundarban is crucial to human survival, and human dependence on the natural resource is the primary entry point to understand human dependence on nature in this study. The people of the Sundarban have always associated the place with fear and anxiety. Their courage manifests in their daily battle against nature for the sake of livelihood (Chatterjee Sarkar 9). The people's understanding of nature is heavily dependent on the supernatural and the effects it has on human life. Superstition also works as a driving force behind human's idea of the natural world and in the literary imagination, the nature of representation is one of the chief concerns. The people believe that if they spell the tiger, it will come and kill them, this is why; they resort to calling it by all sorts of names like *boro sheyal*, *boro beral*, *boro miyan*, etc.[45]

Hazlitt's quote, with which this chapter opened, "We do not see nature with our eyes, but with our understanding and our hearts…" reminds one of the assumptions that nature is always meant to be joyful, that the representation of nature too should be pleasurable and

[45] Meanings to be found at glossary

soothing for the human mind. But this is a very western and privileged portrayal of nature. For people who have to be in constant conflict with natural elements do not have this view of nature. Given a chance, these battling humans would choose to live away from nature because the fear of death lurks in every corner of this so called ‘natural experience.’ But amidst these contestations, the humans in Sundarban have managed to come to terms with the natural world in order to ease their livelihood.

CHAPTER II

Studying the Relationship Humans share with Animals in Sundarban

"About tigers in Sundarbans, science knows almost nothing. They are a mystery…"[46]

Fiction based on Sundarban exhibits a dense matrix of the relationship between humans and non-humans presented in an intrinsic manner. Such stories of humans are always accompanied with special reference to non-human entities and never are they just about humans. Animals for instance, have a special place in these fictions because the real life of such people is strewn around the lives of animals. Starting from the *punthi*[47] literature, which dates back to the seventeenth century,[48] till modern fiction and nonfiction written in the twenty first century, these narratives are primarily structured around a complex struggle between the humans with the nonhuman elements in their immediate environment.[49] Even inside this argument, there is scope of studying animal imagery in the light of "cosmopolitanism" as opposed to its "local" representation.[50] In this chapter, my attempt is to

[46] Sy Montgomery, *Spell of the Tiger: The Man- eaters of Sundarbans* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016), pp. 16

[47] The word *punthi*, though has its roots in the Bengali word for book or *pustika*, can be categorized as a form of folk literature, which thrived mainly through oral traditions of storytelling.
I have explored two *punthi* texts in this work, namely The *Bonbibi'r Johurnama*, and the *Raimangal*. The texts are scare, thus I have limited the study to the interpretations of the texts by several writers; primarily by Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar and Sashankha Shekhar Das.

[48] Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *The Sundarbans: Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), pp 30.

[49] Gopendra Krishna Basu, *Banglar Loukik Dev Devi* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1966), pp 10-11

[50] Annu Jalais, "Unmasking the Cosmopolitan Tiger," *Nature and Culture* 3, no. 1 (2008): 25-40.

delineate the relationship between humans and animals of Sundarban, who share the same environment in different ways and also study the extent to which fiction writers represent this idea in their works.

Focusing on stories and memoirs of writers who chose to write on the Sundarban, I argue that there lies a stark contrast between stories written by writers who have shared their lives at the Sundarban at some point of their lives and those who did not. I also suggest that reading the background of these writers and also locating the intent behind their story telling is an important factor when one is to obtain a true picture of the lives in the Sundarban. While representing non humans, especially animals, many writers resort to an 'elite perspective'[51] on animal conservation; some toy with the idea as a necessary thing to be done for the sake of human lives; and some totally debunk these thoughts and base their stories purely on imagination. In this debate, I try to locate the rationale behind such polar ideas and take a firm stand about the importance of representation. In short, this chapter is set to explore:

i. The various ways of imagining a location by native and non-native writers,
ii. The forms of human and non-human intimacies and conflicts represented in the stories, and
iii. The debate around human rights on one hand and animal rights on the other.

The theoretical context of this chapter is drawn from a rich body of work on 'animal studies' about which, Tim Ingold, says, how we seek to define animals is dependent on cultural variables.

> Throughout history, people have variously killed and eaten animals, or on rarer occasions, been killed and eaten by them; incorporated

[51] By elite here, I mainly refer to an urban mindset, which is detached from the lives of the rural poor, and who seeks to fantasise or romanticise the rural in terms of its aesthetic qualities. Instances of this have been explored later in this chapter during the discussion on texts written by non natives.

> animals into their social groups, whether as domestic familiars or captive slaves; and drawn upon their observations of animal morphology and behaviour in the construction of their own designs for living. (Ingold 1)[52]

Ingold questions the very stem of understanding human-animal relations, arguing that the "the very conception of what an animal might be, and by implication of what it means to be human, is culturally relative."(Ingold 1) "People's ideas about animals, and attitudes towards them are correspondingly every bit as variable as their ways of cultural tradition that is widely thought to be the hallmark of humanity."(Ingold 1) Through his work, there is an underlying attempt of to seek beyond the parameters of "anthropocentrism" and "ethnocentricism" to alleviate this understanding and shift it from a western point of view to a more global one. Following Ingold's observations on how the boundaries of defining humans and non-human animals are problematized, I would like to refer to an essay by Annu Jalais, titled "Unmasking the Cosmopolitan Tiger" where she examines ways in which an animal can be represented. She specifically refers to the Bengal tiger in this respect, and based on her anthropological research at Sundarban, critiques the narratives on the tiger where she highlights the "power play involved in these urban stories on wildlife." Jalais' essay "Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers Become 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger Food'"[53] also is a brilliant article which throws light on the plight of the inhabitants of the Sundarban in their fight with modern laws which recognizes animal rights over human rights. These essays will aid in providing a base for my arguments which I generate from a close reading of the texts of fiction.

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[52] Tim Ingold, *What is an Animal?* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1.

[53] Annu Jalais, "Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers became 'citizens,' and refugees 'tiger- food.'" *Economic and Political Weekly* (2005): pp. 1757- 1762.

It seems imperative to commence with the discussion on the inhabitants of the Sundarban with a brief introduction to the landscape in question and the non-human entities that inhabit this space. The Sundarban Reserve Forest (to be referred to as the SRF henceforth) is distinguished for being the only natural habitat of the Bengal Tigers (*panther tigris*), also known as the Royal Bengal Tigers. Along with Tigers, the region also boasts of the famous salt water crocodiles, spotted deer, pangolins, flying foxes, and wild cats. But it is mainly the tiger and the crocodiles which dominate in the narratives of fiction. This specific choice of animals for fiction writers is heavily dependent upon the real life accidents or incidents. The term "real life incidents" is synonymous with tiger attacks when one is concerned in the context of the Sundarbans. It is recorded that each year an approximate 60 people are attacked by tigers in the Sundarbans, and only half survive to tell the tale.[54] This figure is backed by government data, but researchers working on the Sundarban say that more than 40% of the attacks go undocumented. There exist certain conditions which need to be fulfilled for an alleged tiger attack to make it to the records: (1) the victim has to be one who had taken prior permission to enter the reserved forest, (2) the victim's family has to immediately inform the forest guards, who would then perform routine checks on the supposed area of attack. It is after these pre requisites are fulfilled, that an attack will be recorded as a legitimate one, after which the victim's family will be eligible to file for compensation on humanitarian grounds. However, a majority of the villagers from the Sundarban islands who enter the forest to catch crabs or collect honey or timber wood, do not have valid permits issued by the forest department. As a result, their entry to the forest becomes in the eyes of law, an act of trespassing, and when these illegal entrants are killed, their families, fearing further prosecution, rarely inform the authorities about the deaths. Though the forest department has thorough idea about the number of deaths and in general

[54] Candida Beveridge, "Face to face with a man- eating tiger," News Magazine, *BBC*, November 12, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29987187

about such events, there remain a discrepancy about documenting the exact number of deaths, owing to various reasons. One important reason being that of providing a compensation of monetary help to the family of the victim.

Owing to these factors, I argue that in such a difficult terrain, when man and wildlife have to fight each other regularly; with or without the enabling of the powers of the State, the conflict seems to be implicating Darwin's idea of" survival of the fittest," and thereby it problematizes the whole genre of animal studies as well as social ecology.

To proceed with studying the relationship between humans and animals as is represented in the literature on Sundarban, I would like to offer my understanding of a few key concepts: 1. what are non-humans (animals in this regard)? 2. how is a non-human animal different from that of humans? and 3. what does it mean to study animals in works of fiction? Many writers of animal studies have described human and the non-human in terms of their biological differences. Cora Diamond puts forward the argument that though the difference between human and non-human animals may have started from their pertinent biological differences, it is indeed very socially and culturally constructed. Following Diamond's thoughts that anything beyond humans themselves are nothing but mere representation of what the 'thing' means to its immediate culture or traditional environment, we begin to understand, that the idea of an animal differs acutely from culture to culture. Not just culture, but this difference seems to prevail over class as well, as is espoused by Jalais. She specifically turns our attention to the cause of the Bengal Tiger and argues for the use of the term 'cosmopolitan' where she says that the idea of a cosmopolitan tiger obliterates the profound differences between several lived experiences of the people of the Sundarban with the tiger. "…today's universally propagated ideas about tigers ultimately act to the detriment of "other" tigers because they do not allow an engagement with alternative ways of understanding animals and wildlife." (Jalais 2008, 26) Here, a question of class and culture

ensures as driving factors behind understanding the animal. Jalais argues that it is only people from the privileged urban, who see the animal as a beautiful being; as an exotic specie requiring protection. But this is not how the people who share the same habitat with tigers think. Jalais' argument which is not just limited to the presentation of the tiger covers roughly the entire debate on wildlife protection and human rehabilitation. Jalais strongly believes that no matter what the debate be, whether around conservation of tiger or natural resources (a modern phenomenon) or deforestation in the name of 'development,' (early 19th century colonial endeavours), the "implicit measuring rod remains its Western definitions." (Jaials 2008, 33)

While attempting to understand the relationship between humans and animals, we must first address what makes a human, human. In the beginning of *Politics*, Aristotle defines man simply as an animal by instincts; a political animal to be specific.[55] This seems just enough, but he further goes on to detail what else makes a man. Here he says that the specific difference which sets man apart from all other mortal animals is his capacity for intellectual activity. What is troubling in this whole thinking process is that man 'alone' is deemed to be fit to possess intellectual capacity. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his book *In the Open: Man and Animal,* says that throughout history of Western culture, animal and man has been distinguished from each other.[56] He says that this distinction arises from the notion of man as being strategic, practical and political, while animal is not; which also brings us back to how it has been defined by Aristotle. What is amiss in this whole debate of humans being in possession of higher intellect can be questioned through understanding human animal binaries. In this context, question can arise- what is about animals that make us human?

[55] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), pp. 24, https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/aristotle/Politics.pdf

[56] Georgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 90, https://mbf.blogs.com/files/agamben-open-excerpts.pdf

Ironically, we can channelize Descarthes through Levi Strauss to say "I think with animals, or rather thereby, I am human"[57] though this can land us in a difficult terrain of employing privilege and taking liberties to define the other.

But even if we consider man to be more intelligent than animals, there is still scope to study the relationship of man with animals. How can this relationship be defined? While defining it, humans employ their intellectual faculties in making sense of an animal. However, an animal does not make such claims of holding superior knowledge over humans. If it does, it is totally outside the ambit of western modern thinking process. These thoughts aside, humans have always been in contact with animals in significant ways. Animal studies scholars are of the belief that studying animals is a very important exercise if one tries to make sense of the human world. Animals play a major role in the lives of many people, believes Tim Ingold. He, in his book *What is an Anima*l argues that human life is shaped by the activities of animals. In fact, human actions are in turn attributed to animals. According to Ingold, relations between human and nonhuman animals are morally significant, intense, enduring and pervasive. Nonhuman animals (referred as 'animals') have been part of the human social and psychological landscape since the origin of our species. All human societies coexist with animals, and human-animal interactions range from predation to parasitism to partnership. (Ingold 1988 1, 14)

To address the idea of coexisting, Berger in his essay "Why Look at Animals?" argues that the reconfiguration of the human animal relationship is due to the emergence of industrialist capitalism. This argument holds ground while employing a Marxist perspective, whereby espousing on the fact that the distinction between humanity and the animal world (or in fact the whole of the natural world) is a construction of the human mind. The result of

[57] Melinda Reidinger, review of *Animals and Inequality in the Ancient World*, by Benjamin S. Arbuckle and Sue Ann McCarty, *Anthropology Boom Forum* (2015), http://www.anthropology-news.org/?book-review=we-think-with-animals-and-thereby-we-are-human

which is explained to be the "alienation of modern citizens from a working engagement with nature, the isolation of urban dwellers, the artificiality of contemporary relations to animals, and the degradation of the non human world by industrial technologies." (Armstrong 2008, 1)[58]

History tells the story of humans, as superior to all other creatures of the earth. Our myths and legends too, speak of man as the only being to have been placed at the crown of creation, which resonates in the telling of several religions and folklores as well. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that due to various favourable conditions, the human race has been successful in accessing resources crucial for its sustenance while all other species has not been able to do so. This fact is endowed on human intelligence and the specie's brilliance and uniqueness, but it is not agreed upon as a consensus. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche for example, believes that deep down in the psyche of human beings, we are all animals, disguised by a mask of vanity. He says that humans are not or should not be marked for their brilliance, but for their ability to tame the inner animal. He says that humans are nothing but simply beings with the "beasts in them (are) "improved". They are weakened; they are made less harmful…" Nietzsche here chooses to describe humans in terms of animals, and not the other way round (animals being defined as un-humanly or more commonly as non-humans).[59]

The idea of animals has changed vastly in modern fictions. With the advent of science and technology, how humans perceive the natural world has gone through a lot of changes. Philip Armstrong in *What Animals mean in the Fictions of Modernity* says that "nonhuman animals and stories about them have always been closely bound up with the conceptual and

[58] Philip Armstrong, *What Animals mean in Fictions of Modernity* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1

[59] "Nietzsche and the Human Animal: The Domesticated and the Strong," *Academy of Ideas*, Last modified December 20, 2018, https://academyofideas.com/2018/12/nietzsche-human-animal-domesticated-strong/

material work of modernity." (Armstrong 2) Modernity has redefined the idea of the animal in various ways, and here we find a shift from locating human occupation with the natural world as the sole perspective of understanding the natural world altogether, to a more collective one.

> In studies of literature and the visual arts, in cultural history and the analysis of popular culture, the extent to which human- animal relations have been central to the mission of modernity is becoming apparent. As a resource for thought and knowledge, the generic notion of 'the animal' has provided modernity with a term against which to define its most crucial categories: 'humanity', 'culture', 'reason', and so on. Meanwhile, in material terms, the use and pursuit of actual animals has facilitated and motivated the unrelenting expansionism of modern cultures. (Armstrong 10)

Animal and Human in the Same Habitat

> … [T]he People of the Sundarban still understand what the rest of us pretend to ignore: that all who share the sacred breath of life- the chital and wild boar, frog and fish, idiot and genius- are made of meat. (Montgomery 224)

Montgomery's words articulate the fear of the tiger, and exemplify the conflict between humans and animals in the Sundarban which is both unique and common. Unique in the sense, that this kind of human animal conflict is found nowhere else in the world- where animals employ intelligence to prey on humans. And this conflict is common because it happens regularly there. As mentioned earlier, tigers maul humans on a daily basis and humans live under that threat in such a way that they have internalized this fear thoroughly.

The government's attempts at reaching a solution to this problem are unique. Over the years, the SRF has seen many field directors trying to implement ways to stop tigers from attacking humans. In the 1980s, when Mr. Pranabesh Sanyal was in charge, he introduced clay dummies in the form of fishermen and honey collectors to be installed at several places in the SRF. The necks of these dummies were circled with galvanized wires. The whole process was to instil in tigers a fear of the human. Every time a tiger would seek to attack one of these dummies, it will be jerked off with a shock, thereby associating attacking people with pain. Sy Montgomery writes of these experiments as the "efforts to reduce what the Forest Department euphemistically calls 'man-animal conflict.'"[60] Montgomery in the 1990s visited the Sundarbans to collect data for a book, which she published in 2016- *Spell of the Tiger: The Man Eaters of the Sundarbans.* In this book, Montgomery seeks to answer the very pertinent question about human animal relationship that is- why do tigers of the Sundarbans regularly seek human flesh while tigers from the rest of the world don't? The book is a compilation of her visits to the Sundarbans where she interacted with the local people in her exploration of the unique man-tiger relationship, where on one hand humans worship the tiger as a deity and on the other, hunts it to extinction. Montgomery also recounts the other ways which were tried and re- tried in the Sundarbans in the same respect. She writes:

> In earlier programs the Forest Department bred wild pigs and released them into the reserve's buffer zone to provide tigers with more prey- like placing offerings before an altar. The department dug freshwater ponds in the core area, hoping this resource would entice the tigers to stay there, where people were not supposed to go. Staff members say that tigers do drink from these ponds, but they drink salt water also. Other efforts attempted to fortify forest

[60] Sy Montgomery, *Spell of the Tiger: The Man- eaters of Sundarbans* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016), pp. 38

> workers. Some were outright bizarre. In 1981, an experimental Tiger Guard Head Gear was fashioned from bulletproof fibreglass, which you were supposed to wear over your head and neck in the heat that reaches 100 degrees; another model, equally bulky and uncomfortable, featured long spikes poking mace like out of the nape. …. In 1986, a new approach was tried, an elegant type of deception. Arun Ram, a member of the science club in Calcutta, noted that the tigers almost never attacked from the front; they always sprang from behind, biting the back of the victim's neck. His idea: plastic face masks worn on the back of the head. They were cheap, they were light, and they worked. (Montgomery 39)

The masks worked for some time, before the people realized that the tigers are too clever for such deception. According to Montgomery, "the masks worked as long as the tigers believed in them. But it was not for long." (Montgomery 39) Humans have tried their best at appeasing the tiger But here arises a very rare argument. The then Field Director of SRF, Kalyan Chakraborti came up with the idea that tigers are not stupid creatures. They know very well which the front is and which the back of a human body, even when wearing masks on the backs. According to Chakraborti, the tigers simply do not attack humans who they are assured are not disrupting their habitat. His analogy was supported with the fact that no Forest Guard in uniform was ever harmed by tigers. All those who were, were not in uniforms. However intriguing and magical it may seem, this argument falls flat when one takes into account the history of tiger attacks on Forest Guards, all of whom were in uniforms; which is a large number. But Chakraborti's logic brings us to view this relationship between humans and animals in a different light. This idea, not only equips the animal with super intelligence but also ethical values as well. The fact that a hungry tiger, otherwise a man-eater, does not attack humans who are allegedly trying to protect the wilderness, is like reading out of a page from

Aeshop's Fables. It endows the tiger with a sense of reasoning and moral responsibility. It preys on humans who according to Chakraborti, have been involved with destroying the natural world, or people who were too greedy. Montgomery writes of Kalyan Chakraborti:

> 'So this animal,' he asserted, 'must have got full control and wisdom about him and the area and human behaviour; so regarding the reduction of human casualty, it is my thinking that if we can show that we are all protectors of the forest, respectful of the forest, and not destroyers, then there could be no question of a person being killed by a tiger.' (Montgomery 43)

The tiger, by this argument, is doing the job of Rangers, who were otherwise employed to do this exact same job, only difference being, the Rangers do not choose to devour humans even if they trespass inside the demarcated core or buffer zones. Thus, one who believe in this capacity of the tiger is bound to desire for it to be saved or protected or better, aid in its propagation. Because if tigers themselves do the job of punishing humans from doing illegal or immoral activities (like deforestation), then there arises a demand for more tigers in the region. This brings us back to our understanding of the human versus animal debate, where humans themselves endow animals with such qualities of humanism, thereby making an animal worth its presence. Otherwise, the tiger is just another animal in the wild, which occasionally mauls humans and cattle causing endless misery to the human world. The whole argument holds the protection of the forest as a responsibility or duty, and it completely disregards the deaths of humans in the past who went to collect forest produce. I propose here, that we read this as an instance of de- humanizing the humans who depend on forest produce directly for their livelihood. The de- humanizing process is complete through criminalizing them for acting on their own, and it naturally makes them the 'forest destroyers' opposite those who were according to Chakraborti, the 'protectors of the forest.'

Interpreting human- animal relationships

To begin with, I would propose a common ground for human- animal relationships. Put simplistically, several inferences can be drawn from animal and human attributes. Both humans and animals are living organisms. Both are carnivorous. And both suffer the effects of climate change, though it is only the humans who are responsible for inciting it in the first place. The animal suffers for the actions of the human at the end and seldom is it the opposite. So how are humans and animals meant to share a particular place if one's activities bring doom for the other? In the case of Sundarbans, it is not just the humans who bring destruction in the animal world, but it works the other way round as well. As mentioned earlier, tigers and crocodiles regularly cause deaths to humans; even the ratio of animal attacks on humans way supersede human attacks on animals. While this is unfortunate, we must try to come to terms with this reality in order to facilitate human animal cohabitation. Donna Haraway in her book *Staying with the Trouble*[61] argues that to continue living on earth, one's "task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present." (Harraway 3) Harraway does not seem to detest the idea of trouble, but she embraces it with open arms. She says:

> I want to stay with the trouble, and the only way I know to do that is
> in generative joy, terror and collective thinking. (Harraway 31)

In the context of the Sundarban, the animals, or for better choice of words, the non-human abiotic living organisms are firstly tigers, followed by crocodiles, turtles, fishes, dolphins, snakes, etc. These animals coexist with humans in the Sundarban in a rare style. Many have commented on the unique cohabitation and the way they are represented in fiction

[61] Donna Harraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin with the Chthulucene* (London: Duke University Press, 2016)

speaks of their interdependence. In this regard, my work argues whether humans and other than humans can truly coexist in a composite manner; or whether they are just fit to remain in boundaries predefined by humans themselves- whether with the aid of the state or not. In order to explore the world of human animal relationships in this thesis, I have chosen both familiar and unfamiliar texts, which primarily share two interdependent features: the inclusion of human- animal relations as significant components of their representation, and the ever changing politics of conservation which plagues the reality of Sundarban.

Fictionalizing Wildlife

"অঘোষিত ভাবে সুন্দরবন হল বাঘের রাজ্য"

[trans: the tiger is the unofficial King of Sundarban][62]

The fiction on Sundarbans is complex in this regard to say the least. Authors like Shib Shankar Mitra and Mita Singha write about this dilemma when it comes to animal conservation, and how to draw a line between animal rights and human rights. Shib Sankar Mitra's *Sundarban Samagra* was published in 1964, a time when tiger conservation or wild life protection was not common in mainstream literature. But despite that, Mitra portrays a beautiful picture of the Sundarbans where humans and animals live in harmony with nature. They coexist in a manner, which did not require any intervention other than that of the divine, definitely not governmental. His stories depict the lives of the people of Sundarbans in a way they naturally exist. It does not morally trip the readers into wanting to preserve the 'exotic mysterious beauty' of the forest, because Mitra does not write of any disruption in the system.

[62] Shib Shankar Mitra, "Bede Baule" in *Sundarban Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1995)

In "Sundarbane Arjan Sardar," Mitra writes about the protagonist Arjan, and recounts his adventures in the Sundarban.[63] Arjan being a native of the Sundarban do not engage in ultra heroic activities to satiate his masculinity, neither does he merely go out to 'experience new things' as Nilu, our protagonist from Bibhutibhushan's *Sundarbane Sat Bacchar* does.[64] Arjan engages in situations in response to various inevitable actions. Mitra portrays the villagers' need to approach the forest to harness its produce for livelihood. And in this endeavour, Arjan seldom had to face the tiger, and been attacked by them. In one instance, Arjan lost his companions to a tiger, which made him hunt the tiger and single handed kill it. This, along with other instances, earned Arjan the fame of a very strong and brave man, who was often employed by others to protect them from tiger attacks while in the forest. The conflict between human and animal is important here, because unlike writers of later period, who portray this struggle by partially blaming it on humans, Mitra writes of the tiger as solely an animal, capable of only animosity.

Wildlife conservation is not excluded from Mitra's writing altogether. Personifying nature in his story "Ek Je Chilo Sundarban" (Mitra 469) he gives voices to nature, which in turn revolts against humans. The story presents a hierarchy of non- human beings, starting with bees and birds, to wild boars, to tigers who collectively form a constituency. These birds, animals and insects have one demand- the lessening of the human impact in the forest. Interestingly, they do not object to the humans who seek the forest for need, but those who hunt animals for greed. They want to live "মিলে মিশে" [Trans: together] (Mitra 469), which also speaks on the collective unity of the non- human entities of the forest. Here, man is the foreigner, and also the destroyer. This short story goes against the morals of Mitra's earlier

[63] Shib Shankar Mitra, "Sundarbane Arjan Sardar," in *Sundarban Samagra* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1995)

[64] Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay, *Sundarbane Sat Bacchar* (Kolkata: Saibya Pustakalaya, 1983)

stories, where he presents and also justifies human occupation in the forest. In stories like "Sundarbane Arjan Sardar" or "Bede Baule," Mitra writes about man's triumph over the natural world. He presents the forest as a battleground for humans and the natural elements. In this battle, humans often manage to establish sovereignty over animals by killing them. Use of modern artillery like guns are celebrated as tools of victory for man, while on the other hand, human- animal conflict is also presented by humans' physical supremacy over the animal. In "Arjan Sardar," Mitra endows the fictional character of Arjan with strength capable of killing a tiger. While human supremacy is dealt with, Mitra also believes that animals have intellectual capacities. This manifests in the narrative techniques employed to represent the tiger as a very cunning and meticulous animal and also as a dangerous vengeful monster.

Bibhuti Bhusan Bandopadhyay's *Sundarbane Sat Bacchar* is an adventure of Nilu a Bengali boy, who gets kidnapped by *Mag* (Portuguese) pirates to the Sundarban, but eventually befriends the son of his captors. Bandopadhyay paints a very romantic idea of the Sundarban in the novel. The forest and its animals are all portrayed in a tell- tale manner. The narrative also flows in a continuous array of one adventure after the other. Nilu in the Sundarban encounters animals which were not found in the Sundarbans when Bandopadhyay was writing the novel. He writes of an encounter of Nilu and Monu with a Rhinoceros at the Sundarban where they went to hunt down the animal but eventually failed to do so. Truly, according to the 1878 Statistical Account of Sundarban by Hunter, there is mention of Rhinoceros, but they went extinct by the 20th century due to degraded ecological reasons. The duo, Nilu and Monu also engage in activities such as hunting tigers and deer from the forest and also catching fish. Bandopadhyay writes of a harrowing episode in the lives of Nilu and Monu, when they engage in a fight with a fish. This narration is markedly different from other instances of writers narrating human conflict with tigers. Monu and Nilu along with

their friend Nibaran had gone fishing, and they had even caught a *Doye Bhangan* fish as well, but right then, while pulling the catch onto the boat, Nilu slips into the water. Bandopadhyay writes of the encounter:

> পা পিছলাইয়া আমি জলে পরিয়া গেলাম, সঙ্গে সঙ্গে মস্ত মাছটা আমার দিকে তাড়া করিয়া আশিল; দয়ে ভাঙ্গন মাছ মানুষকে তাড়া করে কখনও শুনিনি; ... [মাছটা] একবার ঝাপটা মারিতেই জালের দড়ি ছিঁড়িয়া গেল। মাছ আসিয়া আমার হাঁটু কামড়াইয়া ধরিল... মাছ আমাকে জলের তলায় নেওয়ার চেষ্টা করিতেছে... জলের জানোয়ার বাঘের মত শক্তি ধরে। আমি সেখানে অসহায়। এবার আমাকে [মাছ] ডুবাইয়া মারিবে!

[Trans: I slipped and fell into the water. Immediately the huge fish attacked me; I never had heard of Doyen Bhangon fishes attacking humans, and I let out a cry of help. Nibaron, with the help of the oars, hit the fish with a blow. But one flutter of the fish tore the fish net and freed the fish, and it came and bit on my knee. I tried to hold the edge of the boat, but failed. The strength of the fish together with the current in the river water took me away from the boat. Bubbling through the salt water, the fish was trying to take me deeper down the water… In the water, the fish was as powerful as the Tiger on land. I was sure it will kill me by drowning.]

The above description of the struggle with a fish is unique among the fictions in this study. It not only depicts a different kind of conflict but also establishes the strength of fishes in the animal world. It also brings an equation with the tiger. The tiger in the context of Sundarban is considered the strongest and the most brilliant of all animal. The intellect of other creatures if needed to be judged is done so with a comparison with the tiger. Here, the

tiger is not just the strongest and more fearsome animal of the Sundarban, but its ferocity becomes the measuring rod for all other non human entities. This helps us in assessing the importance of the tiger in understanding the fear it really evokes in the people.

Different from representation of the tiger as a ferocious animal, there are instances of the animal being represented for the purpose of wildlife conservation; as in some texts, the tiger acts solely as a mascot for conservation. There are practically various ways of interpreting the animal- it can be defined under the lens of human rights, as a potential threat to human existence. Or, on the other hand, it can be addressed in terms of Animal Rights. This second phenomena is a very modern and is a western outlook, as we can argue that the need for protecting animals comes from the fact that their existence is hampered by human occupation, mostly colonization. Unlike human rights, which is universal, irrespective of class, ethnicity, nationality or population, animal rights have a starkly different outlook when it comes to defining the rights of the animal. The protection of animals, and the rights entailed to them are not just tailor made according to human convenience, but the same rights are violated too by humans. In a democratic country, the constitution specifies Animal Rights. Provision 48A of the Constitution of India places a duty on the State and its citizens to "endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forest and wild life of the country."[65] It specifies that cruelty towards animals should not be carried out. But how do these 'rights' help animals? Do they really matter to their existence? What are the factors that assist in the formation of these rights for animals? These are some of the questions this section will seek to answer. Firstly, I would like to bring forth a novel by Mitali Bose Perkins, titled- *Tiger Boy*.[66] The author, a Stanford University Graduate in

[65] Indian Constitution, Article 48A, "Protection and Improvement of Environment and Safeguarding of Forest and Wild Life."

[66] Mitali Perkins, *Tiger Boy* (Chennai: Duckbill Books, 2015)

Political Science, she also holds a Masters Degree in Public Policy from University of California, Berkeley, Perkins is recognized as a novel writer for children. In the past, her novels such as *Rikshaw Girl* and *Bamboo People*,[67] are both very well acclaimed popular novels for children in the US. I would like to critique her novel, the *Tiger Boy*, and start with the Author's Note. Perkins encourages her readers to "take a three hour drive from the bustling Indian city of Kolkata" to the Sundarbans. She describes the Sundarban as "a mysterious, one of a kind mangrove forest, home to trees that send roots up instead of down for oxygen, animals and plants that can survive on salty water and the only wild tigers on the planet that eat people."[68] This description, without doubt can be said to be true, is very similar to how tour operators advertise their 'Sundarban Package Tour.' It is a 'feel good' and somewhat naïve description of a place which is presented totally from an urban elite point of view. What is relevant in bringing this up here is the way Perkins chose to present the Sundarbans to her readers. She is well aware of the readership, and knowing that they will be mostly children, Perkins' choice of presenting the Bengal Tiger as the "only wild tigers on the planet that eat people" shows her ignorance of knowledge on tigers across the world. Not just in India, there are tigers found in many corners of the world which has history of being man eaters under myriad circumstances. This ignorance of the author can be justified as her conscious choice of not representing minute facts, because in the end, the book is intended specifically for children, but there are always ways of eliminating such information if one is not sure of, instead of misrepresenting. Not just this instance, Perkins confuses sea level rise as the major cause behind island disappearance in the Sundarban with deforestation: "The islands are shrinking thanks to deforestation, cyclones and erosion." One is left to wonder how cyclones can be a probable cause behind islands of the Sundarban shrinking, but we

[67] Mitali Perkins, introduction to *Tiger Boy* (Chennai: Duckbill Books, 2015)

[68] Mitali Perkins, author's note to *Tiger Boy* (Chennai: Duckbill Books, 2015)

should also remember the author's stance in the whole debate regarding environmental concerns here. She belongs with the modernist, who judge events from a typical western idea of development. The closest Perkins got to the Sundarbans to even be confident enough to write a novel on its people is to visit the place as a tourist. Her friends from the US Consul in Kolkata, in her own words, "organized a trip to the Sundarbans" for her. Once there, she interviewed a handful of people from an NGO. She also interacted with the rangers at the Sajnekhali watchtower in STR. Along with these; Perkins also "enjoyed the hospitality of community members participating in a mangrove plantation project on Amtoli Island."[69] These experiences according to her summed up her data collection or field work for writing a fully fledged book, one which also happens to be the winner of the Saba prize, 2016. These minute details, no matter how insignificant, are according to me important for delving further into her novel.

Tiger Boy, addresses the issue of human greed within a broader ambit of animal conservation. The protagonist of the novel, Neel is a teenage boy, living with his family in an unnamed village in the Sundarbans. One of Neel's friends, Viju brought in news of a tiger cub escaping from the reserve. The ten week old cub apparently "clawed a small hole in the fence" (Perkins 111) to make its way out. This cub reportedly is also currently at the island of Neel's village, because some villagers found pub marks on the mud banks. Viju's father works for a landlord called Gupta, who declared a bounty on the cub to be brought to him. It is assumed that he will sell it in the black market, because he has a history of such activities. Neel's father, who is a carpenter by profession, also works for Gupta. These fathers along with other men from the village are employed by Gupta to catch the cub before the forest rangers get hold of it. Neel, the righteous teen, cannot let this happen, and with the help of his

[69] Mitali Perkins, acknowledgment to *Tiger Boy* (Chennai: Duckbill Books, 2015)

older sister, Rupa, "rescues" the cub and very heroically delivers it to the rangers. In return he got to name the cub, and not he named her Sundari.

Following Perkins' *Tiger Boy*, there is Tannaz Daver's *One Night in the Sunderbans*, [70]an illustrated story for children. *One Night*, has a strong direct message on preserving wildlife and our natural heritage, which according to the writer, every child needs to know and make their own. The book also features beautiful page long illustrations by Ratna Moriniaux Rege. *One Night*, not unlike *Tiger Boy*, is meant for young readers. It narrates the story about an eight year old girl, Diya who lives with her family in a village in the Sundarbans. Daver takes the readers on a ride through the Sundarbans in a dream sequence exploring moral issues, where Diya encounters the three most dangerous creatures of the Sundarbans- the tiger, the crocodile and the python. All these creatures give her moral lessons on the laws of nature and the importance of conservation of wildlife. Similar criticism like *Tiger Boy* follows *One Night*, that the writer portrays a naïve story through a very simplified lens. But we also have to remember that this book is meant to be read out to mainly toddlers, and instilling in them, ideas about the natural world is important. Children, need not understand politics of space and the temporality of human occupation in the Sundarban. What they do need to know is that the animal world is best left untouched. From issues of global warming, leading to the rise in sea level, to deforestation, it is man who is responsible for all. And children are to know that their individual actions matter in the broader spectrum and Daver's work in this regard can be said to be an important one. Written in very simple language, the book aims at addressing only one social issue- that of protecting wildlife. And it beautifully does so. Unlike Perkins, who attempts to address the issue of wildlife conservation through a mature lens, Daver does it keeping in mind that her readers are toddlers. Perkins' choice of vocabulary and the narrative structure is such that only pre teen

[70] Tannaz Daver, *One Night in the Sundarbans* (Mumbai: Happy Squirrel, 2011)

or teenaged young children will find it worth appreciating. But this age group is also the time when they learn the most, and to get vague ideas or in fact wrong information about a geographical location will do them worse. But both writers should be appreciated equally for writing on the Sundarbans. Considering the lack of fiction, in English on the Sundarban, these writers, through their works have brought the Sundarbans closer to the global readership.

Suchitra Bhattacharya's *Sarpa Rahashya Sundarbane*[71], a part of the Mitin Mashi detective series, is very famous among young readers and adventure lovers. In this particular story, Mitin Mashi solves a criminal case at Bashonti, Sundarban. Though the story provides a very simplistic and often uninformed account of the Sundarbans, the book is essential in analysing the discourse of modern day Bengali writers and their engagement with Sundarban. As the title of the story goes, one is bound to expect a lot of engagement of snakes in. Likely, the story revolves around a scientist's attempt to invent a cure for cancer from the venom of snakes. These snakes, according to him are native to the Sundarbans. The scientist believes in the indigenous knowledge of the Sundarban in medical science, and apparently he has researched on this his entire life. This alternative modernity, i.e. going back to indigenous ways of healing and its representation in the story is noteworthy. Like every other good story, this has its fallbacks as well. While Suchitra Bhattacharya values indigeneity, she also presents some objectifying comments. She writes of the region stinking of rotten fish: "এদিকটায় যে এত ভেড়ি আছে টুপুরের জানা ছিল না। ...মাছের আঁশটে গন্ধে যেন গা গুলিয়ে ওঠে" [Trans: Tupur did not expect so many fish markets here…. The stench of fish made her want to throw up] (Bhattacharya 26). This brings to mind, how the Sundarban or in

[71] Suchitra Bhattacharya, *Sarpa Rahashya Sundarbane* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2016)

fact the whole of South Bengal is being understood by the urban elites. Some even term the region as "Kolkata'r jhi," literally translating as "Kolkata's servants".[72]

Mita Singha's *Bagh Kumir Sundarban*[73] is a collection of short stories based on the Sundarbans. The tiger recurs throughout her stories in many forms. Sometimes, it is the animal which declares a curfew on the villagers: "সন্ধের পর চলে অলিখিত কার্ফু" [Trans: the evenings are marked by unofficial curfew] (Singha 19), or sometimes as beings better than humans: "বাঘ জঙ্গলের রাজা, শিক্ষিত জাতি" [Trans: Tiger is the King of the Jungle, they belong to the educated class] (Singha 84). Singha had accompanied troops of woodcutters or fishermen into the deep forests several times and her stories are based on those experiences. In "Sundarbane Kumir Dhora," she writes about an encounter of a group of turtle conservationists with an estranged crocodile in a village pond. "Macha" is a story about a thrilling story of a tiger attack on humans who were perched on a *macha* (Bengali word for 'loft') on a tree. Tigers are known to be bad tree climbers, but Singha's story is about an exceptional incident when a tiger does so. She writes a biography of a tiger, "Aylar Dine Manush o Bagh" where she humanizes a pregnant tiger and her struggle in finding shelter during the raging storms of Aila.

Natural disasters like that of a storm can aid the tiger in reaching to its prey. Through Sundarban tigers are known to be bad climbers, in one particular incident, a tiger did so, in order to kill humans perched high above up in a tree. In "Macha," Singha retells the story of a woodcutter trio- Karuna, Prakash and Gobinda, who ventured into the core of the forest to cut

[72] Annu Jalais, "Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers became 'citizens,' and refugees 'tiger- food.'" *Economic and Political Weekly* (2005): pp. 1757- 1762.

[73] Mita Singha, *Bagh Kumir Singha* (Kolkata: New Script, 2016)

wood for a *mahajan*[74]. In the story Singha gives the readers an ideal description of boat life and also the complexities around acquiring passes from the Forest Officials to cut wood. Karuna had been feeling unwell since they embarked on the journey and he also was very apprehensive of working on that particular part of the forest, and continuously asked his friends to shift to a different place. Gobinda, who had recently lost his father to a man- eater, assured him along with Prakash, who questioned Karuna's masculinity. The three of them eventually construct a m*acha*, a makeshift platform made with branches and tied on top of a tree; a straight tree was chosen for this since tigers are known to not climb these. Karuna's sickness took a turn and friends had to row him to the village and return to the *macha* the same day, but a terrible storm started which forced the two friends to wrap themselves from head to toe in polythene sheets and go to sleep. A miraculous incident happened that night. A tiger climbed the *macha* with a lot of effort, and mauled both the men to death. They didn't notice the tiger climbing the tree because they had not considered the possibility of a tiger climbing a straight tree as that, and on top of that, the storm at night made it impossible for them to tell the reason behind the shaking of the tree to be that of a tiger.

"Aylar Dine Manush O Bagh," is a story about a tiger's search for shelter during the raging storms of Aila. In this story, Singha tells the struggle of animals during natural calamities, where animals and humans are both the victims of the same. An animal is better equipped with instincts to predict a storm; and the protagonist of the story, a pregnant tiger successfully does so, but she was unable to help it. When the storm came, and it raged on for days, the tiger swam across a narrow river to a village, where she took shelter atop a thatched roof. Surprisingly, there was a human on the roof as well, and Singha writes that the tiger felt compassion for the human, and did him no harm. This human- animal is unique, which is

[74] A *mahajan* is the equivalent of a landlord. He holds permit to enter the forest. It is through these *mahajans* that the poor people venture into the forests to get wood. In return, the workers get paid or often get a share of the wood.

only possible in fiction. But tigers do stray into human inhabited villages; mainly female tigers do so in order to give birth to cubs. Most of the times, this is met with mob violence and results in the killing of the tiger. [75]

Amitav Ghosh recounts an incident of killing of tiger, when a tiger strayed into a village in *The Hungry Tide*[76]. Piya, Kanai, Horen and Fokir encountered an angry mob in a village, which had in possession a tiger in a cowshed. The tiger had strayed into the village on previous occasions as well when it carried away people and cattle. This time, it got trapped in a cowshed and it is when the people got hold of it. They covered the shed with fishnets; also, some boys in frenzy thrust a sharpened bamboo pole through the windows and blinded the tiger. This incident was watched over by Piya and the others who shared diverse opinions. For Fokir and Horen, it was nothing criminal. But Piya's rationale was different- she saw the tiger as an innocent animal, incapable of reasoning. "'This is an animal, Kanai,' Piya said. 'You can't take revenge on an animal.'" (Ghosh 317) But there was little she could do; her protest was limited to her act of breaking a spear pole into two. Later, the crowd set the shed on fire, killing the tiger inside it. This incident while for Piya is "the most horrifying thing" she had ever encountered, Fokir explained it as- "… when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it's because it wants to die." (Ghosh 319)

Human engagement with the non- human animal takes various shapes in the fiction on Sundarban. Conflict between the two is so often, that humans live with the constant fear of attacks from the animal in a way that they have normalized this fear. This fear can only be understood when a foreigner; or the 'other' engage with the Sundarban. Authors in this study explore this 'otherness' through the characters belonging to the urban population and their

[75] "Collaborative Study on Problems of Tiger Straying in the Villages of the Sundarban," *Nature, Environment and Wildlive*, January 1, 1996

[76]Amitav Ghosh, "Killing," *The Hungry Tide* (Noida: Viking by Penguin Books, 2008)

endeavours at the Sundarban. For example, Amitav Ghosh's characters, Piya and Kanai are important cursors. Through their experiences and discovery of the unknown, do we explore the fear lurking around the creeks of the Sundarban. Otherwise, the native characters' normalized notion of the fear factor falls short in articulating this anxiety. But there are authors who tend to romanticize this notion of fear, and the deathly conflicts. This kind of representation paints a romanticized version of the Sundarban, where the forests along with its inhabitants are mystified. While we talk about the conflicts between humans and animals, the intimacies between the two should also be looked at. The intimacies are rare, and are only represented through instances where humans engage in killing the animal. It is only during the struggle that both human and tiger explore a form of intimacy which is destructive in nature. Thus it can be said that human- animal conflict and human- animal intimacy go hand in hand in case of the human- animal relationship in the Sundarban,

In a very different kind of narration, and known as humorous story, Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay's *Damaru Charit* offers a peculiar take on the Sundarbans and its animals. In one particular episode, Damaru receives divine energy and was able to take the form of any other being. Among the people he impersonated with that superpower, he also gets into the skin of a Bengal Tiger. This takes place while on the way to the ceremony to his second marriage and Damaru, in the shape of the tiger scares away people. How he got into the skin of the tiger is yet another story. Damaru comes face to face with a tiger, and fights with it before he ties the animal to a tree with its tail. The animal in an attempt to free itself, very comically escapes from its skin: (page 18) Damaru in the book also encounters mosquitoes the size of sparrows and crocodiles the size of a ship.

Trailokyanath also writes of a very humorous incident when Damaru fights a crocodile to rescue a lot of gold and silver jewellery as well as a human from its stomach. He single handed fought with the animal, only with occasional support from the tribals of the

area, who are depicted as very strong and well built men.[77] This brings to mind the perception of the 'adivasi' who aided in the clearing of the forests to make room for human habitation in the first phase of human settlement in the Sundarban after colonization. Damaru also took these people's help during his historic fight with the giant mosquitoes.

Towards a conclusion

It is true that the rubric of animal studies is very problematic, and so is human-animal study. One has to take into consideration a lot of variables to be rightly addressing it as a whole. Cary Wolfe writes in the essay "Human all too Human," that the crucial challenge of animal studies is that it tries to situate itself in the discipline of humanities and cultural studies. She writes:

> …the question that occupy [ies] animal studies can be addressed adequately only if we confront them on two levels: not just the level of content, thematic and the object of knowledge (the animal studies by animal studies but also the level of theoretical and methodological approach (how 'animal studies' studies the animal).[78]

Studying animals is important because it helps humans assess the impact of their own actions on the animal world, since these worlds are interrelated and maintaining a balance between the two is very important. And studying their representation in fiction is also important because fiction is nothing but human imagination of the purest form. But at the

[77] Amites Mukhopadhyay, "Hunting Tigers, Hugging Ancestors: Constructions of Adivasi Personhood in the Sundarbans," in *Nehru Memorial Museum and Library* (2013), http://125.22.40.134:8082/jspui/bitstream/123456789/911/1/4_Amites_Mukhopadhyay.pdf

[78] Cary Wolfe, "Human All Too Human: "Animal Studies" and the Humanities," *PMLA* 124, no.2 (2009):564-75, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25614299.

same time, when humans seek to represent animals in either fiction or nonfiction, it problematizes the notion of the non human. Philip Armstrong had rightly thus said, that "Novelists, scientists and scholars can never actually access, let alone reproduce, what other animals mean on their own terms. Humans can only represent animals' experience through the mediation of cultural encoding…" (Armstrong 11) It brings us back to the question of representation, and who is representing whom, and why. In this case of fiction on Sundarban, the animals represented here do not follow a strict binary. The idea of the animal varies when one traverses through class and culture boundaries. Sometimes this representation arises out of fear of the animal, while at other times, it is the need to protect or conserve the animal for ethical or other reasons. Whatever the case be, this rich collection of fiction offers brilliant insights into the understanding of the image of the animal. This image also differs greatly from one animal to another. In most cases, it is the image of the tiger which has carved a niche for itself when one refers to the geographical location of the Sundarban, owing to its unique man-eating and cunning preying habits. But even among tiger stories, there is more than one way of approaching the idea. Sometimes the tiger is represented as "Jomdyut er nyay norokhadok bishalkay Royal Bengal Tiger (Translation: deathly man eater huge Royal Bengal Tiger)"[79] or at other times as a cute cat, "Poor baby… Away from home." (Perkins 37.) This chapter thus, has attempted to address most of the possible questions that arise when one attempts to read the relationship of nonhuman animals with that of humans.

[79] Dr. M. N. Jana, introduction to *Sundarbaner Samaj O Sanskriti* (Kolkata: Deepali Book House, 1984)

CHAPTER III

Nature- Religion Dialectic in the Literature on Sundarban

> …battling with the hostilities of nature was so overwhelming an aspect… it led to the evolution of deities to whom [the people of Sundarban] could appeal for refuge psychologically during difficult times.[80]

Nature and the natural world are often interpreted as an embodiment of divinity, sacredness and spiritual power.[81] Sociologist Emile Durkheim defined religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community…."[82] The naturistic theory of Durkheim is in contrast with the theory of animism. 'Animism' endows natural objects and also non humans with meanings; it shares characteristics with totemism but differs in theory. 'Naturism' insists that the idea of religion fundamentally is dependent upon real experiences of being amidst nature. This theory puts forward the fact that religion emerged from a set of beliefs which man derived from their natural surroundings, especially from the conflict between man and nature. Naturally, the gods and goddesses that thus emerge appear to be the saviour of humans from non- human threats.

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[80] Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *The Sundarbans: Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010),. 6

[81] Evan Berry, "Religion and Nature in a Globalizing World," *Religions* 32, no. 8; (2017): 1, accessed May 1, 2019. https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/8/3/32/pdf

[82] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 13

Myths and folklore are replete with stories of such forest gods, which were replaced in modern days by mainstream gods and goddesses of the world. Belief in forest gods today are often termed as paganism in a pejorative manner, blocking out such ancient knowledge from common consciousness. Ancient knowledge is looked down upon as barbaric, silly or often unscientific by those who attribute mainstream religion and religious practices with a western scientific reasoning alone. This has led to the decline in many minor religious practices which offered diverse thoughts on spirituality and coexistence with the natural world. But there exist such religions today, which are different from the dominant understanding of spirituality, and are distinctly cradled in the protection of nature. One such system exists in the Sundarban region, where the nature-religion dialect is prevalent.

Nature is celebrated in the Sundarbans through a number of folk and religious traditions. The gods and goddesses are specific to the Sundarbans as they are derived not out of the broad Hindu pantheon but a very different genre altogether. Here, Hindu and Muslim ideals are amalgamated, which follows a compassionate mingling of culture and language. The deities emerging out of this syncretic cult were those "with whom the man in the forest could identify himself." (Chatterjee Sarkar 30) My attempt in this chapter would be to- 1. scrutinise the relationship that the people of the Sundarban shares with the prevalent religion of the region (the Hindu Muslim syncretic religion as is defined by the cult of Bonbibi); and the extent to which the British administration as well as the post- independence State Government of West Bengal was responsible in shaping these relationships and vice versa. 2. argue that in understanding the religion and mythical stories of the Sundarban, one can truly grasp the underlying yet prominent struggle between man and nature. Since the Sundarban is one such region, which does not have original or tribal habitants, its history of settlement as we know of today are founded on colonial records only. It was in the colonizers' assertion to reclaim the forested but otherwise fertile countryside as taxable pieces of land, which led to

the forced migration of people from the tribal belt of Chota Nagpur plateau in the early 18th century as was discussed in chapter one. Earlier, no permanent settlements were found in the region, though the cult gods and goddesses were there. Tiger attacks were common throughout the history of human settlement and thus the humans always shared a complex relationship with their natural surroundings. Just depending upon colonial records cannot do justice to an otherwise obscure knowledge about the relationship between humans and non human animals. Thus, the study of the religion of Sundarban is, an essential endeavour to paint an overall picture of this struggle. Focusing on the *punthi* text and works of fictions, I have attempted to answer these questions. Further I strive to answer a few more questions, such as: 3. what narrative strategies do the fiction written on Sundarbans make use of, in decoding the religion of the area? How are myths used in these texts to highlight critical ecological context? 4. I try to demonstrate how the outlook towards religion has been subjected to change, from *punthi* texts to modern fictions. In this chapter I shall briefly discuss interpretations of the cult gods and goddesses of the Sundarban, namely Bonbibi and Dakshin Ray. For this purpose, I take into consideration, the interpretations of *Bonbibi'r Johurnama* and *Raimangal* (consisting of the story of Dakshin Ray and Narayani) and also works of fiction by Shib Shankar Mitra, Amitav Ghosh and Mita Singha.

Cult Gods and Goddesses of the Sundarban

The religion of the Sundarban is not singularly about Bonbibi neither is it about Dakshin Ray. There exists a number of other gods and goddesses who have never been able to reach a global recognition, neither could they even make it to the Hindu pantheon; but it still has managed to stay alive in the beliefs of the locals through their distinctive cultural traditions. Some of these god heads are limited to certain communities. For example, there are gods and

goddesses like Shitala, Chandi, Manasa, Joshthi, Bishalakshmi, Panchanan, etc, who are associated with typical occasions. On the other hand, there are gods and goddesses who transgress the ambits of religious ideologies in order to make room for a new genre, example- Bonbibi, Dakshin Ray, Borokhan Gazi, etc. These gods emerged from the fear of humans of the unknown- be it diseases or natural elements. For example, the cult of Sitala is one which believes in the Goddess' power of curing small pox, which was prevalent in the lower Bengal region. The fear of snakes and reptiles is where Manasa emerges from. Joshthi is the Goddess of fertility, Kheshtrapal the God of agricultural production, along with Lakshmi. Among Gods of the water, the Sundarban is the abode of the Panch Pirs (Five Pirs), namely- Ghiyasuddin, Samsuddin, Sikandar, Barakhan Gazi and Kalu Gazi. The Goddess of nature, who can also be termed as an ecofeminist figure, Bonbibi is also common in these parts, along with Dakshin Ray- the God of Tigers, who is also himself represented in the form of a tiger as mentioned earlier.

These cult gods and goddesses emerged through the need of man to brave the odds of the terrifying terrain. With tigers, crocodiles and snakes lurking in every corner, death seems to be literally knocking on humans door every night in the Sundarbans. In this situation, the people had but little option to embrace a fresh religion which will speak of their own struggles with nature. They also had a hard time accepting the mainstream gods and goddesses of the mainland, since they were represented in a very elite and urban manner. Among others, Bonbibi and Dakshin Ray feature chiefly as the protector of the Sundarbans and though Bonbibi hails from Islam and Dakshin Ray from Hinduism, we are presented with what many call a "melding of religions" (Mont 112) which is unique to the Sundarbans.

Nature religion dialectic

> In response to their environment, the locals, both Hindus and Muslims, have evolved a religion that is a curious mix of animism, the Hindu Shakti tradition and a typically Indian brand of Sufism.[83]

Historians and sociologists believe that early man started believing in religion after they were faced with several supernatural events, the reasons or answers to which they did not have at that time. This resulted in fear and surprise, which adequately overwhelmed them. One prominent characteristic of religion is that all religious activities and beliefs are supernatural. This thought is also espoused by Durkheim when in order to define the concept of religion, he said that anything that goes beyond man's understanding is automatically attributed to the world of mystery and supernaturalism. But as man evolved through time, his notions of religion also were shaped accordingly.

Nature has helped man shape the ideas of religion in many ways. This statement can also be inverted and it will hold the truth: that religion is the direct byproduct of man's engagement with the natural world, where man is a problematic figure of authority over the religious laws and rules. So, if nature has shaped religious laws, and we freeze this statement as truth, we arrive at two strands of thought: 1. how is then, man the creator of religious laws? Man should have been solely the observer of nature and natural laws and not the maker of those. 2. Why are gods and goddesses personified? Many world religions do worship natural elements as they were, for example the Santhals worship the mountains as their gods; they do not have a deity for that, etc. Even the idea of God as an all knowing, all powerful and always present figure defies the notion that nature is the creator of religion. In some

[83] Saba Naqvi, *In Good Faith* (New Delhi: Rainlight Publishers, 2012), pp. 31

ways, it empowers nature with the mentioned qualities, but otherwise, unsettles the argument. When man endows nature with divine powers, the idea of gods and goddesses are conceived.

The concept of totems is interesting here. Durkheim says that human belief on totems is a way of interacting with divine elements. He also talks about the initial creative imagination of the origin of religions. "…when I approach the study of primitive religions, it is with the certainty that they are grounded in and express the real... " (Durkheim 2) He says that when these religious practices and beliefs are considered as formulas, they may appear disconcerting, but to grasp the meaning beneath the symbol is according to him, what brings out the true meaning. To take the discussion forward, I would discuss the two deities of the Sundarban- Bonbibi and Dakshin Ray to explore how these gods negotiate the binaries of human with their nonhuman environmental elements.

i. Bonbibi

> … there are no gods and goddesses in Islam. Idol worship is strictly banned. There is only Allah and his last prophet Mohammad and even he cannot be depicted in picture or idol. Yet, the people of the Sundarbans have created a curious creature in the form of a Muslim goddess. In the imagery and form, Bonbibi strongly resembled the several Shakti figures so popular in the State. Her devotees insist that she is not a metamorphosis of Goddess Durga or Kali, and are convinced that she is Muslim. (Naqvi 30)

This cult goddess speaks through her name itself. The word Bonbibi, a combination of two separate words- *bon* and *bibi*, meaning forest and woman respectively, adds an extra

ecofeminist angle to her. She is literally the Goddess of the Forest. Bonbibi rides on her pet tiger, a *bahon*, which is also common to Hindu gods and goddesses. Every god in the Hindu pantheon accompanies an animal, which is called the *bahon*, literally meaning accompaniment. Often they ride on these animals, and the animals, presented always at the feet of the Gods shows the gods' dominance over those animals. This also proves the god's dominance over nature as well. The fact that Bonbibi is represented in union with the single most deadly animal of the Sundarban at her service, also tells of Bonbibi's unearthly powers.

The devotees of Bonbibi believe that she does not harm any human who worships her as well as respects the tiger. The tiger in this sense can be said to be a totem, a totem being an object holding spiritual and sacred value. The term totem is derived from Native American Ojibwe language which is the word for guardian spirits or a belief system which is based on animistic religions. Usually, totems take the form of animals, while some communities also symbolize plants and other nonhuman objects as these symbols. Totemism is also claimed to be the origin of religion, as is espoused by Durkheim. He says:

> [The totem] expresses and symbolizes two different kinds of things. From one point of view, it is the outward and visible form of what I have called the totemic principle of god; and from another, it is also the symbol of a particular society that is called the clan. It is the flag of the clan, the sign by which each clan is distinguished from the others, the visible mark of its distinctive moments, and a mark that is borne by everything that in any ways belongs to the clan: men, animals, and things. Thus if the totem is the symbol of both god and society, is this not because the god and the society are one and the same? How could the emblem of the group have taken the form of that quasi divinity if the group and the divinity were two distinct realities?

> Thus the god of the clan, the totemic principle, can be none other than the clan itself, but the clan transfigured and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal that serves as totem." (Durkheim 208)

Durkheim studied the meaning of totems in primitive societies, drawing on the connection between social groups or communities with their specific spiritual totems and how the idea of religion is structured along these lines. On the basis of the idea of totemism, Durkhiem also draws out the distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane.' He says that "…sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of the sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things. Finally, rites are the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects."[84] He says that those things in the society which are considered sacred are not hurt by the specific community.

In this regard, Bonbibi's accompanying tiger is a totem which acts as a unifying symbol amongst the people of Sundarban. It is a figure of fear and worship at the same time. But unlike how Durkheim has described totems, the tiger as a totem for the people of Sundarban is quite different. They do not seek to consider the tiger as a mascot and neither is it a figure of awe for them. The locals also share a very different opinion of animal conservation as opposed to the urban elite way of thinking. Durkheim's argument are true but is limited to only tribes and clans which consider totems as objects of veneration and is a sacred object. In this case, the totem of the tiger is a fearful object, but at the same time the people do not hurt it routinely. They do not hunt for the tiger under normal circumstance.

[84] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), pp. 40- 41

Though there are instances of the people killing tigers, these incidents are in response to a potential tiger attack.

> Bengal's Sufis preached the immanent unity of a god who may manifest in many ways: in trees, in water, in the bodies of birds or tigers …[85]

Bonbibi emerges from a distinctive brand of Sufism in Bengal. "Instead of the orthodox Islamic view of the soul- an individual entity created by Allah," (Montgomery 111) Bengal's Sufis spread the word of God through nonhuman forces like animals and nature. She is revered throughout the Sundarban as the most famous forest deity. Her origin can be traced from the Middle East, her epic story also attributes her as a believer of the Islam religion. But she is recognized as an alternate for Goddess Durga in the Sundarbans, she is also often referred to as Bono Durga by many. But Bonbibi is not as sophisticated and elegant as Devi Durga is. In fact, she is presented as a folk deity, in a rugged and rustic manner.

The story of Bonbibi is beautifully sketched in the *Bonbibir Johurnama*, a *punthi* text.[86] Her arrival at the Sundarban is recited by Mohammad Munshi, where he refers to Bonbibi as a 'Pirani', 'Bipottarini', and also as a motherly figure (Das 5). The contrasting image of the figure is interesting. On one hand she is referred to as a Pirani- Pir being a Muslim Holy saint, and Pirani the female form of the word. On the other hand, she is 'Bipodtarini' – an avatar of Goddess Durga observed as a protector from troubles.

According to the *Bonbibir Jahurnama*, she is an inhabitant of Mecca in the Middle East, born to Ibrahim and his second wife Gulal Bibi. The story of Ibrahim and Ful Bibi

[85] Sy Montgomery, *Spell of the Tiger: The Man- eaters of Sundarbans* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016), pp. 111.

[86] Sasankha Shekhar Das, Bonbibi (Kolkata: Lokosongoshkriti O Adibashi Songoshkriti Kendra, 2018), pp. 5

narrates her childlessness, which they discovered while on a pilgrimage to Medina. They learnt that if Ibrahim doesn't marry a second time, chances of him having a baby is nil. Thus, with Ful Bibi's permission he married Gulal Bibi. But before the marriage, Ful Bibi made Ibrahim promise hers that he has to abide by one wish of her, which she will present in the future. In the course of time, Ibrahim married Gulal Bibi, the daughter of Jalil Fakir. Ten months later, when Gulal Bibi was pregnant with Ibrahim's twins, Ful Bibi presented to Ibrahim her wish which he had committed to follow. Ful Bibi desired for Gulal Bibi to be sent off to the forest for *Banabas*. Bonbibi and her brother Shah Jongoli were born in the forest during their mother's *banabas* which also justifies their nature related naming. They continued living in the forest, till after twelve years, Ibrahim found them. But both Bonbibi and Shah Jongoli refused to leave with their father because at that time, they claimed to have been summoned by Allah to travel to the 'Country of 18 tides.' Thus, they travelled all the way from the Middle East to the Sundarbans, where Bonbibi engaged in a divine combat with Dakshin Ray, the protector of the forests, till his mother Narayani settled the issue between them. It is said that in the beginning Narayani appeared to fight Bonbibi on behalf of her son. But in the process, she realized that she can never defeat Bonbibi because their strength was similar. When Bonbibi too understood this, she and Narayani ended their battle and decided to settle the matter. It was decided then that there has to be islands for humans and certain for tigers. (Das 6) These stories vary from author to author, but mainly are carried forward through oral traditions of storytelling

The laws stated that none should transgress these boundaries, but if they need to do so, they will be vulnerable to the other. For example, if humans venture into the forested islands, they are exposed to tiger attacks, and on the other hand if tigers cross into human inhabited islands, they too are viable to be hurt by humans. Bonbibi's demarcation of tiger and human islands stand blurred to this day. It can be said that today modern laws of the

government have replaced Bonbibi's division and have segregated islands on the basis of core, buffer and transition zones of the Sundarban Reserve Forest. Human activity is allowed in the transition zone, such as fishing, etc. but the core and buffer areas are prohibited for human entry without proper permission.

As discussed earlier, Bonbibi as a deity is intricately related to the nature of the Sundarbans. In order to explore that, I would like to delve into the history of human habitation in the Sundarban. The first of the people who came to the Sundarbans to settle mainly were farmers or fishermen and these people, through their professions, were linked with the forest in myriad ways. As per colonial records, these people were brought in to the Sundarban from several tribal pockets in Central India. These people, in their original habitat observed cult religion where they personified natural elements as gods and goddesses. For example, the Santhal God Boghut Bonga was revered as the god of tigers. Similarly, the Oraons and other tribal communities had their own deities. Nature worship was not unknown to them, neither was the fear of wild animals, owing to their close relationship with nature. When these people came to the Sundarban, they found themselves in similar terrain, and living so close to the forest also meant that they were vulnerable to attacks from the deadly Bengal tigers. It is also interesting to note that most of the early inhabitants at the Sundarbans were also people belonging to the lowermost strata of the society, who were rarely Brahmins or Kshatriyas. Since the dominant Hindu gods and goddesses were not inherited by these people, it was a rather smooth choice for them to embrace a slightly different kind of religion. Secondly, the area comprised of a mixed population of Hindus and Muslims. Tigers do not differentiate between Hindus and Muslims both were equally prone to attacks when they would venture into the forests for the produce. Thus, the myth of Bonbibi is a crucial factor in joining both the religions which are otherwise particularly contrasting. It can also be argued that nature is the acting force behind this marrying of religion, but then again, Bonbibi is an

agent of nature, she is instrumental in relegating laws of nature into the 'profane'[87] of the Sundarbans. She is also an auxiliary force behind the conversion of religious animosity to a cultural harmony. In various parts of the Sundarban, Bonbibi is found to be dressed differently. In Muslim dominated areas, she is dressed in *salwar kameez*, while in predominantly Hindu neighbourhoods she is draped in a *saree*. This adds to Bonbibi's religious flexibility which can also be termed as radical.

The worship of Bonbibi as a deity also enforces an ecological perspective to the traditional rituals. Every year in the month of *Poush* (mid December to mid January in the Bengali calendar), devotees of Bonbibi gather around for her annual worship. In earlier accounts, Bonbibi's rituals had "… no hard and fast rules nor any similarity with those of the Puranic gods… [She could be worshipped any time of the year and by any man of the community. There is no fixed date or season for the worship…" (Chatterjee Sarkar 42) But this has changed over the years. Now, her recognition in the Sundarban is apparent from the fact that Forest Officials seek her blessings, as does the *mouleys* and *bauleys* (Honey collectors and woodcutters). Interestingly, the Dhanekhali Drainage plant is also named after her. Sy Montgomery in her book *Spell of the Tiger* recounts a puja of Bonbibi which she attended, was organized by the Forest Department itself. She also mentions this *puja* as the most elaborate one in the whole Sundarban. In her description, she mentions an array of food being offered to the goddess, along with other things. Bonbibi is not the only deity on the dais during this *puja*, but along with her, are Gazi Saheb, Gulal Bibi and others. As the priest reads out from the scripture, which is also unique, the deities' facial emotions change. In the beginning, the idol of Gulal Bibi is showed to have has tears in her eyes, but during halfway through the chanting of *mantras*, the tears are wiped out by the priest. This transition follows

[87] Durkheim's theory of religion rests in the division of the "Sacred" from the "Profane." He defines Sacred as those acts which are forbidden; those that transcends the humdrum of everyday life. The Profane on the other hand is characterized as the mundane activities of human life.

the story Bonbibi's birth, during which Gulal Bibi was in remorse for being left out in the forest by her husband Ibrahim. But eventually, Ibrahim returns to take them back, but by then Bonbibi and her brother Shah Jongoli are grown up, and they refuse to accompany their father back to the palace. Instead, they travel southwards to the Sundarban in order to serve the people. It is when Gulal Bibi knows that her daughter Bonbibi is well settled as the saviour of the people of Sundarban, that her tears disappear.

Bonbibi's devotees also perform similar *puja* every time they venture out into the forest. But the rituals differ from the *puja* which takes place at the village. At the *abad* (forest), the men perform *puja* at the spot where they disembark from their boats. Sourced from various texts, both fiction and non- fiction, I present here the rituals that are followed. First, the men offer *pronaam* (folding of hands in prayer) to the soil the moment they step foot on the shore. Then they take some of the soil from there and build a *thhan* and a rough figurine of Bonbibi. A *thhan* is a sacred spot where the deity is to sit. This is followed by offering *batasha* (crude sugar sweets) to the deity, which is followed by prayers again. Montgomery recounts that the devotees of Bonbibi are very particular about their way of worship. She was told by the villagers that the soil which is used for making the figurine of Bonbibi has to be taken from the forest specifically; otherwise the deity will not be enhanced with sacred powers. This particular ritual calls for examining the relation of the deity with nature. The fact that the people of the Sundarbans choose to sustain the rituals of Bonbibi through a sustaining relationship with nature is noteworthy. Worth mentioning here is that the state and its politics play a huge role in the cultivation of religion of Sundarban. But, the cult of Bonbibi has been accredited as grand affair, albeit in the form of an 'exotic indigenous affair' in recent days. Earlier, though there were devotees of Bonbibi, there weren't any single unified system of her worship, as is found now. People would offer prayers to Bonbibi and Dakshin Ray every time they set foot on the forests in their own defined ways. There also

exist unscripted rituals for women whose husbands had gone to the *bada*[88]. But it was only till very recent times, that we find 'Bonbibi Utsab' being held with a lot of pomp and show. This tells of the changing patterns of the religious cult of Sundarban, along with changes in people's negotiation with natural elements.

In fiction, Bonbibi is represented as the sole Goddess of the Sundarban. In the earlier literary texts, Bonbibi was not as prominent as Dakshin Ray. In the *punthis*, Dakshin Ray features prominently over other Gods in the lower deltaic Bengal, but modern texts markedly have rendered his presence as more charismatic than that of Dakshin Ray. Even when Dakshin Ray is written about, his characterization is limited to him being the God of Tigers or simply as just the opponent of Bonbibi. Shib Shankar Mitra in *Bonbibi* writes about the steps of becoming a *Bauley*. A *Bauley* is a devotee of Bonbibi who possesses superpowers which are invaluable while going on a hunting or wood cutting trip. Kalim, the protagonist of the story goes through several disciplining and training sessions from an older Bauley and finally emerges as one himself. Though Bonbibi, the deity, is referred to in the story only scarcely, we find the presence of Bonbibi in the everyday life of the people of Sundarban. Especially, the life of *Bauleys* is analogous with the rituals of Bonbibi. In this story, Mitra also recounts the subtle fading of Bonbibi's cult in the Sundarban, which according to him is being facilitated by western influences in the forest, such as the introduction of guns and artillery in hunting animals. Bonbibi's devotees are of the belief of not harming tigers as the animal is related to Bonbibi. As guns became popular in the Sundarbans, hunting started to be perceived as a pleasurable experience. In *Bonbibi,* Mitra mainly prioritizes on the development of the protagonist while also narrating the life and hardship of the people of the Sundarban, but I find the title misleading. Mitra neither talks of Bonbibi as the folk Goddess nor does he personify the mythical figure in any of the characters of the story.

[88] *Bada*- the *bada* is defined as the forested island; the *Abad* being villages (or inhabited islands)

Bonbibi features prominently in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.[89] In the novel, Bonbibi is introduced to the readers through an episode from the lives of Kanai and Kusum when they were both young. Kusum, being an inhabitant of the Sundarban was an ardent devotee of Bonbibi, and she thus took Kanai with her to experience a theatre performance on "The Glory of Bon Bibi" (Ghosh 106). Kanai was fascinated by the performance but he failed to get engrossed in the story as Kusum did. For Kusum, Bonbibi was someone who she called to, if she were afraid; she did so when her father was killed by a tiger. It was a tragic incident; Kusum could see her father being taken away by a tiger, and amidst other villagers who went ahead to save him, Kusum could do nothing but to pray to Bonbibi. "She sank to her knees and began to whisper, 'Help, O Mother of Mercy, O Bon Bibi…" (Ghosh 114) But the poor man could not be saved. Interestingly, Ghosh subtly justifies the killing of Kusum's father by a tiger, weighing on Bonbibi's rationale. Kusum's father venturing into the reserved forest area was a violation of Bonbibi's rules. Here, Ghosh draws the line between reserved forest and human inhabited villages in liu with Bonbibi's imaginary boundary of *abad* and *bada* (forested islands and human inhabited islands). "Although this was a 'reserve' area it was common for people of their village to forage for firewood there." (Ghosh 113)

In another incident, Ghosh narrates a Bonbibi's puja offered by Fokir and his son Tutul in the fictional island of Garjontala, which was witnessed by Piya. The father- son duo led Piya through the thickets of the forests to a "leaf thatched altar" of Bonbibi, where she found figurines of gods and goddesses. (Ghosh 161) Fokir and Tutul performed puja to the deity; the ceremony of which consisted of offering leaves and flowers in front of the images followed by a prayer. Like the previous mention of Bonbibi in the novel, here Ghosh recounts the curious phenomenon of the Hindu Muslim syncreticism as well. Fokir's chanting of 'Allah' while praying to deities was surprising for Piya as it was new to her.

[89] Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Noida: Viking by Penguin Books, 2008)

It is also interesting how Ghosh presents perception of educated people towards the cult of Bonbibi. Nirmal, a school teacher and noted for his education and intellect, was one who had opposing views on this unique Goddess of Sundarban. When Kanai approached him for learning the story of Bonbibi, he dismissed him thoroughly. "Don't bother yourself with it. It's just false consciousness; that's all it is." (Ghosh 107) Even on further pressing, he tells Kanai of his disgust of the cult: "… Bon Bibi rules over the jungle, that the tigers, crocodiles and other animals do her bidding. Haven't you noticed the little shrines outside the houses here? The statues are of Bon Bibi. You would think that in a place like this people would pay close attention to the true wonders of the reality around them. But no, they prefer the imaginary miracles of gods and saints." (Ghosh 107) Though in a very rejecting attitude, Nirmal's inability to see through people's beliefs is also a different perspective on the cult of Bonbibi. He doesn't consider her an all powerful figure, but just as a pagan and backward belief.

Mitali Perkins' *Tiger Boy* presents a nuanced idea of Bonbibi in the novel. Perkins writes of the villagers offering "extra sweets and flowers to their statues of Bon Bibi, protector of the Sunderbans…"[90] in response to a tiger giving birth to cubs at the SRF. Perkins presents the villagers in a romantic, idyllic and simple manner, where they are overjoyed at the birth of tiger cubs. A reading of the *Tiger Boy* paints such a picture of the Sundarban that one may often forget the fact that tigers here are generic man- eaters like nowhere else on the earth. Also in other episodes, Neel the protagonist's mother pays visit to the shrine of Bonbibi, where he watches her light incense sticks and chants prayers (Perkins 31, 36). Bonbibi, for Perkins was among several other quintessential elements of presenting the life at Sundarbans, the mangroves, the Royal Bengal Tigers, the forest rangers and

[90] Mitali Perkins, *Tiger Boy* (Chennai: Duckbill books, 2015), pp. 65

cyclones being the others. It is interesting to note that when writers attempt to write of the Sundarbans, they are drawn to these few items for description. The representation of Bonbibi here is that of a "guardian angel"[91] which is not how the myth or cult of Bonbibi is in actuality. Here, the myth of Bonbibi is not given any significance to, and for Perkins, Bonbibi holds no other importance other than being there in the narrative as a 'must- include' key word to show the author's knowledge about the life and the people in the Sundarban.

ii. Dakshin Ray

> One of the central motifs of the *punthis* was man's struggle against wild anials, especially the tiger, which was idealized as monstrous foe or at times even a subordinate deity.[92]

Myth has it that Dakshin Ray was the original ruler of Southern Bengal. His name literally means "King of the South' and is a popular God in India and Bangladesh. His popularity is similar to that of Bonbibi and is often worshipped on the same platform as her. The popular image of Dakshin Ray is one where he is seated atop a tiger, and is often accompanied by Kalu Ray, the crocodile God. Scholars also believe that Kalu Ray and Dakshin Ray are related to each other; that they are blood brothers (Chatterjee Sarkar 38). Dakshin Ray features in the early literary texts of Raimangal Kabya and also in *Bonbibi'r Johurnama*. Unlike Bonbibi, where Bonbibi's history behind her advent in the Sundarbans is recounted, we can only speculate about Dakshin Ray's origin. One thing is clear- that he was a Hindu deity. In his book *Bengal's Folk Deity*, Gopendra Krishna Basu tells of an interesting

[91] Mitali Perkins,"Glossary" in *Tiger Boy* (Chennai: Duckbill books, 2015)

[92] Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, The Sundarbans: Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), pp. 12

probability of Dakshin Ray being the son of Shiva. When Shiva in a mad rage had sliced off Ganesha's head, it was said to have fallen south of the Himalayas. This severed head was said to have been the origin of Dakshin Ray.

In earlier punthis, DakshinRay features in the *Raimangal Kavya*. The *Raimangal* was written by Krishna Ram Das in 1686, while there is another version of the same, an incomplete manuscript written by Rudradev, which was published in 1966. Krishna Ram Das' *Raimangal*[93] eulogises the tiger deity and attempts to establish the cult of Dakshin Ray. He narrates the story of the merchant Pushpa Datta's encounter with Dakshin Ray where the God tries to confirm his sovereignty over the Sundarban. Dakshin Ray emerges victorious in his endeavour and Pushpa Dutta along with other humans becomes his devotees. I have attempted to talk about the victory of the natural world in the *punthis* in the second chapter, and it seems essential to mention here that nature and the natural world has always been on gods' team whenever there was a feud between nature and humans. The story of Pushpa Dutta further elucidates that. Human negotiation with nature works as long as they are on the side of the gods.

Unlike Krishna Ram Das' *Raimangal*, Rudradev's version of the same text presents a different story altogether. Here, not just Dakshin Ray, but other tigers kings are presented and personified. "In fact each tiger has a well defined personality…" (Chatterjee Sarkar 38) Rudradev's *Raimangal*[94] can also be interpreted as a semi biography of Tigers where he epitomizes the intellect of tigers in hunting down humans. Here, tigers hunting down humans are presented in a romantic manner; their hunt being staged as a deed of heroism.

[93] Taken from Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar's *Folk Deities and Monster.*

[94] Taken from Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar's *Folk Deities and Monsters*

The worship of Dakshin Ray takes place around the same time as Bonbibi's; in the Bengali month of *Poush*. He is not a household deity, and thus do not feature in any form of closed structure. Dakshin Ray's puja takes place in the open space in the forest or wilderness, often under trees like those of Banyan, or Margosa. He is always found in the image of a human, painted in his battledress, riding atop a tiger. Though he is the King of Tigers or God of Tigers, he is never worshipped in the imagery of the tiger. This throws light on the fact that humans though consider gods being personified as animals; they are not comfortable with worshipping the sole imagery of an animal. In fact, it can also be deduced from this fact that, worshipping of nature gods has in its core the idea that humans are the predominant powers over nature. This manifests in both Bonbibi and Dakshin Ray as they are represented with human like features, only with an extra divine energy. The myth of both these godheads effectively talks about their dominance over unruly natural elements, but still no natural element in that sense is worshipped; the Tiger God is worshipped in a human form, but not the tiger as a tiger. While describing the puja rituals of Dakshin Ray in the Sundarban, I was reminded of a visit to the National Musuem in Delhi, which houses a terracotta idol of Dakshin Ray. The website of the museum also has its mention.[95] In the description box, the museum writes of a particular ceremony that supposedly takes place after the traditional ceremonies for the deity, the *Zatal* ceremony. But neither in any works of fiction nor non-fiction, have I come across this term. During a visit to the Sundarban's Jharkhali Island for an academic conference, I took a chance at enquiring about the *Zatal*, but I have so far been unsuccessful in locating it.

[95] "Dakshin Ray" in Anthropology, National Museum of Delhi, accessed 2 May, 2019, http://www.nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/prodCollections.asp?pid=81&id=8&lk=dp8

In Bengalil fiction studied by me, Dakshin Ray is never present. This is rather uncanny, given that he was the supreme God of the Sundarbans. Amitav Ghosh mentions Dakshin Ray as a 'demon' in *The Hungry Tide*.

> The jungles of 'the country of eighteen tides' were then the realm of Dokkhin Rai, a powerful demon kind, who held sway over every being that lived in the forest- every animal as well as every ghoul, ghost and malevolent spirit. Towards mankind, he harboured a hatred coupled with insatiable desires- for the pleasures afforded by human flesh he had a craving that knew no limit. (Ghosh 108)

Ghosh describes in detail the mythical character of Dakshin Ray being full of animosity and as a blood thirsty anti- hero. He fictionalizes the character in the attempt to establish the powerful deity of Bonbibi. Ghosh chooses the theatre performance on Bonbibi, "Bonbibi'r Pala" as the sole measuring rod for Dakshin Ray's character. Here, Bonbibi is "merciful in victory and she decided that one half of the tide country would remain a wilderness; [the] part of the forest she left to Dokkhin Rai and his demon hordes." (Ghosh 108-09) In *The Hungry Tide*, he is often referred to as the demon that preys on people who set foot on the labyrinth that was the wilderness of the Sundarban. In the story of Dukhey in Bonbibi'r Pala, Dakshin Ray is represented as a cunning monster whose thirst for human blood made him deceive a party of woodcutters. He manipulated them into leaving Dukhey in the forest, on whom he could feast on, but since Dukhey was a devotee of Bonbibi, he was saved.

Victory of the Animal World over that of Humans in *Punthi* Literature

To proceed with our discussion of the representation of this man animal conflict in the literature on Sundarban, I would like to begin with the *Punthi* literature which has thrived in the region for more than 400 years. Most of this is in the form of vernacular literature, survived through oral traditions of folk songs, etc. The main theme of the *punthi* literature was to depict the struggle between humanity and their immediate nature. It catered to the tastes of the marginal sections of the population and it was based on the lives of these people through its harbouring on the gods and goddesses of the forest. The figure of Bonbibi recurs in the punthi literature on Sundarban in a way, it can be said that she is the "…embodiment of the forest itself…' (Sutapa Chatterjee 47). The reason for Bonbibi to have a place among the other mainstream Bengali gods and goddesses is said to be because of the fear of the tiger that the humans of Sundarban inherently carries, as is noted by Gopendra Krishna Basu in his book *Banglar Loukik Devata*. There exist different versions of Bonbibi's stories, like many other epics. In the *Bonbibir Johurnama*, which consists of two similar tales, narrates the arrival of Bonbibi to *Bhatir Desh* or the Sundarban, followed by her fight with the local tiger God called Dakshin Ray. One version of the story was written by Banayuddin in the year 1877, but there exists an older version also, which is believed to have been written in the 13th century BC by Marhum Munshi Muhammed Khater. Apart from the *Banabibi Jahuranama*, which is the most common, the *punthi* literature of Sundarban also comprise of *Ghazi Kalu Champavati Kanyar punthi* by Abdur Rahim and also the *Raimangal* by Krishna Ram Das. (Chatterjee Sarkar 32)

In the *punthis*, what prevails over the "fantastic narratives about gods, goddesses and their interactions with humble men and women" is the fact that it very beautifully depicted "man's struggle against wild animals, especially the tiger, which was idealized as monstrous foe or at times even a subordinate deity" (Sutapa Chatterjee 31-33). The *punthis* have a

special niche for animals in the sense that animals are given the stature of gods. The imagery of Dakshin Ray, Kalu, all are worshipped as animal Gods; Dakshin Ray being the depictive god of Tigers, and Kalu that of crocodiles. This shows that humans were not only close to animals but were dependent on them too. This dependence is emblematic to the representation of animals in religion to the extent where they are worshipped as Gods. It is also important to note that the *punthi* literature belongs to a genre in Bengali literature known as *Mangal Kabya*. *Mangal Kabya*, as the name suggests (‘*mangal’* meaning well being), is read out in household, in the *panchali* tradition of oration. Now, if we take into consideration that this kind of texts are meant for recitations at the households of individuals, and the fact that most of the narration are about co-existing or conflict with animals and other non human entities, we come to an understanding of the intricate amalgamation of these factors in the lives of humans of the Sundarban. In the *punthi* literature, whenever a combat is narrated between the animal world and humans, there is inevitably always the win for animals. To elucidate this point further, the *Raimangal* can be taken for reference. There are two versions of the *Raimangal* manuscript available: one written by Krishna Ram Das and the other Rudradev. Krishna Ram Das’ *Raimangal* has an episode where a merchant named Pushpa Dutta, ordered his fellows to fell trees from the forest to make a boat. As the forest was the abode of Dakshin Ray, the tiger God, it angered him, and he appeared in front of Pushpa Dutta’s men and killed them all. One of them, named Baulya Ratai however survived but he was so stricken with grief over his brothers’ death that he decided to commit suicide. But just then, through divine intervention, Dakshin Ray appeared in front of this man, and offered him a deal. Dakshin Ray would bring all his brothers back to life, if he sacrificed his son to him. He complies, and all happen accordingly. But Dakshin Ray did not harm the son, in return, he asked Pushpa Dutta to worship him. This is how, as the story goes, Dakshin Ray established his power over humans.

An Overview

Men owe to religion not only the content of their knowledge, in significant part, but also the form in which that knowledge is elaborated. (Durkheim 8)

Religions often address environmental issues mostly pertaining to conservation of nature. It has been doing so from before 'conservation of nature' was in vogue. The creation of the universe or universes is mostly the topics under discussion in religion, but it is only in cult religions and not mainstream religions that we find nature being given a special place. A cult is a system of religious veneration and devotion which is directed towards a particular figure or object. Cult gods and goddesses are different from mainstream Gods because they represent a very specific community of people or their issues. In the Sundarbans, the cult of Bonbibi provides a space for both Hindus and Muslims to engage with religion. This cult is not limited to just the joining of the two major religions but it can be said that it is a product of the eco consciousness of the people to worship Bonbibi. In many ways, Bonbibi is an eco warrior. She protects the interests of the forest and its habitants as well as the humans. Worshipping Bonbibi is a way of paying respect to nature in a sustainable non- western manner. The western idea of 'conservation of nature' is to protect the fauna and flora solely without engaging with the human lives, especially tribal and marginalized communities; who were not given a voice in the whole debate skirting around conservation. Humans living amidst nature are often looked down upon as destroyers of natural bounty and seldom as people with rights. This thought is reflected in the government's actions, when during the mid 1970s, in an attempt to protect tigers in the forest, huge number of people from the Sundarbans was transported to the arid terrain of central India. While this is an example of extreme policy, on the other hand, rampant destruction of the forest is also not encouraged. With modernity, the Sundarbans have seen the coming of several moneyed classes, whose sole aim was to derive profit out of the forest through timber trade, fishery or honey

collection. More than often, these people also engaged in poaching of animals which led to creating an imbalance in the ecosystem of the region.

Amidst this, the cult of Bonbibi can be sought as a way to live in a sustainable manner in the Sundarbans. Bonbibi highlights the need and greed of human beings. According to her myth, if humans are just taking from the forest what they need, and not what they greed for, they won't be victims of animal attacks. Like in most religions, her followers also tend to believe that Bonbibi saves those humans in distress who have been honest and truthful in their lives. Protection of nature and natural resources is of utmost importance here as well, because humans understand that if the forest falls short for its inhabitants (tigers mainly), then they will venture out on human inhabited islands to satiate hunger.

In the literature on Sundarban, religion plays the pivotal role of portraying humans' relationship with the natural world. Since human life is intriguingly tied with the natural world in one or the other, understanding how humans perceive nature is important. And in this case, their perception of nature is greatly shaped by their religious inclination. Among all the other Gods and Goddesses that are described earlier in this chapter, only Bonbibi seems to have dominated the fictional spaces more than any other. Dakshin Ray though finds a niche in the fictions, owing to his direct involvement in the story of Bonbibi's emergence, also is more than often omitted out. In the *punthis*, such as *Raimangal* or *Bonbibi'r Johurnama*, the victory of the natural world is eminent, and humans only act as serving agents for the gods. But in modern Bengali and English fiction, humans play an important role in their negotiation with nature. The narrative technique in these fictions is a mirror to the modernist ideas that are different from those in earlier writings, but nature remains to be located at the centre of all argument and humans at the praxis.

CONCLUSION

The conflict between man and nature seems endless; it is also cyclical in some ways. Man engages in rampant destruction of the natural world for their needs, and in turn gets affected by the disruption that emerges out of the ecological imbalance thus created. As plain as it may seem, this problem is complex and is beyond simple solution. While we understand that man is at the apex of all these problems, we also recognize man's right to exist in the world, along with all the other non- human living elements around them: such as trees, animals, etc. Cohabitation seems an impossible proposition at the current time, when man has already extended superiority over all of the earth's resources. There can be found literally no corner on the earth, which has not yet been stepped upon by man. In this scenario, natural forces do take their turns at revenge taking on man in various forms; currently, the biggest threat being that of global warming. But does this mean that, man should pay for their deeds through the justice systems defined by other men? Should government bodies facilitate torture on groups of people in order to make way for the flourishing of natural elements? Say for example, a person owns a hector of land and has built his home on it. While we all recognize the value of this particular land in terms of the number of plants that could have been planted there, is it justifiable to evict the man from his home, demolish his house and plant saplings, which might grow into trees one day and help fight global warming? Even if it seems probable as an abstract suggestion, on an individual or personal level this seems preposterous. Here arises the need for sustainable development and conscious ways of dealing with such issues. I bring this topic on board to discuss the current state of the people of Sundarban in light of modernity.

On a different note, modernity is defined by a major ecological failing, which promotes "eco- anarchy" among many other affairs.[96] Here, nature and the natural world are seen to be occupying a higher ground than humans, and it also locates humans as criminals responsible for its destruction. Interestingly, the right of humans is situated at the bottom of this debate. Here, animals and trees are portrayed to be more important than human lives. Annu Jalais in her essay "Dwelling on Morichjhanpi: When Tigers Became 'Citizens', refugees 'Tiger- Food'" locates this argument as central. She writes of the brutal evacuation of people from Sundarban's Morichjhanpi Island for the state's own reasons, and dumped the excuse on the people's violation of the Forest Acts. The rationale was that if people continued to live on the island, it would jeopardize the habitat of tigers, mainly because it was inside the SRF. Officials made it clear that human habitation will be a threat to the world famous Bengal Tigers. As the villagers refused to comply, officials charged at the villagers and raged their homes, thereby making them extremely vulnerable to tiger attacks, for which the area is infamous for. In fiction, Amitav Ghosh recounts this incident in his *The Hungry Tide*.

This brings to mind, two very recent news which talks on similar lines. One is an instance of a forester making a controversial comment on wanting to reduce the number of tigers in the forest tract under her charge:

> "Maha[rashtra] forester wants tiger numbers down:
>
> When 13 tiger- bearing countries are wanting to double the big cat population in the wild by 2020, an assistant conservator of forests (ACF) with Brahmapuri division of Maharashtra has called for a reduction in numbers, thereby kicking up a storm. She proposed this

[96] John S. Dryzek, "Towards an Ecological Modernity," *Policy Sciences* 28, no. 2 (1995) http://www.jstor.org/stable/4532350.

> as a solution to increasing man- animal conflict in the area under her charge."[97]

This left many people enraged, for whom this proposition was interpreted as sheer cruelty and inhumanity. How can innocent tigers be put to death? Asked many, who failed to understand the reason behind ACF Rameshwari Bongale's "irresponsible statement."[98] But it seems that Bongale never called for the animals to be put to death. She could have asked for transferring some animals to other forests or even some to zoos, which will help bring under control the rising man- animal conflict in the region. Here, we understand that humans have encroached upon forest lands, have engaged in illegal felling of trees and grazing of cattle, but should it stop them from implementing sustainable methods to help them fight imminent death? This is a question which is best left unanswered, and I hope this dilemma has been addressed adequately in my research.

The second instance that I wish to include here is another news clip, which happened to come up barely a week from the previous one. Here, we find villagers of a certain island of Sundarban in a frenzy attacking forest officials:

> "Foresters probing tiger death thrashed:
>
> Almost two weeks after a tiger was found dead after being trapped in a wire snare… in the buffer zone of the Sundarbans, a group of foresters probing the incident were attacked and severely beaten up by more than 100 villagers…"[99]

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[97] Vijay Pinjarkar, "Maha forester wants tiger numbers down," in *TOI*, April 15, 2019.

[98] Ibid

[99] Krishnendy Mukherjee and Monotosh Chakraborty, "Foresters probing tiger death thrashed," in *TOI*, April 22, 2019.

At the Sundarban, owing to the lack of proper livelihood options, many people resort to illegal occupations such as poaching of animals. During one such endeavour, a tiger was killed by them, which happened to be noticed by the forest officials, who went to probe the incident. Surprisingly, they were met with hostility as they neared the island of the alleged poachers:

> … as we entered the village around 10:45pm, we could hear sound of conch shells coming from a distance. The sound became louder, as we moved forward… Our forest guards were also carrying arms with them. But before we could understand anything, more than 100 villagers, including 70 women, attacked us with sickles, axes and iron rods."[100]

It is a very rare incident, as we find an entire village (including women) arming up in order to save the poachers. This shows how less the death of a tiger means to them, that they have unified against the pet of Bonbibi, the deity to whom the people of the Sundarban were likely to swear their allegiance. Though we have similar representation in fictions, the most well written being the tiger killing episode in *The Hungry Tide*, this particular incident goes against all that we understand of the religion of the Sundarban, which we very ornamentally have attributed tags such as "mystic," "unique syncreticism," etc. In the third chapter of this thesis, I have talked about how the religion of the Sundarban is one, which incorporates ecological awareness as the foundation on which other values are attached. Shib Shankar Mitra's stories consist of instances of tiger killing as synonymous with masculinity, a different kind of being and justice prevails there. Tigers were seldom killed for the sheer joy of hunting the animal, but mainly in self defence, which justifies the act to some extent, though problematizes the debate.

[100] and G. R. Santosha, "More than 100 blew conch shells before the attack," in *TOI*, April 22, 2019

In the first Chapter titled "Exploring Human Interaction with Nature in the Sundarbans," I attempted an ecocritical study of the texts on Sundarban, exploring aspects of human domination and cohabitation with nature in the Sundarban. I argued that in the fictions on Sundarban, the representation is dependent on the depiction of certain values regarding nature which the authors go by. In the second Chapter titled, "Studying the Relationship Humans Share with Animals in Sundarban," I specifically look into aspects of conservation of wildlife as a political act, and the ideas of which differs from author to author. I also talk about the forms of human and non- human intimacies and also conflicts as is represented in the fiction on Sundarban. I specifically take the imagery of the tiger and discuss people of Sundarbans' complex relationship with the animal. The third chapter titled "Nature- Religion Dialectic in the Literature on Sundarban," explores people's relationship with the prevalent religion of the region. The Hindu- Muslim syncreticism is unique and understanding it helps one also understand the deep roots the community share with religion. The religious ideas transgress boundaries of closeted religious ideas in order to create one where nature is at the apex.

Limitations of Research

As a student of English literature, who reads Bengali fiction for leisure and not to critically analyse them, the task of doing so has been difficult. But the risk was worth undertaking, since fiction on the Sundarban is scarce when it comes to texts written only in English. My attempt has been to map the relationship humans share with the non- humans in the Sundarbans and locate the conflicts and build on the perspectives of fiction writers and archival work simultaneously. While I have tried to understand the same through the fictions in this study, I have also eliminated many more, incorporating all of which would have been too ambitious a project to complete in the short span of two years. This is something that I

hope to address in the future course of my work. Since I have only based my work on the Indian part of the Sundarban have not been taken into account any work of fiction by authors from the Bangladeshi side of the area, which I am sure would offer contesting perspectives on similar issues.

Taking it forward

I situate this work within an ongoing body of brilliant work by several scholars on myriad aspects of the Sundarban. My work in this regard can be said to limited only to the literary aspect, but it is very important according to me to delve into an understanding of how the world of fictions interpret the region. Neither the soil, nor trees speak for themselves, nor does the animals or water. It is only fiction which allows us to view the mundane through a different lens. In fiction, we find these objects with specified rules and as separate beings, which otherwise would have just been the 'token natural world.' Representation and interpretation of these aspects thus becomes important in order to draw a holistic view of how we perceive them.

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