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Tiger-Charmers of the Sundarbans

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The tiger-charmers of the Sundarbans have been seen by forest guards and scientists as unscrupulous. But the islanders argue that tiger-charmers are able to better communicate between human and nonhuman worlds, and ensure resources are evenly shared. This is their story.

What led me to the Sundarbans

In 1999, I set off for the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forests in the world, to undertake two years of anthropological fieldwork for my doctoral thesis. I had been there as a child and then again as a high school student. As a child, I had noticed little shrines the same height as me with small deities inside them, and I had listened to the story of Bonbibi, the "woman of the forest."

In newspapers in the late 1980s, we had learnt how scientists had figured out why the Sundarbans tigers were infamous for their propensity to attack and kill humans, and how the government had offered the islanders remedial measures. One of these had involved distributing masks to the islanders. These had to be worn back to front. It was believed that wearing masks on the back of one's head would prevent tigers from attacking as they usually went for the nape of the neck. Their intention was to fool tigers into thinking the mask was a human face.



In 1988, I was in class 8. My school, Loreto Sealdah, had organised a nature study camp to the Sundarbans Sajnekhali sanctuary. The scientists running our camp had explained to us that the Sundarbans islanders had refused to wear the masks generously distributed by the West Bengal government "because they were so superstitious that they preferred to rely on tiger-charmers and Bonbibi than on science." A budding interest in science kept me from taking that information in any other way but at its face value.

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Full of enthusiasm, the next morning I remember a couple of us had woken up while it was still dark and had gone towards the watchtower, which overlooked the forest, in the hope of spotting a tiger. Beyond the wall of grilled netting, in the receding greenish-white mist, we could just about make out the two ponds that had gleamed so brightly in the moonlight. But after taking in the stillness of the ponds and surrounding trees for about an hour and not spotting any animal, we lost our eagerness and climbed down. It was dawn.

A small group of guards, still in their *longhies*, was sitting in a circle chatting and drinking tea. On noticing us, they beckoned us over and asked if we had been lucky enough to sight an animal. We shook our heads despondently. To raise our spirits, one of them said he would show us something and went towards his quarters. The others made space for us and offered us some tea. The guard who had gone in came back with a couple of the masks. Lo and behold, they were the ones the scientists had mentioned the previous night.

> Slightly surprised by our keenness, one of them said, "You're mad! Tigers don't even respect government officials!"

Intrigued, my two friends and I playfully put them on the back of our heads and innocently asked if we could venture out of the tightly fenced sanctuary to watch wildlife "out in the open" - we would surely have more luck this way, we implied. They laughed off our request. We became insistent. Slightly surprised by our keenness, one of them said, "You're mad! Tigers don't even respect government officials!" We argued that we were not superstitious and that we would not need armed guards as we would be protected by the masks. Our faith in scientists was boundless.

Are masks "scientific" if they work for only one kind of human?

As we continued arguing playfully, it slowly dawned on me that the guards never moved without their rifles and thick shields, even when straying barely 50 metres from the gates of the sanctuary. We cheekily asked why they did not wear masks and suggested them doing so might convert the islanders to wearing them. Now on the verge of exasperation, they explained that the masks would not work, either for us, as we were from the city and were so fair and plump, or for them, because tigers were so used to seeing them with rifles that they would not fear them if they only wore masks. We were thoroughly perplexed.



Later that evening, when we reassembled, this time in the little wooden room where we were to be given another lecture on wildlife, I raised my hand and asked why the guards had not allowed us to venture outside even though we had been prepared to wear masks. When one of the scientists told us that it was "too big a risk to take" my recently acquired staunch belief in "scientific masks" crumbled.

> I wanted to know why people refused to wear masks and preferred to put all their trust in tiger-charmers and Ma Bonbibi.

I realised then that there were after all two kinds of people: those who were required to trust the force of a mask, and those who were too important to be wearing masks and who could only be adequately protected by a rifle and shield-bearing human. The supposed scientific force of a mask was reserved for those in menial occupations, such as fishermen or honey collectors; not us, city school-children. But we were also not sufficiently important to warrant the protection of armed guards. We were in between, left to contain our excitement for wildlife until 5 p.m. when we would be allowed to watch the guards feeding the deer while we stood safe within our giant cage.

For a decade after that camp, I had thought about masks and tiger-charmers and Ma Bonbibi, and of death caused by tigers. So, when I got the opportunity to undertake a doctoral programme at the London School of Economics, I decided to do it on the Sundarbans. I needed to find answers. I wanted to know why people refused to wear masks and preferred to put all their trust in tiger-charmers and Ma Bonbibi. I also wanted to find out who these 'tiger-charmers' were and how exactly they were believed to be able to 'charm' tigers.

The colonial misreadings of the Bengal tiger's 'nature'

One day, while preparing to do fieldwork in the Sundarbans, sitting at the Wellcome Institute's library in London, I came across a text that had been written in 1875 by Joseph Fayrer, a surgeon and a prolific natural science writer. Fayrer was conversant with the writings of naturalists, especially those about the subcontinent. In his *The Royal Tiger of Bengal: His Life and Death*, Fayrer argued that even though the tiger's physical aspects are superior to those of the lion, the lion had thwarted the tiger from acceding to the title of king of the jungle because of a misunderstanding about its "nature," which was thought to be that of a "natural man-eater".

Fayrer consequently took it upon himself to "rehabilitate" the tiger's image through an account of why it had "fallen into evil ways," explaining that this man-eating habit "not of much consequence" was to be blamed on the superstition of villagers. Fayrer claimed that the habit was both the result of the "apparent indifference of villagers and cowherds with which they regard the brute" and of "the natives of India, especially the Hindoos, hold[ing] the tiger, as they do the cobra, in superstitious awe" (1875: 41-42). He felt that this "injustice" done by the tiger could be rectified if the animal were given a better "character certificate."

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Fayrer contended that the tiger population increased after 1857 (it is interesting that he picked this very date). We might conjecture wildly that it being the year of the subcontinent's first consequential armed uprising against the British, he might have feared that tigers would take their cue from people, start reproducing on a bigger scale, and so be able to launch their own attack against the British.

Fayrer, like many well-meaning contemporary wildlife enthusiasts, then tried to downplay the destruction caused by tigers. After telling us how in Lower Bengal alone in the six years between 1860 and 1866 tigers killed 4,218 people and how, during the same time, loss of property amounted annually to 10 million pounds sterling, he invited the reader to consider this destruction as being "not so great when one bears in mind that the population of India, including the native states, is nearly 250,000,000" (1875: 45, 47). The strangest thing was that on our way to the Sundarbans, I had overheard a well-dressed man responding the same way upon reading in the newspaper that a fisherman had been killed in the Sundarbans: "We are an overpopulated country, one less, one more, who cares?" he had said turning towards one of his friends who had nodded in approval.

In Fayrer's time too, the British regarded India as an overpopulated country with wild animals. From Fayrer's own account, we learn that British sportsmen in those days killed about 1,200 tigers a year in Bengal alone. But again, this was not so much to rid villagers of the widespread destruction caused by these animals but because Fayrer - and undoubtedly many other Englishmen - perceived such hunting to be a way of purging tigers of their "evil man-eating ways."

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What appeared necessary to Fayrer was that the tiger recovered its true "psychology," implying that for the sub-species to regain its due or "natural" regal status, it had to forgo its man-eating habit. Not only was this "habit" blamed on people who lived in the same vicinity as tigers, but ridding tigers of "their evil ways" could only be undertaken by, as Fayrer calls them, "courageous English sportsmen." Thankfully they could not do any of that because the marshy forests of the Sundarbans were not conducive to British ways

of hunting, and this is why there are still tigers in deltaic Bengal today.

Asking the islanders if masks work

Soon after arriving in the region a decade later in 1999, I decided to live in a village, one that lay across the river from the forest. Tushar Kanjilal with his *Gramer Diary* had been an inspiration and under his advice, I had gone to live on the island of Satjelia.

One of the islanders of southern Satjelia had recently been killed by a tiger while fishing along the forested riverbank opposite the village. Horrified, some of the islanders had watched the gruesome attack unfolding before their eyes. This attack, fresh on the islanders' minds, was mentioned often when they heard I was keen to know more about this region.

"Why did he not wear a mask?" I tentatively queried one day.

"Why should he?" shot back my interlocutor, Amal.

"Because they protect...?" I suggested.

"The day forest guards and visiting dignitaries wear masks, we will wear masks. Until then we prefer relying on our tiger-charmers and Ma Bonbibi," retorted Amal with brief clarity and evident bitterness.

> "Our tigers allow us into their forest as long as we are poor and have no alternatives. But if we enter the forest with firearms or with devious motives and plan to take life, then we're fair game to tigers…"

After some weeks, the islanders kept insisting that I travel to the forest with them to "know all about their tiger." I countered that I was not interested in tigers. I wanted to write about them, the people of the Sundarbans. They persisted: "How will you write about us if you do not know our tigers?"

"Why do I need to know about your tigers to be able to write about you? What is so special about your tigers?" I asked, incredulous.

"Our tigers allow us into their forest as long as we are poor and have no alternatives. But if we enter the forest with firearms or with devious motives and plan to take life, then we're fair game to tigers. For the forest is the land of equality and brotherhood," said Leela who liked to summarise everything the men said and get to the point.

She went on: "Tiger-charmers are those that take on the responsibility of facing tigers and being like tigers to tigers, so they understand each other and can talk to each other."

"Why then are they the first ones to get killed?" I retorted, as I had by then become familiar with all the British colonial gazetteer writers who made very disparaging comments about tiger-charmers, saying that they were invariably the first ones to be killed by tigers.

"That's because tiger-charmers are arrogant, just like tigers. You know that tigers have huge egos and attack each other, right? This is the reason why they attack tiger-charmers - they see them as another tiger. They're like brothers. Just like Ma Bonbibi asked us to be. Stay with us some time, visit the forest, and you'll start to understand," she explained with a trace of exasperation.

It was only when I accompanied the islanders to the forest that I did indeed start to understand. The tiger-charmers' power is called upon when forest-working teams land by boat to go into the forest and, again, when they depart. As soon as a boat arrives along a forested island, the role of the tiger-charmer is to be the first one to alight from the boat and then crouch and 'check the earth' (*mal dekha*) by placing his hand on the earth - usually a little mound --while reciting the names of the five pirs and the five bibis. Once he has finished reciting his silent chants to pacify difficult nonhumans - especially tigers and spirits - he ties a piece of earth to his body and keeps it there during the whole venture. Later, before leaving the forest, when all his team-mates are safely back in the boat, he crouches again and places his hand on the forest earth to "break" the spell he had cast, so that tigers can again go about their ways unhindered.

> [T]iger-charmers have to strike a subtle balance between having the required humility when entering non-human territory and retaining their co-workers' confidence through their reputation as being powerful.

These precautions are explained as showing that one does not mean any harm to the animals. 'Checking the earth' also permits tiger-charmers to 'feel' and gauge whether they have arrived at a 'correct' time. If they deem that the time is not right, they return to the boat, as one of the important precautions when setting off for the forest is to not disturb nonhumans unduly. Just as it is bad form to arrive at people's houses during lunch or dinner, it is considered to be asking for trouble to enter the forest during the animals' dinnertime, which the islanders believe is at night. A 'correct' time to enter the forest is when tigers and other animals are resting, which is the morning and early afternoon. This is the reason why tiger-charmers usually refuse to go to the forest at night and resent poachers, who are seen as not respecting wild animals' need for privacy.

So the tiger-charmers have to strike a delicate balance between the needs of nonhumans and humans. If, when trying to place their hand down on the earth, their fingers start quivering and their hand refuses to settle gently on the earth, the tiger-charmer either has to leave or say stronger charms. If they leave, they return to the boat and row it to another part of the forest where they 'check the earth' again. The important aspect of this ritual is to show total deference. As one tiger-charmer explained:

"We crouch on the ground to ask for forgiveness from the forest and its inhabitants for barging in on them and upsetting their routine by the charms we use. Then we say: 'Listen, lord, you will have to clear off from the path I have chosen, you go yours, let me go mine,' or 'Mother of mine, whether in water or in the jungle, clear my path, collect your tiger children to your bosom and show the way to your human children. Pleading your name, I say these words.'



Ma Bonbibi and Dokkhin Rai

Ma Bonbibi is the name of a little-known superpower that graces the Sundarbans forests. The story goes that Allah chose Bonbibi to protect people who work in the Sundarbans forests against a greedy shape-shifting and man-eating tiger-demon, Dokkhin Rai.

Dokkhin Rai, "King of the South," was originally a Brahmin sage who lived in the forest. Through his ascetic powers, the sage could magically transform himself into anything. One day, in a fit of greed, he decided to feed on humans. For this, he shape-shifted into a tiger.

Dokkhin Rai's greed increased and soon the sage-turned-tiger-demon refused to share any of the forest resources with humans. He also started legitimising killing them by calling it a 'tax', one humans had to pay with their lives for the products they took from what he

had started to consider his jungle. Soon his arrogance and greed knew no bounds and he proclaimed himself lord and master of the Sundarbans mangrove and of all the beings that inhabited it: the 370 million spirits, demons, god-lings, spirits, and tigers. With time, he became a demon who preyed on humans. Tigers and spirits became the chosen subjects of Dokkhin Rai, and emboldened by him, likewise started to terrorise humans and feed on them. The trust that had existed between tigers and humans had been broken.

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But Allah, on noticing the frightening deterioration in relations between tigers and humans, decided to act. In his compassion for the people of the "land of the eighteen tides" (*athero bhatir desh*, another name for the Sundarbans), he decided to put a stop to Dokkhin Rai's reign of terror and insatiable greed. He chose for this task Bonbibi, a young girl who lived in the forest.

Bonbibi's human birth-father, Ibrahim, had abandoned his wife Gulalbibi in a forest, believing she could not become pregnant. What he did not know was that she was already pregnant, with twins. The animals looked after Gulalbibi and she gave birth to her twins in the forest. As she thought she did not have enough to provide for both children, she kept only her son, Shah Jongoli. A passing deer took pity on Bonbibi, the baby girl, and became her surrogate mother.



One day, while she was still a teenager, Bonbibi heard Allah bidding her to free the Sundarbans from the exploitation of the Brahmin man-eating sage who took the form of a demon tiger and called himself the King of the South. At the same time, Ibrahim returned to the forest to find his wife. As her mother, brother, and father prepared to leave the forest, Bonbibi called out to her brother and told him about her urgent task: to go to Medina to seek Fatima's blessing, then to Mecca to collect some holy earth, and then to travel to the Land of the Eighteen Tides to free it from the demon tiger. Her brother Shah Jongoli decided to accompany her. Together they left for Mecca and Medina.

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Armed with holy earth and Fatima's blessings, the siblings arrived in the Sundarbans. There they called out Allah's name and mixed the holy earth of Mecca with the earth of the Sundarbans. When Dokkhin Rai heard their call for prayer he resented their intrusion and decided to drive them away. But Dokkhin Rai's mother, Narayani, appeared. Insisting that it was better for a woman to be fought by another woman, Narayani wrestled Bonbibi.

As Narayani began to lose the fight, she called Bonbibi a "friend" (*shoi*). Bonbibi, gratified by the appellation, accepted Narayani's 'friendship' and they stopped warring. She then declared that Dokkhin Rai should stay within the realm of the forested islands further south and not venture into the northern parts of the forest where humans came to fish and collect honey.

Young Dukhe's Tale

The myth of Bonbibi is always followed by Dukhe's tale. Dukhe (literally "sadness") was a young boy who lived with his widowed mother, making a living by grazing other peoples' animals. One day, his village uncle lured him into joining his team to work in the forest as a honey collector. Dukhe's mother did not want him to go but finally relented, telling him to call out to Ma Bonbibi should he encounter a threat.

The team left for the forest but could not locate any beehives. Dokkhin Rai then appeared to the uncle, whose name was Dhona (from *dhon*, which means "wealth"), and promised him seven boats full of honey and wax if he could have Dukhe in return. After some hesitation, the uncle left Dukhe on the banks of Kedokhali island and sailed off.

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Just as Dukhe was about to be devoured by Dokkhin Rai, he remembered his mother's advice and called out to Ma Bonbibi. Bonbibi instantly rescued him and sent her brother Shah Jongoli to teach Dokkhin Rai, who had strayed outside his realm, a lesson. Fearing for his life, Dokkhin Rai ran to his friend, the Ghazi. Ghazi, a *pir* - an Islamic saint - suggested that Dokkhin Rai ask forgiveness from Bonbibi by calling her "mother." He then took him to Bonbibi and pleaded on Dokkhin Rai's behalf. Bonbibi, heeding the Ghazi's intervention, received Dokkhin Rai's apology and accepted him as her "son."



However, Dokkhin Rai began to argue that if humans were given free rein, there would soon be no forest left. So, to be fair and to ensure that Dokkhin Rai and his retinue of tigers and spirits would stop being a threat to humans, and that humans would likewise stop being a threat to nonhumans (that is, wild animals, plants, and spirits) by chopping down their forest, Bonbibi elicited promises from Dukhe and Dokkhin Rai that they would treat each other as "brothers."

> Dokkhin Rai began to argue that if humans were given free rein, there would soon be no forest left.

She did this by forcing Dokkhin Rai and the Ghazi to part with some of their wood and gold respectively and by making Dukhe promise that he and his kind heed the injunction that they are to enter the forest only with a *pobitro mon* (pure heart) and *khali hate* (empty handed). She then sent Dukhe back to the village a rich man, riding on her pet crocodile Kalu, so that he no longer had to work in the forest.

Pure hearts and empty hands

Following this retelling of Dukhe's story, the islanders of the Sundarbans often explain that they identify with Dukhe, whose unfailing belief in Ma Bonbibi saved him, and that they consider the forest to be only for those who have no intention of taking more than what they need to survive. There is no place for those who enter with "greed in their hearts" or "firearms in their hands," they insist. This is the "agreement" between nonhumans and humans that permits them both to depend on the forest and yet also respect the other's needs.

The "pure heart" means that they have to enter the forest without any greedy or violent disposition, and the "empty hands" means they must enter the forest without firearms, and only if they do not possess riches or their own land. It is only if humans honour their part of the agreement and leave the forest and its resources to those who are dispossessed that tigers will respect their part of this agreement worked out by Ma Bonbibi, the islanders patiently explained to me.

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Bonbibi's story is not very old. The *Bonbibi Johuranamah*, the booklet that narrates her story, was written by a little-known author called Munshi Mohammed Khater Saheb towards the end of the 19th century. Although in Bengali, it is written from back to front to emulate the way the Arabic script appears. The story between the Ghazi and Dokkhin Rai is older and more famous. This appearance of the two in this story recalls a version of an epic poem called *Ray-Mangal* composed by Krishnaram Das in 1686 (it predates that of Bonbibi by at least a couple of hundred years). The historian Richard Eaton believes that this story is a "personified memory of the penetration of these same forests by Muslim pioneers" that is, Sufi holy men, and that, at its inception in Bengal, Islam was seen more as a technique which could work magic, enabling Sufi leaders to control tigers and evil spirits.



Today, the power of these beings who "protect" the forest, whether the Ghazi, Bonbibi, or Dokkhin Rai, are usually represented together by little earthen mounds or as decorated human figures. The earlier shrines had been only earthen mounds, but over time Hindus started making representations of Bonbibi, Shah Jongoli, Dukhe, and the Ghazi to include in their shrines. Shrines dedicated to Ma Bonbibi always include earthen mounds; the representational figures, however, are optional. Though Hindus talk about "worshiping"

her, Muslims talk about "venerating" her, just as they do their parents or the pirs who brought Islam to Bengal. For them, it is more a matter of showing respect than "worship," and there are understandably no images in the shrines Muslims dedicate to her memory.

For the islanders, Bonbibi's figure opposes the distinctions of caste, class, and religion. This is the reason why those who work in the forest as fishermen and crab collectors stress that they have to consider all *jatis* "equal": whether Brahmin or from an erstwhile untouchable caste, rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim, or even human or animal. Tigers and humans "share the same food," they explain, because they both depend on the forest. Tigers eat fish and crabs like the villagers, and like them, are greedy for wood and are careful not to cede live trees to humans. Islanders spoke about being allowed to claim dead wood and dry twigs from the mangrove but not live trees. These facts not only make tigers equal to humans, they also "tie" them to humans.

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Also, Dokkhin Rai, the Ghazi, and Bonbibi have to be placed together in shrines, point out the villagers, to show how different jatis must coexist and agree when dealing with the forest. Many Sundarbans islanders say that the most important factor for ensuring their safety in the forest, apart from entering the forest "empty handed" and "pure hearted", is that they should entrust their lives to Bonbibi, live up to her injunctions, and not dwell on their religious, caste, or gender differences.

Shamanic interspecies communicators

What this story also taught me as an anthropologist is that there are different ways of understanding "nonhumans." While I was a student at the London School of Economics, I came across philosopher and anthropologist Philippe Descola, who had just written his famous book *In the Society of Nature: A Native Ecology in Amazonia* (1994). In it he discusses how for the Achuars that live in the Amazon jungles, jaguars are "brothers," as humans can become jaguars and jaguars human.

When I started living in the Sundarbans conducting anthropological fieldwork, I was surprised to find that the islanders wanted me to visit the forest and learn about their tigers from them, as I mentioned earlier. I was initially reticent and argued that I was working on peoples' cultures, not on tigers. Yet the islanders kept insisting that I would not be able to understand their culture if I did not understand their tigers. I became curious to discover why they thought their tigers were so important to know. They then explained that "their tigers" were "just like them" - cantankerous yet compassionate - and that they were interconnected in this terrible place where the land and water are brackish and where both tigers and people have endured a history of persecution and migration.

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The people who helped me understand tigers most were the tiger charmers, the very people ridiculed by Fayrer, British colonial gazetteer writers, and the forest guards and scientists who had remarked how "tiger-charmers were the first ones to be killed." Yet as I lived with the tiger-charmers and learned from them what was so special about "their" tigers and forests, they explained that when they became tiger-charmers they took on the persona of a tiger, and specifically took on a tiger's arrogance in order to be able to face them and talk to them. Tigers resent other tigers and sometimes attack them. Similarly, tigers sometimes attacked tiger-charmers. This was the price they had to pay for becoming 'tigers'.



What seemed curious was that even though the islanders saw it as natural that tiger-charmers would be targeted by tigers, none would ever venture into the forest without one.

"Why is that so if they are the first ones who get killed?" I wanted to know.

"It is because tiger-charmers also know how to speak in the language of tigers and can use sacred spells that 'request' tigers to go to sleep," I was told. This comes in handy when they must cut wood or collect honey. So the tiger charmer in a way knew he was "taking on the risk of being a tiger" to allow the rest of the team to feel protected from the tiger. In a way, tiger-charmers consider themselves to be talking "tiger to tiger" with the forest tigers, understanding themselves as sacrificial offerings in case their subtle "negotiations" with the forest beasts were to break down. They do this by using a subtle mix of both "tigerish arrogance" as well as "human devotedness to Ma Bonbibi" when entering the forest.

> [The tiger-charmers] explained that when they became tiger-charmers they took on the persona of a tiger, and specifically took on a tiger's arrogance in order to be able to face them and talk to them.

The task of tiger-charmers or of the intrepid wood and honey workers, the islanders explained, is therefore far from enviable as it challenges Dokkhin Rai's so-called arrogance and greed. The islanders pointed out that Dokkhin Rai, the "king" of all the nonhumans of the forest, is primarily a ruthless and greedy Brahmin and landowner and that he and his retinue of tigers, being embodiments of "arrogance" and "greed", have to be "stood up to". They say that Dokkhin Rai resents humans because he sees their charms as undermining his power and humans' extraction of forest products as a depletion of his personal wealth. He challenges those humans he considers threats.These are mainly those who know magical spells that can outwit his own charms as well as those who pose a threat to his favourite possessions-the most important of which is wood.

Arrogant as Dokkhin Rai is, the forest fishers explained, he loves taking on important adversaries in a battle of wits, and his greed is so great that anyone taking anything from him, especially wood, is terrorised with the threat of death. The task of tiger-charmers, the islanders explained, is far from enviable as it entails challenging Dokkhin Rai.

With the beings of the forest

This point is well illustrated through the following apocryphal story. Binod, a veteran tiger-charmer, had been hired, along with a few others from his village, to collect some huge logs which had washed up along the seashore, 20 kilometres south of Garjontola. With

seven other men, he sailed off in two boats with enough water and food to last 10 days. By dusk, they reached Kedokhali, the biggest island and the furthest south.

Recognised as Dokkhin Rai's abode, Kedokhali was also feared for its large number of tigers. Once they arrived, they decided to settle for the night in one of the canals that criss-crossed the island, away from the powerful sea waves and strong wind and well hidden from any Forest Department boat on patrol. This was deep in the core of the forest where humans were barred entry. Had they been found, they would have been heavily fined.

On their way there, they were lucky and collected some logs. As night fell, one of the men chopped off a piece of the wood and lit it. All of a sudden, they heard cries of "Auuuu, ouuu, I'm burning, I'm burning!" coming from the jungle. Binod ordered the man who had lit the log to extinguish it. Then they heard a threatening voice floating down to them, demanding "Hand me that man, he burned me." Surprised, they turned towards the voice and saw in the distance, sitting on the riverbank, what looked like a human figure, beckoning with his long arms, and calling for the man in the boat who had lit the piece of wood.



Binod had had many experiences with the more sinister nonhumans of the forest and was never one to be easily intimidated. He replied: "Come and fetch him yourself if you have the guts. It's impossible for me to deliver him to you because, having brought him to the jungle, I have the responsibility of taking him back home safely." But the figure refused to leave them.

So, after some time, Binod took a clay pot and a thin towel and recited some sacred incantations. The figure stopped threatening them and disappeared. The recitation of his charms over, Binod found, as he had expected, a pebble inside the pot. It was Dokkhin Rai, who had been transformed into a pebble. Binod plucked it out and tied it to the bow of the boat. He then told his men not to worry, and ordered that food be served.

> Binod had had many experiences with the more sinister nonhumans of the forest and was never one to be easily intimidated.

The next morning, the occupants of both the boats woke up, not in the canal they had moored the previous night, but in the middle of the sea, their anchor having been mysteriously loosened. They were totally lost, surrounded by a heavy mist that clouded their sense of direction. To make matters worse, they were hit by a storm and one of the boats capsized, which had most of their water and food.

Directionless, cold, and hungry, they began wondering whether they would ever reach home again. A couple of nights later, they heard a voice say, "Let me go." Every time, Binod replied, "Take us to safety first. After that I will release you." Finally, after about two weeks, they reached a coast. The voice said, "This time I could not stop you, but I'll get even later." When they arrived, Binod kept his promise, untied the pebble, and threw it into the sea.

As he did so, he heard a menacing voice say: "I am Dokkhin Rai. Nobody interferes with me."

They had arrived at a little fishing village in Odisha and the inhabitants, not being able to understand their language, called the police, who sent them back to the Sundarbans. After a few days of rest, Binod returned to the forest as he needed some *golpata* (nipa or mangrove palm) leaves to rebuild the roof of his house. He and the men who had accompanied him heard that voice again. It kept saying, "Bring me that man and I will leave you alone. Otherwise, I will not let you cut any of my golpata."

Binod said, "I've had enough of you and I will cut golpata whether you like it or not." With the powerful charms he knew, Binod managed for a second time to imprison Dokkhin Rai in his earthen pot, which he then covered with his thin towel (*gamcha*) to prevent the miniature Dokkhin Rai pebble from escaping and causing mischief. Dokkhin Rai pleaded to be released, but Binod replied that he would not do so until he finished building his roof.

> [T]he manifestations of Dokkhin Rai, the islanders believe, are numerous. For example, Dokkhin Rai is not just "arrogant" but also "greedy" and "thieving".

With Dokkhin Rai confined, Binod came back home later that day with enough golpata leaves for his roof. On the way back, Dokkhin Rai's pleas became more insistent: "Please, let me go, you know that I am not allowed to see women's faces, I am a bachelor. Please deliver me."

Binod replied, "After all the mischief you have done to me, how can I now be sure that you will not create more trouble? No, it's safer to release you once I have reached home."

"Please," pleaded Dokkhin Rai, "I am not allowed to enter inhabited places, deliver me."

Binod turned a deaf ear to his entreaties, returned home with Dokkhin Rai in his pot, and unloaded all the golpata from his boat and arranged it in the middle of his courtyard ready to construct his roof. Once he had finished, he decided Dokkhin Rai's ordeal had lasted long enough and untied the towel. As he did so, a sudden wind blew all his golpata over the river and back into the forest. This was Dokkhin Rai's doing. From the pebble-like form into which he had transformed and from which he had subsequently been released, he used his magic to take the form of a strong wind and blow the leaves back into the forest.

Thus, the manifestations of Dokkhin Rai, the islanders believe, are numerous. For example, Dokkhin Rai is not just "arrogant" but also "greedy" and "thieving." Indeed, if these titanic beings are perceived as able to match the powerful charms and fearlessness of certain humans such as tiger-charmers, they are also believed to be "thieves" (*chor*). This is not only because they attack from behind and lay claim over wood or forest products but also because they are considered to be insidious beings who disguise themselves to plant the seed of fear in human hearts to make them weak and even cause them to die.

"Refugee" tigers and humans

The islanders narrate that arrogant nonhumans target tiger-charmers because they know of their opponents' powers and feel threatened or challenged by them. Once the tiger charmer is killed, they know the other team members will become easy prey as they will have "caught the fear." Most islanders recover from such "fear" by having it exorcised but some of them never pull through, and months later, die from the fear that has been eating them alive.

"Why do you refer to these beings as 'arrogant'?" I asked, perplexed. "But this is what they all are. Whether it is Dokkhin Rai, tigers, monsters, or spirits, they all have a firm conviction of their self-importance, are very possessive about their wood, are vengeful, and are the very embodiment of arrogance," the islanders replied.

> I learned that their tigers were "kind-hearted" because they, like the islanders, had a history of fleeing violence. Tigers too had migrated. They were migrants…

One person then told me how some friends of his had challenged a group of spirits to a charm-slinging competition. When, after an entire night's fierce competition, they ran short of charms, one of them had the sense to say, "Please forgive us, master, we know no more." Hearing this, the satisfied spirits left them. "They love to feel superior to us and once we recognise that, they leave us humans alone."

"But our tigers are also kind-hearted and cantankerous creatures," some islanders clarified.



I learned that their tigers were "kind-hearted" because they, like the islanders, had a history of fleeing violence. Tigers too had migrated. They were migrants: "They left southeast Asia fearing for their lives as their body parts were in high demand in those countries. While searching for a safe place, they travelled through many regions," narrated Kamal, a fisherman, "until they found refuge in this god-forsaken place that is our Sundarbans mangrove."

> This narrative about tigers and Sundarbans islanders' sharing a presumed history of migration articulates their feeling of being "second class citizens". The islanders felt that they were wrongly blamed for the environmental ills of the Sundarbans.

"So when we came along, we refugees from East Bengal," explained Anil, an elder who acted as the historian of the village, "tigers allowed us to settle in the northern parts of the forests. After that, our forefathers reclaimed the forested mangrove islands of the north and west, erected mud bunds to keep salt water out, and made this difficult region their home."

"So you see, we and tigers are joined together, sharing the same history and geography. We have even ended up with their cantankerous nature and a generous kind-heartedness towards each other," clarified Mohan, one of my neighbours in Garjontola.

This narrative about tigers and Sundarbans islanders' sharing a presumed history of migration articulates their feeling of being "second class citizens". The islanders felt that they were wrongly blamed for the environmental ills of the Sundarbans. In this context, the islanders' versions of the bloody story of Morichjhanpi and how they believe that tigers radically changed after this episode and became "uncontrollable" man-eaters, takes on enormous importance. Through this narrative, the islanders voiced their fears about being, for the state, mere "tiger food," or "dispensable citizens," while tigers, through the various government programmes to increase their numbers, had become "first-class citizens." Some islanders mentioned having become poachers after the incidents on Morichjhanpi in 1979 when hundreds of migrants died, many of them shot by the government.

Then, in the 1980s, it became dangerous to be killed by a tiger because the family of the dead trespasser was made to pay a fine. The victim's body had to be abandoned in the forest for fear that the forest officials would get to know about it. The new widow and the victim's children were forbidden to cry and taught to say that their father had died of diarrhoea because if exposed, the family members were exhorted to pay up for the dead, and were, in effect, treated like criminals.

> [The] fall from grace for both tigers and tiger-charmers irremediably broke the sort of compassionate understanding that had existed between all creatures.

Many islanders also argued that if the tiger could swim over to their village (which happened very often in those days) and could make off with their cattle and sometimes even human beings, they did not see why they were not allowed to enter the jungle and do the same. "The state officials think we are thieves and poachers anyway," said a young man, "then why not live up to their expectations?" said a young man sarcastically.

For these reasons, understanding the multiple stories of tigers, both of their supposed migration and of the presumed contemporary transformation of their character as narrated by the islanders, is so important. For the islanders, it underscores the background to the tensions that revolve around two types of relatedness to tigers. One was based on peace and equality and the principles of the forest represented by Bonbibi and a belief that a shared history of migration had made them all compassionate. The other was based on violence and an assumed transformation of tigers after the state's brutal treatment of its underclass Sundarbans citizens. It was also due to living in the harsh geography of the Sundarbans where rivers were brackish and cyclones particularly dangerous.



In the first kind of relatedness, the one based on peace, tiger-charmers negotiated the complicated relations involving greed, arrogance, and theft; through incantations shared between the human and nonhuman worlds. In the second kind of relatedness, the one that grew out of violence, it was no longer the tiger-charmer who interceded between both worlds but the urbanised elites and the government. They could not bridge the worlds between humans and nonhumans because they neither knew the spells that would appease nor the shared language of complicity. All they understood was the foreign language of "protection" and firearms. Thus, the pact was broken.

Tigers became state representatives and national animals that needed to be conserved, and tiger-charmers became illegal beings who the government believed preyed on the superstitions and fears of the islanders. This fall from grace for both tigers and tiger-charmers irremediably broke the sort of kind-hearted understanding that had existed between all creatures. Incantations had hitherto bridged worlds. Now they were replaced by the armed guards of the government. Creatures had become wary of one another, and the language shared by tigers and tiger-charmers had been gradually forgotten.

Making sense of our shared environment in the anthropocene

As climate breakdown becomes a reality that is experienced (though in varying degrees) all over the world, our complicated 'human: nonhuman entanglement' needs special attention. We cannot go on with understandings of our environment as a binary between humans and nonhumans, or see natural resources only through the eyes of profit-making extraction - our fate on this planet is together.

This is where the tiger-charmer stories from the Sundarbans become relevant. If the nonhuman is to break free from the ways in which empires - both Eastern and Western - have understood it, we need to listen to the stories of those who have, all along, lived with them without seeing them as "things" that can be used mindlessly but "beings" we need to be in touch with.

In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh argues that climate change is not so much a crisis of *nature* as it is of *culture*: our problem is our inability to *imagine* it or write about the transformations our environment is currently undergoing. This lack comes from the fact that we are, so to speak, 'moderns' and therefore so ensconced in our own sense of stability and belief in science that we are ill equipped to both 'imagine' climate change as well as act in the face of it. Yet there is a growing "strangeness of what is unfolding around us […] we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors" (2016: 30).

The increase in what we see as strange events "seem to have stirred a sense of recognition, an awareness that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own: the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness" (2016:31). How else, asks Ghosh, do we account for the interest in the nonhuman that has been burgeoning in the humanities over the last decade and over a range of disciplines, from philosophy to anthropology and literary criticism? "Can the timing of this renewed recognition be mere coincidence, or is the synchronicity an indication that there are entities in the world, like forests, that are fully capable of inserting themselves into our processes of thought?" (2016:31).

> In the current scenario, we will need to radically reconceptualise our very existence and this needs to include nonhumans as well as those considered as "other" humans.

The 'recent' appearance of the 'nonhuman' within human consciousness ends up, uncannily, refuting both Cartesian dualism as well as Enlightenment ideas (and one could also add Confucian approaches to nonhumans to this line of thought as these have also placed the human above the nonhuman). Ghosh suggests we find a way of co-existing with the nonhuman because it lives with us, whether we want to recognise it or not. Thinking that Cartesian "Nature" is separate from the human world has disallowed us to have the humility to reckon with the hidden, but present, nonhumans around us.

One could say that the pioneering article that led scholars from the social sciences and the humanities to engage with climate change was Dipesh Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History: Four Theses* (2009). Chakrabarty argues that the anthropocene, the era in which we find ourselves, spells the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history and renders the duality between 'nature' and 'human' completely irrelevant. We humans have become a *geophysical* force that shape, and will continue to shape, the course of climate for ages to come. This *geological agency* (as opposed to a biological one), the one that has driven a wedge in the continuity of our human experience over time, has left us puzzled, Chakrabarty argues, as to the kind of action, we humans as a collective, can/should now undertake.

For both Chakrabarty and Ghosh, climate change is not just an environmental crisis, but also an epistemological one. For Chakrabarty it is one where the very subject of history has to be rethought; for Ghosh, it is a crisis that forces us to rethink the very notion of "Nature" and the nonhuman and our position within our shared environment calling us to greater humbleness (and eventually a sort of spiritual self-awareness).

Empires have done their time. Their imposition of division and hierarchy between "human" and "nonhuman" and ultimately between groups of "humans" should be a thing of the past. In the current scenario, we will need to radically reconceptualise our very existence and this needs to include nonhumans as well as those considered as "other" humans. Covid-19 has made us rethink many of our past relationships. This group of tiny 'nonhumans' of sorts has completely shattered our way of life, jolting us back to contemplate today's uncanny and intimate, and perhaps mend the broken, kintsugi style, relationships we share not just with nonhumans but ultimately also with other humans. This is perhaps the only mark of our exclusiveness as humans. Let us stay human by imagining more equal futures for all creatures, whether human or nonhuman.

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