

| LONG FORM |

THE LAND OF TALES AND TIGERS

THE SUNDARBANS, THROUGH THREE BOOKS AND ONE VISIT

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anarchy the Sundarbans was associated with.

From 1765, the East India Company began the process of inhabiting these islands, and by mid-nineteenth century, inhabitants from places ranging from Chotonagpur and Jharkhand to the Arakan coast of Myanmar were settled here: to reclaim the land, and for revenue. Incentives, including tax breaks and cheap land, were provided. Many, especially those who had little else, took up their homes and livelihood in the forest.

Sir Hamilton's Islands

One such initiative to populate Sundarbans is that of Sir Daniel Hamilton. The fascinating history and importance of this Scotsman working in colonial India is wonderfully described in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* and in Annu Jalais' ethnographic study *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics & Environment in the Sundarbans*. In the early 1900s, Sir Daniel Hamilton, having become very prosperous had bought the islands of the Gosaba Block (in present day West-Bengal, India) to build a utopian cooperative society. He invited indentured labourers to his islands. Here, selling or buying the land was forbidden, and religious differences were to be cast aside (pork, beef and alcohol were all prohibited). He started his own one-rupee currency for commerce, and those he settled on these islands were expected to live off the land. He established dispensaries, schools and non-formal training institutes. He wanted to create a just and economically unhindered society, which locals even today remember with pride. However, in the late 1950s, the administration of Hamilton's islands was taken back by the Indian government, who claimed that it had practically become a *zamindari*. Many islanders believe that the scheme was doomed to fail: Hamilton had based his utopia on the ownership of land. Land, to the people of the Sundarbans, was essentially corrupting.

Betrayal of trust

Both Amitav Ghosh's and Annu Jalais' books are based on Hamilton's islands. For both the authors, along with the history of these islands, another incident, much more brutal, is central



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

What the British started, continued till the 1900s. Since 1947, refugees had come to the Sundarbans from all parts of Bengal — the last of them arrived during the Liberation War of 1971. The communists who were the opposition then, gave these refugees assurances of permanently settling them in the Sundarbans.

By the time they came to power, about

30,000 to 35,000 east Bengali refugees sailed to the Sundarbans island of Morichjhanpi. But, the island had been reclaimed for tamarisk and coconut plantation by the government, and the refugees were asked to leave.

In 1979, the government forcefully evicted these refugees in the name of

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conservation of the forest, fearing that allowing them to stay would cause another influx of refugees. First an economic blockade was launched, and then came state force, as guns were fired and houses were burnt. Although there are no exact records, official count puts the number of those dead somewhere between 50 to 100. The story was never pursued, the government never held accountable, and therefore the claims of islanders that hundreds had died while trying to flee never confirmed.

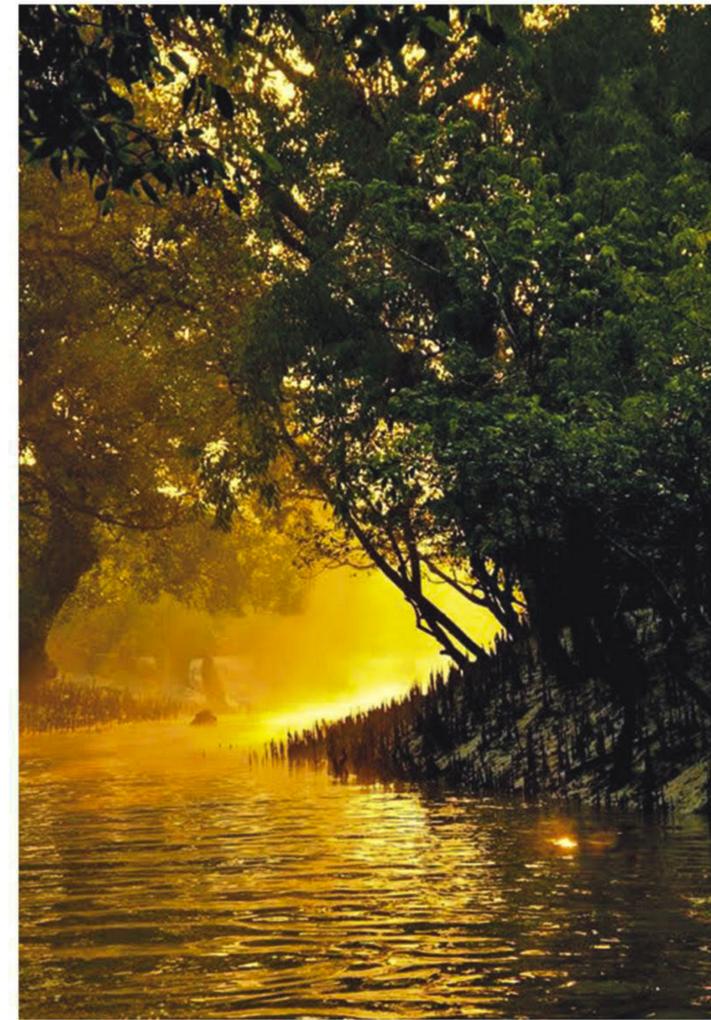
The land of stories

The two stories presented by Annu Jalais and Amitav Ghosh, though presented in two different contexts are essentially the same. Ghosh tells the story of Piya, an

Central to both books is the respect and authority Bonbibi commands over the Sundarbans. In Sundarbans lore, Bonbibi is the forest's protector, sent by the Islamic god. Abandoned in childhood by her father, she is reared by a deer. Her battle with Dakkhin Ray, the tiger demon is essentially the early battle between the settlers and the untamed forest.

Indian-American cetologist, who travels to the Sundarbans in search of the Irrawady Dolphin; Annu Jalais is more concerned with the way the islanders of Satjelia (part of Hamilton's islands) navigate their social and political realities, providing a "frame of reference to understand social relations in the Indian subcontinent."

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PHOTOS: SAKIB AHMED



She then commands that no one is allowed to take from the forest any more than they need and all who enter the forest, must do so with a pure heart. In this way, she ensures not only the survival of man in the tiger's lair, but also that the forest is not exploited. The inhabitants, both Muslim and Hindu, revere not only Bonbibi but also Dakkhin Ray.

Weaving stories into everyday life

Bonbibi had made men and tiger brothers; in the modern social and political landscape these relations needed to change. When prawn-seed collection was introduced in the Sundarbans, it meant

economic stability for many, with little investment. On the other hand, prawn-seed collection is ecologically harmful. The urban view of the Sundarbans, given its World Heritage Status, had turned it from being an uninhabitable place to that of a treasure that needs to be protected. The tiger, national animals of both India and Bangladesh, now needed to be conserved. At the same time, it was felt that the number of tiger attacks on humans had increased too.

The islanders of Annu Jalais' book explain this change through the stories of Bonbibi. She had equalised all men, and protected them in the forest. The tigers too had become compassionate to the islanders' hard life. But the conservation efforts, and the massacre of Morichjhanpi, were to the islanders an indication that to the city-folk, their lives had no value.

This explained the recent ferociousness of the tiger. The tigers were no longer equals, and the islanders were now merely tiger food, since the city *bhadralok* cared more for the former. The islanders told tales of how the new tigers were government engineered, more ferocious, with a penchant for human blood; or how the tigers now saw themselves as superior beings.

So the islanders too resort to new beliefs, maybe more mainstream versions of Islam or Hinduism. Explaining these changing stories of the tiger and Bonbibi in the context of the social hierarchy and politics of the island, Jalais puts forward an important challenge: the social aspect of ecological conservation. In an article along the same vein, she writes:

They argue that while the world is becoming a global village where people all over the world are increasingly brought to relate to the tigers of Sundarbans forests, their options to make a decent livelihood are shrinking and their very presences seen as illegitimate or even criminal in what has become a transnational World Heritage Site.

Prawn-seed is bad for the Sundarbans, but take it away, these people, living on the margins of society, would fall prey to economic exploitation. Women, who mostly carry out the collection of prawn-seed, would lose the empowerment this has brought. In the same way, lives and livelihoods of the locals cannot be endangered in ecological bids to save the tigers. The very designation of the Sundarbans as a World Heritage Site was a concern for the islanders of Satjelia. The urban view of the exotic Sundarbans was as similar to the colonial concerns for "regal" tiger and forests' resources, and far from what the local saw as their home.

But the wildlife of the Sundarbans is not limited to the Bengal Tiger either; Amitav Ghosh's book is a testament to the rich diversity of the life it sustains, such as the rare Irrawady Dolphin.

It is futile to say, as many have, that these islands should never have been reclaimed. The concerns of the people need to be given as much importance as the flora and fauna; otherwise all efforts of conservation will always be seen as alienating.

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