

## Amongst Tigers

Jolil is laughing at me. We are sitting on Jolil's brother-in-law's terrace in Gabura, drinking tea and chatting. Jolil is an aging *bawali*—a term meaning “wood collector” that is often more broadly applied to men who have spent their lives working the Sundarbans.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes these men operate within the bounds of forest law, sometimes on its fringe. Over the course of his life, Jolil has worked numerous jobs in the Sundarbans—fishing, honey collecting, timber collecting, transporting goods across borders, and more. Jolil has a dashing air and a somewhat unsavory reputation. He speaks with the authority of someone who has spent his life learning the lessons of the jangal the hard way. His livelihood has long depended on navigating the mutable boundaries between land and water, human and animal, legal and illegal, and predator and prey that characterize the Sundarbans. He spends days—sometimes weeks—at a time under the mangrove canopy. It's a hard way to make a living. Jolil must thread the often shifting politics of extracting resources from the mangrove forest. Changing weather patterns, salinity balances in the water, and other forms of environmental change make this harder, or at least more unpredictable. But Jolil also must contend with human and nonhuman predators under the mangrove canopy. Paramilitary agencies police the mangroves, enforcing policies that criminalize his livelihood in the name of protecting the Sundarbans. Dakats—bandits—stalk its canals and waterways, often holding fishermen for ransoms they can ill afford. And the Bengal tiger—*bagh*—prowls the forest, presenting potentially lethal threats despite, or perhaps because of, its decreasing numbers.

Jolil is one of my self-appointed tutors, men who find my curiosity about the Sundarbans to be an amusing opportunity to impart wisdom about everyday practices and to share stories of hair-raising encounters. Men like Jolil offer a



FIGURE 15. Beehive in the Sundarbans.

window onto work in the mangroves that I, as a foreign ethnographer, have little direct access to. When I enter the protected area of Sundarbans Forest Reserve, I am required to travel in a Forest Department boat with an armed guard ostensibly there to protect me from the Sundarbans's many hazards. When Jolil goes into the forest, he goes as he has gone throughout his life—in a small boat, sometimes with a partner, sometimes with a small crew, and sometimes alone. Today, Jolil has been schooling me on honey collecting. The Sundarbans is famous for its rich and distinctively flavored honey. During the honey season, there's good money to be had hunting for giant hives in the mangrove depths, smoking out the fierce bees, and bringing the bounty back to sell to brokers in villages along the forest fringe. Honey collecting is a dangerous occupation. Anyone who works in the forest might fall prey to one of the dwindling numbers of tigers who stalk the mangroves. But honey collectors—*moulis*—suffer a disproportionate number of attacks because their work demands that they enter the interiors of mangrove-dense islands.<sup>2</sup> These are claustrophobic spaces where it can be hard to tell if (and by what) you are being watched, particularly if your attention is trained upward toward where the hives are located.

I ask Jolil about the techniques for avoiding tiger attacks. “What do you want to know?” he asks me. I tell him that I heard that in West Bengal, honey collectors

used to wear masks with faces on the backs of their heads. When a tiger saw the faces, they thought that they were being watched and did not attack. “Have you ever worn a mask while honey collecting?” Jolil stares at me for a few seconds, as though trying to gauge whether I am messing with him, and then bursts into uproarious laughter. He has seemingly never heard something so absurd.<sup>3</sup> I expose myself (yet again) as a foreigner visiting the Sundarbans with a head full of imagination about both the tiger and the territory it stalks.

“Listen,” Jolil says, “when you collect honey, you stay in groups, close together. Numbers are the only thing that will keep a tiger from attacking.” Then, pulling up his *lungi*, the cloth skirt commonly worn by men in rural Bangladesh, he presents me with his leg. The bone is intact, but his calf is misshapen and smooth, covered in scar tissue. A chunk is missing. “This is what happens if you hunt for honey alone.”

Jolil tells me a beastly tale, the story of his encounter with the tiger who took a bite out of his calf.<sup>4</sup> He and a group of companions were searching out honey deep in the mangroves. He had forged ahead, hearing the buzzing of a large hive. That was when the tiger came out of the mangroves and seized his leg in its jaws. Hearing his cries, the rest of his team rushed forward and began striking the tiger with sticks and poles. It dropped Jolil and retreated into the forest to seek easier prey. Jolil drops his *lungi* back over his leg and looks up at me. “Masks,” he says, and begins laughing again.

#### THE TIGER’S TWO BODIES

Much has been written and said about Bengal tigers, *Panthera tigris tigris*. The tiger is so intertwined with the Sundarbans—its history, culture, environment, and ecology—that the two are all but synonymous. The tiger that stalks the jangal is more than just a predator. It is also a deity, a symbol of sovereign power, an icon of national and international conservation, a sentinel of global climate change. It prowls the actual mangroves but also the pages of magazines like *National Geographic*, the glossy fundraising materials of international conservation organizations, the leads of anxious articles tracking the fate of endangered species. As my conversation with Jolil suggests, my own imagination of the tiger led me to misapprehend the nature of the beast. But the challenges that Jolil faces in his everyday struggles to make a living also suggest ways that imaginations like mine are profoundly entangled in the making of predation, ecology, and risk in the Sundarbans.

Tigers have been a part of the delta ecology since at least the late Pleistocene (over twelve millennia ago). They are more than just residents of the mangrove forests. As apex predators, they play a critical role in balancing fauna and, subsequently, flora in the region, allowing mangroves to flourish—to become the Sundarbans.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, tigers are not only residents of the delta but also one of its makers. But tigers are complex entities—made as much through global imagination as through the material realities of their habitat. They highlight the ways that

mangroves are not simply the outcomes of natural histories and changing environments but also of capital flows and the regional, national, and global imaginations that invoke them to various ends.

Annu Jalais, in her landmark ethnography of the Indian Sundarbans, *Forest of Tigers*, and her classic essay “Unmasking the Cosmopolitan Tiger,” notes that there are (at least) two conflicting versions of the tiger.<sup>6</sup> The first, what she terms the “cosmopolitan tiger,” is the infinitely reproduced tiger who appears in iconography, postage stamps, WWF logos, colonial fantasies, and so on. The cosmopolitan tiger is the tiger stripped of context and reduced to signifier—the image that can be appropriated for any meaning. It might stand for the ferocity of the animal kingdom, the nobility of the big cat, the sovereignty of the colonial and postcolonial state, the fragility of nature. It stands in contrast to what Jalais calls the “Sundarbans tiger,” the tiger who bawalis like Jolil sometimes encounter in the flesh. Jalais argues that “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.”<sup>7</sup> If the cosmopolitan tiger demands an urgent intervention to save it (or, as often, to save the nature it stands for), it also prevents an engagement with the ways that people who live in the delta think about and live with tigers—what they do to protect themselves from tigers and other hazards in the jangal, how they understand tiger behavior, and how tiger conservation opens delta residents to new forms of predation and anxiety. In so doing, the cosmopolitan tiger occludes the complex ecologies in which its flesh and blood counterpart is enmeshed.

Jalais’s work offers a critical insight into the bifurcation between the biological and discursive beast. Yet the tiger’s two bodies do not stand apart.<sup>8</sup> As I argue here, the interplay between the cosmopolitan and fleshly beast has become a key node for shaping a much broader network of political ecologies in delta space today—of forging the climate frontier. Tigers in the delta are sites of articulation—between the local and global, the past and the future, and the biological and the symbolic. Here, global imaginations of tigers mingle uncomfortably with development, conservation, and actual transformations in habitats and environments both within and outside of the Sundarbans. This mingling has grave implications for those who work in the mangroves and live on its fringe. Tigers, like the delta’s silted terrain explored in the previous chapter, are yet another node through which imagination, matter, and violence mingle to produce a frontier terrain of predation and risk.

This chapter explores how the ongoing invention of the tiger shapes a broader network of politics and relations in the delta landscape. The grafting of global imaginations onto the tiger has more to tell us than that tigers—and the web of relations around them—are misrecognized in global narratives about climate and conservation. The cosmopolitan beast is not a misrecognition; it is a creation that emerges from the tension between imperiled mortal tigers and their images’ limitless capacity to personify imperiled nature. Thinking with the tiger’s two bodies

situates the tiger as not *only* a charismatic beast making its possible last stand in the threatened mangroves but also as enmeshed in land, human labor, and a broader web of predation. In what follows, I explore the region as, at least in part, constituted with the flesh and figure of the tiger. As we shall see, to do so requires not a focus exclusively on *Panthera tigris tigris* but also on the ways it is drawn into relation with a range of transformations within the delta siltscape.

#### PREDATORY TERRAINS

Tigers occupy a central place in the cosmology of the Sundarbans—perhaps most notably as the physical manifestation of the demon/deity Dokkhin Rai, the “King of the South,” who is held at bay by Bonbibi, the syncretic deity who is of the forest.<sup>9</sup> Bonbibi, the daughter of a Muslim fakir, offers protection from tiger attacks and other misfortunes for those who work in the mangroves.<sup>10</sup> She and her brother Shah Jangali are domesticating forces—reclaiming and protecting the inhabited parts of the Sundarbans from the unpredictable and often violent Dokkhin Rai, who rules over the deep parts of the jangal. But Bonbibi also mediates encounters with tigers—alternatively fending off attacks and negotiating safe passage for *mouris* and others who must labor in Dokkhin Rai’s realm.

The narrative of Bonbibi charts an ethics of the jangal—a set of practices of faith, respect, and purity that mediate the risk of unpredictable threats in the forest. Shrines to Bonbibi and the cast of characters who feature in her mythology are a constant presence in Bangladesh’s delta, where she is worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike. It is common to see Bonbibi shrines and temples in villages and in the courtyards of wealthier homes throughout the region. Many villages host an annual Bonbibi mela or puja on January 15, where the narrative of Bonbibi (*Bonbibi Palagaan*) is sung over a period of hours as part of an annual ritual renewing protection and safe passage for those who work under the mangrove canopy.

Tigers pose real and lethal threats to those who work in the mangroves and live on its fringes. Indeed, the Sundarbans, in both the colonial and postcolonial period, is a space where tiger attacks are emblematic of terrain. This is with good reason. There is evidence to suggest that tiger attacks in the colonial period were significantly higher in the Sundarbans—where chance encounters are readily possible with the semiaquatic predators, who swim from island to island in the mangroves and stalk prey from both water and land—than in many other tiger habitats throughout South Asia.<sup>11</sup> “Man-eating” tigers were central to the colonial imagination of the Sundarbans, figuring prominently in framings of the mangroves as a sinister drowned land at the mouth of the delta.<sup>12</sup> W. W. Hunter’s 1875 *Statistical Account of Bengal*, for example, speaks of spaces within the jangal where a single marauding tiger displaced whole populations (before meeting an end at the hands of colonial officials).<sup>13</sup>

The tiger, as has been well documented by environmental historians, thus figures centrally in questions of colonial and postcolonial rule and sovereign power.<sup>14</sup>



FIGURE 16. Bonbibbi shrine, Dakope, Khulna.

To master the beast was to impose a modicum of order on the unruly, swampy wastelands. This relationship is at the heart of what Anand Pandian has called “predatory care,” the endlessly reproduced colonial fantasy of paternal protection by white hunter representatives of the colonial state ready to kill marauding man-eaters with European skill, bravery, and (at least after the mid-nineteenth century) repeating rifles.<sup>15</sup> Vijaya Ramadas Mandala argues that the colonial hunt—and especially, though not exclusively, the tiger hunt—was central to colonial governance. As he notes, “What became established as mere recreational sport in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was later identified as critical to the continuation of colonial commercial and political functions and the extension of territorial control.”<sup>16</sup> That is to say, the identification and personification of savage “man-eaters” terrorizing local populations, the shooting of tigers, and the iconography of the white *saheb* with his boot on the carcass of a freshly killed predator were central dynamics of imperial sovereignty and power.<sup>17</sup>

Predatory care continues to figure prominently, if differently, in the postcolonial state—where the focus of care is more directed at tigers than subjugated colonial populations. Today, tigers are reimagined as the public face of expansive and well-known conservation efforts, many of which have been implicated in the dispossession of refugees and peasants.<sup>18</sup> The most famous example of such efforts is India’s Project Tiger, launched in 1973—the much lauded and much criticized (for its forced displacement of people from tiger habitats) conservation program

put in place by the Indian government in an attempt to resuscitate a dwindling tiger population in its national parks. But tigers are equally central to Bangladeshi imaginations of conservation, threatened habitat, and imperatives to protect the mangrove forests for both the national and global good.<sup>19</sup> The public face of conservation in Bangladesh is a dramatically named organization called WildTeam, founded by Dr. Md. Anwarul Islam in 2003. Tiger conservation in Bangladesh is a nationalist project, but also an international affair, with funding flowing to WildTeam, the Ministry of the Environment, and both international governmental and nongovernmental conservation organizations such as International Union for Conservation of Nature and the United States Agency for International Development.<sup>20</sup>

Tigers in the Sundarbans are unquestionably under threat. They are listed as a critically endangered species in Bangladesh by IUCN, and the estimated tiger populations in the 6,500 square kilometers of the Bangladeshi Sundarbans number in the low hundreds (114 according to a 2018 census).<sup>21</sup> Tigers are often targeted by poachers for the lucrative trade in their pelts and teeth. But an equally significant threat to the Bengal tiger is the shifting environment. The impacts of climate change on tigers is a hotly debated topic, but most models note that rising sea levels and increased salinity (and decline of sweet water in the mangroves) are likely to erase viable tiger habitats in the near future.<sup>22</sup> Such changes in habitat, as explored below, are already shifting tiger behavior and patterns of predation—pushing them out of the mangroves and into settled communities on its fringe.<sup>23</sup> Hunted by poachers and facing the challenges of declining habitat and human predation, tigers have become both an open question and a preoccupation for those concerned with the survival of the Sundarbans and its denizens.<sup>24</sup> They thus also shape the postcolonial frontier terrain of the delta as the most prominent face of conservation and preservation of the mangrove forest, a global biosphere preserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site (i.e., a place in need of preservation for the good of humankind at large).

#### SENTINEL BEASTS

In the contemporary moment, the cosmopolitan tiger has made a smooth transition from being the face of global conservation to a face of global climate change. Alongside this shift, where the cosmopolitan tiger has taken on additional burdens of representing nature under threat, there appears to be an inversely proportionate relationship between the tiger's two bodies. As the number of fleshly beasts declines, their cosmopolitan and imaginative counterparts flourish and multiply, appearing in ever more urgent cries for intervention to stop climate change and environmental degradation. The prolific figure of the tiger, in marked contrast to the dwindling numbers of actual existing tigers, is present in almost every representation, project, and discussion of the Sundarbans—typically invoking the specter of immanent environmental collapse.

Such, perhaps, is the nature of sentinel beasts—beings that are best understood as subcategories of the sentinel objects that, in Frédéric Keck and Andrew Lakoff’s words, “provide the first signs of an impending catastrophe.”<sup>25</sup> As Keck and Lakoff note, such sentinels (canaries in the climate coal mine) are potential answers to the question of “how the detection of threat can be made to have political force.”<sup>26</sup> As images of polar bears on shrinking icebergs—and of emaciated tigers swimming among the mangroves—suggest, the answer to this question depends, centrally, on the charisma of the sentinel in question. Tigers, who have long captured global imaginations with their ferocity, beauty, and seeming nobility, make apt icons of climate threat for conservationists, development agencies, and government officials alike.

It is thus not surprising that tigers are a topic of constant speculation in the region. Where tigers are (or are not) is a conversation that not only impacts village lives but also has implications for conservation budgets. Ironically, this fascination with the presence/absence of the Sundarbans tiger serves, often, to reinscribe the political division that splits the mangrove forests into two separate state-controlled preserves. A constant question in national narratives is not just how many tigers are left, but what state do they reside in? This manifests in Bangladesh, not only in news reports and tiger census projects that constantly track the population of tigers within the nation-state (as opposed to the binational Sundarbans at large) but in rumors that imagine that tigers have themselves become bound up in state and boundary formation.

There is a constant anxiety in Bangladesh that tigers are more populous on the Indian side of the border. This is figured not as the result of a “natural” affinity for the Indian habitat but rather of geopolitical intrigue. Several people told me of a rumor that the Indian government has set up one-way gates in the Sundarbans. When border-crossing tigers walk through them, they cannot subsequently return to Bangladesh. Such rumors are far-fetched (why would tigers go through a gate in the unfenced mangroves in the first place?) and usually are acknowledged as such by those who share them with a proverbial nod and a wink. But this genre of rumors that figure India as stealing tigers from (and occasionally out of) Bangladesh do reflect the fraught relationship between the two states across the notoriously violent border fence that hems in most of Bangladesh.<sup>27</sup> They also speak to the import of the tiger not only to conservation in general but also to national pride and capital flows—particularly in the form of development.

NGOs working in the region—both international and local—liberally sprinkle tiger-oriented projects among their programming portfolios. Some, such as WildTeam, work hand-in-hand with the government of Bangladesh to implement tiger conservation and awareness schemes. For WildTeam, this means (amongst other things) training local communities how to react if tigers enter their villages. To do this, they organize “Village Tiger Response Teams” (VTRTs). The goal of the VTRTs is to prevent lethal encounters in the event of human-tiger contact. These teams are cadres of trained tiger responders who work on a voluntary basis to

protect their communities from tigers and to protect tigers from their communities. Their members, often found wearing ubiquitous neon-colored VTRT T-shirts, are easy to spot in villages throughout the delta.

As a VTRT member in Joymoni explained to me, the teams have two jobs. First, they educate their communities about the importance of tigers to their local and national heritage. They run workshops that highlight the importance of tigers, their endangered status, and the impacts of climate change on tiger habitats. They thus engage in a time-honored strategy that NGOs use to shape the behavior of Bangladesh's rural peasantry—they run training sessions. Second, if they hear of a tiger entering a community, they rush en masse to the scene and scare it off by shouting, beating on pots with sticks, and generally making noise. I asked if this approach worked, and the VTRT member assured me it did. "If we get there in time," he told me, "we will certainly be able to scare off the tiger." That, of course, is a significant "if." In many cases, tigers are often gone before VTRTs arrive on the scene. However, there have been cases where VTRTs have successfully scared tigers out of villages and cases where VTRTs were able to intercede in conflicts between angry villagers and a cornered tiger, likely saving the tiger's life.

The work of the VTRTs may thus play a role in reducing the lethality of encounters between tigers, humans, and livestock on the mangrove's fringe. But it also shows how tigers are increasingly bound up in discourses not just about their own endangerment but about a broader suite of climate-related concerns in the delta. The boundaries between tiger conservation and resilient development programming are increasingly blurry. This blurring allows tigers to be mobilized both as a symbol of threatened nature and justification for development interventions.

Take, for example, the short video "Protecting Wildlife and Forests in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh," produced by USAID's Bagh Project in 2014. The video, shot with a mix of English-language subtitles and voiceovers, opens with a series of shots of delta villagers talking about human-tiger conflict.<sup>28</sup> Two points emerge from these conversations. First, the film makes clear, residents of the Sundarbans bear no malice toward tigers. Despite having lost family members to tiger attacks, residents of the region who appear in the film express a desire not for revenge but for a less conflictual relationship with tigers. Second, villagers in the Sundarbans see tigers as integral to their environment. The young girl who narrates the first portion of the video, for example, describes the Sundarbans as a loving mother and paternal father. She speaks of the ways that her elders have told her about the importance of tigers and refers to tigers as *baghmama* (maternal uncle tiger), a common trope throughout the country that figures them as at once fierce and familial. Her speech is interspersed with images both of tigers in the wild and the bodies of tigers who have entered into villages and been subsequently killed by villagers. The implied message of the film is that residents of the Sundarbans do not want to kill tigers, but without the intervention of a higher nongovernmental authority, they might have little choice.



FIGURE 17. Still from the USAID video “Protecting Wildlife and Forests in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh.”

Having laid out the problem of tiger conflict, the film positions development as the solution to the problem. Tiger conservation is key to saving the mangrove forests, but it must be accompanied by other kinds of development initiatives being carried out by USAID—including alternative livelihood schemes and the promotion of high-yielding variety crops. This message is interspersed with images both of happy villagers and villagers being trained by VTRTs (WildTeam is supported by the Bagh Project) about the import of tiger conservation. One such image is of a VTRT member around a fire wearing a tiger mask (presumably in the service of educating villagers) shown in figure 17.

Like all development promotional materials, the video is best taken with a generous pinch of salt. Yet it is revealing of the relationship between tigers and the logics of climate resilience and development. On the one hand, the film responds to a now all-too-familiar critique of conservation programming—that conservation tends to value “nature” at the expense of those who live “within it.” As the film makes clear, USAID believes agriculture and alternative livelihoods (things that will, it intends, keep people out of the mangroves) are intimately entwined with tiger conservation. This message is hammered home at the film’s end with that icon of the 2010s, a hashtag message: #ConservationIsDevelopment. More interesting, though, is the way that the film invokes tigers not just as apex predators but also as apex objects of development. Here, the conservation of tigers is both a goal and an effect of other forms of climate-oriented development. Whether the adoption of high-yielding variety crops can be causally linked to conservation or not, the film makes it clear that USAID sees its mission of producing resilience in the delta as fundamentally tied to and motivated by the cosmopolitan beast. The production of resilience is the key to ending the kind of interspecies conflict that places tigers at risk and the kinds of displacing effects that also might

imperil the world at large. There is thus an articulation between tiger conservation and the global anxieties about the displacing effects of climate change explored in chapter 1. The tiger prowling the Sundarbans is also a sentinel beast, prowling a climate ground zero.

It is not surprisingly then that many other local and national NGOs in the delta—many of which sustain themselves by securing lucrative implementation contracts from international organizations like USAID and IUCN—build tiger-related programming into their portfolios. One popular variant of this is the “Tiger Widow’s Fund” for women who have lost their husbands while working the mangroves. Tiger widows—*bagh bidhoba*—have emerged as objects of fascination in international coverage of climate change. Stories about the lives of women who have lost their husbands to the charismatic predator abound in international coverage of the delta’s woes. Popular representations of tiger widows hold that they are shunned and excluded from village life because they are considered to be unlucky. Such is the case in certain situations, and life can be quite difficult for widows who are held partially responsible for their husbands’ deaths.<sup>29</sup> I also, however, visited many communities where *bagh bidhoba* seemed no more or less excluded from village society than women who have lost their husbands in other ways. But programs assisting *tiger* widows, as opposed to programs assisting widows or marginalized groups in general, signal to international funders that local NGOs are engaged with the famed forest denizen—or at least with its victims.

One day, I asked the director of one such NGO about his organization’s own recently launched Tiger Widow’s Fund. He told me that the fund provided crucial support to the many women whose husbands were victims of tiger predation. The program organized beneficiaries into small support groups—a model bowered from the Grameen Bank’s microcredit loan groups. Individual members of these groups would receive cash grants to start entrepreneurial ventures, and the group would constitute a collective support network for these new business owners. I asked if it would be possible to visit a group supported by his NGO during their weekly group meeting. The director was somewhat taken aback by my request but obligingly called a project manager who ran one of the groups in a neighboring island. The following day, Riton and I went to meet the group.

We arrived in the late afternoon, accompanied by the project manager, and were introduced to the six women who were part of the program. The women were taciturn and unenthusiastic to talk to a foreign researcher. They grew less talkative and more annoyed as the project manager continually interrupted them as we asked questions, prompting them to narrate their stories in ways that best demonstrated the impact of the NGO’s interventions. Chagrined, I realized that there was no scheduled meeting and that these women had been compelled to come and speak with us by the project manager himself. They clearly had better things to be doing with their time.

The women had all used their grants to develop alternative livelihoods in the absence of their husbands. Most had started fish, shrimp, or crab businesses, though one had invested in a tea stall that also sold snacks and goods. I asked Shorifa, the most forthcoming and the eldest woman in the group, about the loss of her husband. She replied, “My son was five years old at the time. Now he is twenty-five. After my husband was killed, we ate, and I fed my son through hard work. I lived in my father’s house, but I took care of all of the land my husband and I had. So when my son grew up, we moved out of my father’s house and into our own house.”<sup>30</sup> All of this had taken place long before the Tiger Widow’s Fund had been launched. Surprised to hear that Shorifa had lost her husband so long ago, I asked the other women about when they had been widowed. Among the six women, none had lost their husbands to tigers more recently than seven years before, and two had lost their husbands more than a dozen years ago.

Programs such as tiger widow’s funds can provide crucial and life-altering support to families struck by tragedy. But the temporal distance between the death of these women’s husbands and the founding of the fund also highlighted a paradox of life in the delta. Tiger attacks are only one of many ways to die in the forest. It is not uncommon to meet widows whose husbands have been killed or lost due to drowning, human violence (perpetrated by dakats or paramilitary policing groups), storms, and more. While there is scrupulous accounting of deaths by tiger attacks, it is almost impossible to gain accurate figures of deaths due to other causes in the mangroves. Women whose husbands are killed by tigers indeed experience social alienation within their communities. Yet social alienation is also experienced by widows who have lost their husbands in other ways. Tiger widow funds, it seems, are more concerned with the way that women’s husbands died than with the social impacts of being a widow. In other words, in tiger widow’s funds the *mode* of death—being killed by the forest’s most famous predator—matters more than the fact of death itself. To have one’s husband killed by a jungle cat drew these women into a circuit that tied together tigers, communities living in the Sundarbans region, local development organizations, and global NGOs and donor organizations interested in resilient life in the delta. It drew them into a broader and ongoing production of the region as climate frontier.

#### BETWEEN TIGERS AND TIGER PRAWNS

I have never seen a tiger in the Sundarbans. The closest I’ve come was a fresh pawprint, no more than a few minutes old, that I saw in 2020. Every time I complain about this to friends, they repeat a well-worn phrase “*tumi bagh dekhte pabe na, kintu bagh tomake dekhe*”—you won’t see the tiger, but the tiger sees you. The phrase endows the tiger with panoptic power—a creature that instills fear and discipline on those who enter the jangal, demanding that you recognize the



FIGURE 18. Fresh tiger tracks.

possibility that at any moment you might be subject to its lethal gaze. Still, most of my friends who work the Sundarbans claim to have seen a tiger at least once. Many of the stories they share are vague and unremarkable, though some involve near misses and almost-lethal encounters like Jolil's.

For all of that, few people I have encountered who work in the Sundarbans see the tiger as a malicious predator. Rather, they understand tigers as, on the one hand, beings who share the space of the mangrove and, on the other, a form of animate risk beyond their immediate control. They often use the phrase "*jole kumir, dangaye bagh*," which translates as "crocodile in the water and tiger on land," to describe the terrain of perils in the Sundarbans. But the point of the phrase is not to identify either tigers or crocodiles specifically but rather to point out that the mangroves are full of threats.

Consider Shonkar, a crab collector who spends days at a time alone in his boat in the mangroves. He has worked various jobs in the jangal for over a decade. But as the export market in crabs has grown, he now primarily hunts for large crabs that he sells in the local markets for export to East Asia. One day, while we are chatting about the crab business and its inherent risks, I ask Shonkar what it is like to fish for crabs in the mangroves. "In the nighttime, I live inside the jungle on my boat. In my boat, I am alone," he tells me. I comment that it seems like a solitary and anxious way to make a living. "Honestly, if you are afraid, you cannot go into the Sundarbans. Slowly, I have become used to it."

“What about tigers?” I ask.

“Of tigers, I have no fears. Mandals [an Adivasi community to which Shonkar belongs that straddles the India-Bangladesh border] have a mantra. I know this mantra by heart. If I say it, the tiger will not come near me.”<sup>31</sup> This seemingly blasé attitude to the threat of tiger attacks is one that I have seen before. Mantras, offerings to Bonbibi, and piety offer protection to those who work the forest. Or not. As a Muslim fisherman told me in response to a similar question about tiger attacks, “If Allah wills it, my time has come.”

Jalais’s ethnography (previously discussed) explores a range of ways that those who live and work on the Indian side of the Sundarbans understand tiger attacks. Many of her interlocutors explain tiger attacks as the result of transformations in the environment that make it more violent. This violence has made the Sundarbans itself cantankerous—a space in which tiger, human, and tiger-human relations consequently became more quarrelsome and potentially lethal. As she writes, “Villagers explained that the growing violence of humans expressed through polluting paraphernalia such as motorboats, shrimpers’ mosquito nets, and poachers’ rifles, and more dangerous religious and political violence, affected the locale of the forest, which in turn affected tigers and other nonhumans’ need for peace and security. This made tigers even more ferocious and increased the danger of working in the Sundarbans. The two (humans and nonhumans) however, are ‘sealed’ together by this common environment of the Sundarbans—the locale of the Bengal tiger.”<sup>32</sup>

Here, human-tiger relations are situated not on opposite sides of an environmental binary (hunter/prey, human/nonhuman, nature/culture), but rather are forged within and by the same environ. Human and tiger life is thoroughly, if unevenly, intertwined with a broader ecology of capture and predation. Tigers are unquestionably predators—occasionally preying upon humans. But they are also only one predatory actor among many within this ecology. Others, proximate and remote, are implicated in making the mangroves a zone characterized by capture and violence. As the climate of the Sundarbans shifts and becomes more violent, so does the delta’s more-than-human social climate. There is an intimate articulation between the violence *of* the environment and violence *in* it.<sup>33</sup>

I have asked my friends on the Bangladesh side of the delta about their interpretation of tiger encounters. Most offer prosaic and ambivalent accounts. Yet they agree that tiger encounters are enmeshed in the increasingly violent environment. As a crab fisherman named Alam put it, “There is tension (*pirron*) in the jangal. Everything feels it. Tigers, deer, forest officials, and we who go there to feed our families.” Alam’s point is apt. Tigers are afflicted by the same forces that shape the life and livelihoods of humans fishing the Sundarbans—the increased salinity in the water, conflict between dakats and the paramilitary forces, pollutants that degrade the mangroves, the decline of available fauna for food, increased hunting and poaching, and unpredictable weather. While such transformations mean that my friends must spend more time *under* the increasingly dangerous mangrove

canopy to capture enough resources to feed themselves and their families, it means that tigers often come *out* from under the canopy and into the densely populated agrarian space beyond to feed themselves.

Since I began working in the delta region in 2013, there have been frequent reports of tigers emerging from the mangroves to prey on domestic livestock.<sup>34</sup> Changes in ocean acidity, water levels, and salinity balances in the water pose challenges both for accessing fresh water (also a challenge for humans living in the region) and for finding enough prey in their forest habitats. Cows and goats owned by peasants living in villages near the Sundarbans have become regular supplements to tiger diets. Not surprisingly, alongside accounts of livestock attacks have been occasional accounts of villagers (regularly described as “mobs”) attacking and killing (often framed as “lynching”) these tigers-out-of-place.<sup>35</sup> Such accounts are regularly accompanied by lurid photos reproduced in local and national newspapers displaying the tiger’s dead body.

The tiger’s two bodies—the entanglements of the tiger’s cosmopolitan and fleshly form—make it difficult to see such encounters as anything other than attacks on global treasures, as the outraged online comments (many of which contrast the natural nobility of the tiger with the inherent savagery of ignorant peasants) that accompany such stories make clear. The dual nature of the tiger thus structures a range of coercive relationships between wildlife in the forest and those who make their livings in and along its borders. The killing of tigers in villages on the fringe of the jangal is rendered as crime and tragedy in the international and national press—an avoidable catastrophe caused by peasants and fishermen who fail to understand or to appreciate the import of the tiger (to everyone else). Such renderings radically simplify and erase other interpretations that highlight the more-than-human, and more-than-tiger, violence of the Sundarbans’s shifting environment.

Of these forms of violence, shrimp aquaculture is particularly significant. If tigers—*bagh*—prowl the forest and characterize global imaginations of the Sundarbans, tiger prawns—*bagdachingri*<sup>36</sup>—have, during the long boom in shrimp aquaculture from the late eighties, come to structure the terrain of the delta beyond the mangroves. As noted in the previous chapter, shrimp production itself has been a fundamentally violent process—rife with land grabs perpetrated by wealthy landholders backed with armed enforcers ready to exercise occasionally lethal force on landholders and groups seeking alternative forms of production. But, *bagdachingri* production brings with it more slow, seeping, and insidious forms of violence as well. One important dynamic here is that shrimp aquaculture has led to the collapse, or at least significant restructuring, of agrarian labor markets in the delta. This, as noted, has led many to migrate and pushed others to work in the Sundarbans as fishermen. Tiger prawns outside of the Sundarbans have thus pushed many to pursue activities that conservation groups identify as harmful to tiger habitats.

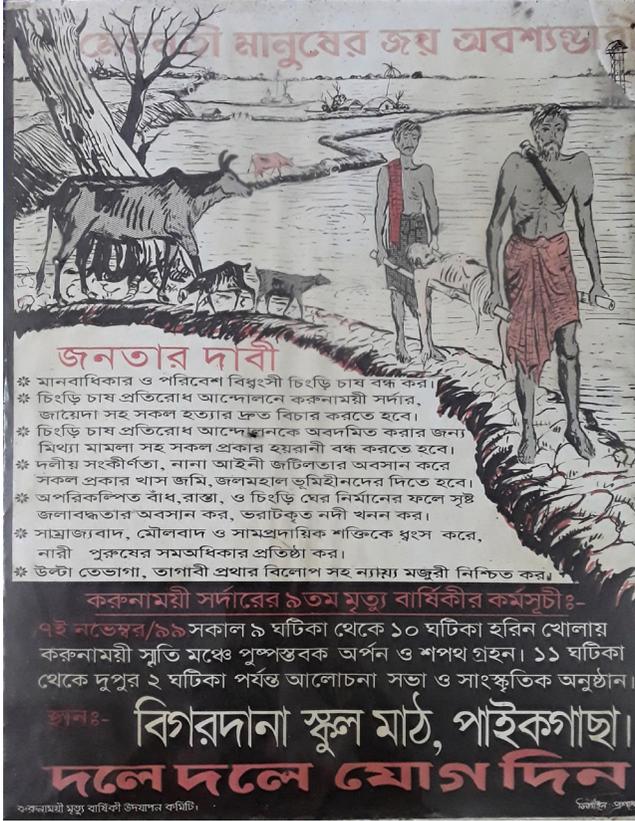


FIGURE 19. Karunamoyee Day Poster, 1999. Part of the Karunamoyee Sardar Collection by Nijera Kori, <https://archive.org/details/KarunamoyeeSarder/Karunamoyee%20Day%20poster%201999/>.

But labor is not the only way that shrimp aquaculture has drawn tigers, tiger prawns, and humans into new relationships with each other. The transformation of the delta siltscape into a terrain of tiger prawns has also radically reshaped land use in many communities living near the Sundarbans, heralding a shift from field to gher. This land transformation is dramatized in figure 19, a 1999 poster for Karunamoyee Day—an annual day of action against shrimp aquaculture hosted by Nijera Kori, Bangladesh's landless movement.<sup>37</sup> The poster dramatizes the impacts of shrimp not only on the health of humans (especially poor and landless people) living in the delta but also the effects of the shrimp on the ecology at large—the transformation of land that both humans *and* animals could use for sustenance into stagnant pools of brackish water. This has had an effect not only on humans who live in the delta but also on livestock. This point was dramatically brought home to me one day while visiting Momin and Rokeya, an elderly couple living in

a village not far from Mongla situated on the immediate fringe of the Sundarbans. Like much of the delta, this area has been profoundly transformed by brackish water shrimp aquaculture. Ghers occupy much of the open land around the village. Here and there are fields where some farmers continue to grow rice. But for the most part, the village is hemmed in on one side by the mangroves and on the other by ghers.

Momin and Rokeya's house speaks of earlier comparative wealth—built during the height of the shrimp boom, when Momin owned several profitable ghers. The building is constructed from concrete and stone. But its dilapidated condition also suggests more recent financial decline—a change in fortune that came to this family when Momin sold his ghers to a neighbor. The couple has recently lost their cow to a tiger. Momin tells us what happened: “The whole year long, I have been tying that cow and feeding her in our home. But after the recent rice harvest, I let her free to graze on the *dhan* [paddy straw]. After some time, I saw my cow had not returned home. We searched other houses but could not find her. . . . Later, I got the news that the tiger had gotten her inside the jungle.”

In many ways, Momin's narrative is a typical one. The cultivation of bagdachingri has produced a landscape dominated by endless shallow, stagnant saltwater ghers. There is a limited amount of grazing land, even following the rice harvest. Families like Momin's therefore often let their cows graze freely. This allows cows to consume the leftovers of human harvests. But they are also drawn to the protected mangrove forest, where they can access a range of tasty, nutrient-rich flora. Lacking enough pastureland to graze in, cows and goats turn to the mangroves, the habitat of the tiger.

Cows, like the one lost by Momin's family, often are among the most significant assets owned by peasants living in the delta. Their loss can represent a catastrophic blow to family finances. In this case, the loss is double, as the cow was pregnant and due to give birth within the next few days. As we talk, Rokeya repeatedly breaks into tears. “My heart is going to break,” she tells me. “Today we are not eating anything.” The government of Bangladesh runs a livestock insurance scheme whereby people who lose livestock to tigers can get modest compensation. However, families are only eligible if they can prove that their livestock was not grazing in the restricted space of the forest at the time of the attack. That can be difficult. Even when families muster evidence that their animals were attacked outside the forest, suspicious authorities often assume otherwise. This family's loss was compounded by a fear of arrest for having allowed their cattle to illegally enter the mangroves. “This morning, some people in the area threatened us,” Rokeya tells me. “They say the government will make a case against us. Now, our heart has come into our mouth. Maybe they will capture us and take us to the prison cell. What will happen? We cannot say.”

Such anxieties and losses speak to the ways that the web of predatory relations around tigers produce harm for humans and nonhumans alike. As the political

ecologies of production heralded by the long shrimp boom in the delta degrade and erase agricultural and grazing land, the effects of pollution and global warming—the outcomes of their own interwoven social relations of production—erode forest habitats. As tiger prawns push livestock into the mangroves, other kinds of environmental degradation push tigers to its fringe and, often, out. The effect is a blurring of the artificial boundary between forest and community that draws humans living along the Sundarbans, animals within them, and those who police this boundary together in corrosive configurations. The region's ecology emerges not only out of shifting patterns of weather but also out of a host of relations of predation, agrarian production, and consumption across scale—warming climates that push tigers out of the forest, Western diets enmeshed in the consumption of cheap seafood, conservation projects seeking to secure the future of the cosmopolitan tiger, the local politics of land, and more.

#### BEASTLY ENCOUNTERS

The tiger is omnipresent in the delta. In its discursive form, it prowls signboards, NGO planning meetings, development reports and press materials, the halls of guesthouses, and more. In its fleshly form, it moves elusively through, into, and out of the mangroves, sometimes preying on livestock, sometimes on humans who work in or near its domain. As the delta emerges as a climate frontier, and as the tiger multiple is reconceived as its sentinel beast, the tiger's two bodies interact in new ways. The tiger emerges as one side of a multispecies wedge—bagh and bagdachingri—squeezing those who live on the forest fringe. It becomes an icon of climate endangerment, subtly welding agendas of conservation and resilience together. It reaffirms a politics of predatory care in which peasants are, once again, figured as anthropogenic threat. The tiger thus sits at the heart of a network of relations indexed to climate change and deepening relations of exploitation and expropriation in the delta siltscape. Indeed, the tiger multiple is one node of a broader ecology through which such relations are produced and bound together anew.

Nayanika Mathur, in her exploration of human/big cat encounters in contemporary India, asks about the value of using tales of beastly encounters as a means of considering the Anthropocene. As she writes, “Taken together, [beastly encounters] ground the Anthropocene within localized politics and ecosystems and can serve to relay the voices, imaginaries, and opinions of those people . . . who are already coping with the damaging consequences of climate change.”<sup>38</sup> Beastly tales, such as those I narrate throughout this chapter, can unsettle simplistic narratives that frame human/tiger encounters simply as conflict over declining resources and declining animal populations. They resituate such encounters as nexuses of a broad swath of predatory relations and multi-scalar politics. These relations are as central to making this climate frontier as the changing patterns of the monsoon

or shifts in the downstream flow of rivers. The tiger's two bodies—as well as the humans and nonhumans who encounter them—are part of the delta's densely interwoven terrain where imagination, biology, and materiality come together to shape present and future. In the Sundarbans, tigers assemble this frontier and are one of its emergent properties.

The Bengal tiger is not only the delta's most notorious predator; it is a nodal point in a broader web of predation—not only a hunter of the mangroves but a vector of politics that captures land and those that inhabit it. The tiger's two bodies work together to foment new forms of exploitation and expropriation in the delta and to enmesh them. Tigers are thus a suggestive point of entry into understanding the complex relations of this climate frontier. But tigers are only one such node. To understand the delta's broader ecology of capture, we must turn our attention to *dakats*—bandits who also prowl the mangroves and are likewise profoundly entangled in shaping its territory and rule.