

**BRAVING CROCODILES WITH KALI:
BEING A PRAWN SEED COLLECTOR AND A MODERN WOMAN
IN THE 21ST CENTURY SUNDARBANS**

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Globalisation has undoubtedly shaped popular conceptions of gender and society in innumerable ways. This article studies one such instance - the plight of tiger-prawn collectors in Sundarbans. The discovery of tiger-prawns - the 'living dollars of Sundarbans' - has certainly transformed the lives of women in the region beyond imagination. These women however have had to face strenuous attacks from many spheres. Based on her anthropological fieldwork, the author portrays the struggle of women in the area against patriarchy, traditional modes of exploitation and even urban notions of femininity. Braving crocodiles and even changing their religious allegiances, these women have, carved out a sphere of self-respect for themselves.

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Globalisation – whether it has diversified or restricted the economic options of small communities worldwide – has brought significant changes in the way people perceive and live out social relations. Prawn-*seed*¹ collection, which started in the mid-1970s in the inhabited islands of the Bengal delta just north of the Sundarbans forest, has provoked growing criticism from environmental and NGO activists due to the catastrophic effect it wreaks on eco-systems world-wide. In this paper, I shall not discuss the prawn industry's destructive nature (there is no dearth of literature on it anyway) but highlight how, in the inhabited islands of the West Bengal Sundarbans, prawn-related occupations bring to light dilemmas of a moral order. They are seen to be threatening not just the environment but also the idea of a 'traditional' Sundarbans sociality – especially around issues of gender and hierarchy. What was interesting for me was to see the tactics with which the island women themselves countered the criticisms levied at them.

While studies have argued that globalization has been detrimental to women due to the growing structural gender inequalities it has given rise to,² the view held by many women, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, is that it has given them greater opportunities to challenge pre-existing patriarchal norms and has rendered them more empowered compared to an earlier generation of women. As Ganguly-Scrase argues, there are two major contrasting

¹ *Bagda* in Bengali. This refers to the 'tiger prawn' – scientific name *Penaeus monodon* – which is the most delicate in taste and largest Indian marine penaeid prawn to be farmed. To facilitate reading, I shall refer to the tiger prawn hatchlings (which are usually at the post-larval stage PL 20, 9-14 mm) as "prawn seed" even though the literature also refers to them as 'shrimp' 'post-larvae' / 'juveniles' / 'seedlings'. I also use 'shrimp' and 'prawn' interchangeably.

² M. Panini, *The Social Logic of Economic Liberalisation*, 44 SOCIOLOGICAL BULLETIN 33, 57 (1995), Dolly Arora, *Structural Adjustment Programs and Gender Concerns in India*, 29 JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY ASIA 328, 328-61 (1999); Srimati Basu, *The blunt cutting edge: the construction of sexuality in the Bengali 'feminist' magazine 'Sananda'*, 1(2) FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES 179 (2001); CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT STUDIES, *SHIFTING SANDS: WOMEN'S LIVES AND GLOBALISATION* (Stree 2000); Meenakshi N. Dalal, *Rural Women of India and the Global Economy*, 3 DEVELOPMENT 40, 40 (1995); Ritu Dewan, *Gender implications of the 'new' economic policy: a conceptual overview*, 22(4) WOMEN'S STUDIES INTERNATIONAL FORUM 425, 429 (1999); Ganguly-Scrase, *Paradoxes of Globalization, Liberalization, and Gender Equality: The Worldviews of the Lower Middle Class in West Bengal, India* 17(4) GENDER & SOCIETY, 544-566 (2003).

³ Ganguly-Scrase, *supra* note 2, at 545.

approaches in the Subcontinent on studies based on the impact of the liberalizing process of globalization on women.³ There are the studies which focus on the poor and highlight their growing gender inequalities, and those which explore, resting mainly on studies amongst the upper and middle classes, feminine desire and subjectivity. In other words, what is left out of the picture is how the experience of globalisation amongst poor women can also be a study of ‘feminine desire and subjectivity’.

To this effect, I will highlight how women (often landless) pointed out that it was the introduction of prawn collection that saw the most marginalized amongst them start eating two square meals a day. They further said that the earnings from prawn-collection had ‘empowered’ them. I was curious to know what exactly they meant by this and how this occupation offered not just greater freedom to dispense of their money as they wished but also make their own choices – and here I shall concentrate on the reasons they provided as to why goddess Kali had now become their chosen divinity. This occupation, as I mentioned earlier, was disapproved of by the village elite and prawn collectors were condemned for being ‘greedy’ and for posing a threat to the ‘ethics’ of village life. What struck me was that the outrage of the village elite pivoted not so much around an anxiety over safeguarding the global commons of the Sundarbans nor over the fact that an increasing number of women prawn-collectors were being killed by crocodiles but around an urban,⁴ middle-class preoccupation with a morality centering on gender and social hierarchy. They would often denounce prawn seed collection with the attack that it ‘made women ‘uncontrollable’” and the poor in general ‘arrogant’ because with the money they were making they now ‘dared’ to challenge the hierarchies of the family and of village life.

Between July 1999 and February 2001, I conducted anthropological fieldwork in one of the southern-most inhabited islands of the Sundarbans. My

⁴ By ‘urban’ I mean not only those living in towns and cities but more broadly, following Gombrich & Obeyesekere (1988:4), to indicate middle-class people who even though living in villages are, through their aspiration and lifestyle, clearly differentiated from peasants, fishers or forest workers.

work consisted of living with the fishers, accompanying various groups of people to their occupational sites, asking many questions and taking extensive notes. I also occasionally worked as a school-teacher at the local school. My research culminated in a book on how people use their understandings and experiences of tigers to talk of social hierarchies and distinctions amongst themselves.⁵ In this paper, I will concentrate on just one aspect of my research: the shift of religious allegiances, of many prawn-collecting women, from goddesses Bonbibì to Kali and why. This transfer, I argue, was often explained as a necessity. Kali was seen by the prawn collectors as offering a space to claim a sense of ‘modernity’ because she was the goddess worshipped by the forest guards, people who represent both the upwardly mobile and the larger exterior world. Kali was also deemed more ‘powerful’. Her inherent violence, in sharp contrast to Bonbibì’s peaceful disposition, was believed to offer greater potency in dealings with life-threatening dangers such as crocodiles and tigers, as well as the risky contingencies of the prawn industry. By choosing Kali, it was as if the women prawn collectors refused their relegation to the margins of civility as Kali permitted them, as one of them pithily expressed, to be part of ‘the cut-throat world of global business’. Indeed, if Kali is seen as fitting with the necessarily violent, risky and bloody nature of their occupation, she is also seen as befitting an occupation inscribed within ‘modernity’. Prawn seed-collecting thus located within a contemporary temporality as well as a spatiality which extends beyond their village (their prawns reach the plates of people belonging to the distant lands of Japan and the USA), the collectors considered their occupation—and their chosen deity—to be ‘modern’. Kali was important both because she was rural enough to be subversive and yet also urban enough to be ‘global’. It was because she was both inside and outside the confines of their village world that Kali was significant. And because the prawn collectors saw themselves as situated within a greater ‘global’ experience, however remote

⁵ The book is called ANNU JALAI, *FOREST OF TIGERS: PEOPLE, POLITICS AND ENVIRONMENT IN THE SUNDARBANS* (Routledge 2010) and a longer and fuller version of this piece appears in Chapter V.

that ‘globality’ appeared to be from the material and social realities of their daily lives.

Some background on prawn fisheries, fishing and landowning in Bengal

The rivers and canals of the West Bengal Sundarbans are an incredible repository of fish and its fisheries, especially prawn fisheries, have earned a considerable amount of foreign exchange for India. Indeed, tiger prawns have been called the ‘living dollars’ of the Sundarbans and around 10,000 hectares of the inhabited islands north of the Sundarbans forest have been converted into prawn fisheries since the 1980s. The thriving of these fisheries depends on the collection of prawn seeds from the rivers flowing in the southern part of the region. As the soil of this region is not very fertile and periodically gets submerged by the rivers’ salt water, a large section of the population of these deltaic islands depend on the forest for crab, wood or honey or work in the rivers as fishers or crab and prawn-seed collectors.

Prawn collection became very popular and was (there has recently been a bid to implement the Government’s ban on this occupation) one of the most stable sources of revenue for the islanders of the Sundarbans. A couple of hours’ net-pulling easily enabled one to make more money than s/he could have done by working a full day in someone’s fields. This occupation especially developed after the disastrous cyclones of 1981 and 1988 which caused many islands to get swept by saline river water when their bunding⁶ broke damaging crops worth Rs. 830 million and leaving in their wake a (temporarily) infertile land. The islanders who were most affected were those living along the banks of rivers – usually fishers and forest workers. The little land they owned was lost and many islanders, to prevent their families from starving, resorted to prawn-seed collection as they were offered ready cash for the prawn-seed they collected.

⁶ The islands furthest South are basin-like and surrounded by raised mud quays called ‘*bund*’ to protect them from the saline tidal rivers. Taken together there are about 3500 kilometres of *bunding* – the process of enclosing an island with a bund – around most of the fifty-four inhabited islands of the Sundarbans to keep river water from overflowing into them during high tide.

Prawn collection developed very rapidly in the 1980s also because it was a time when the government came down heavily on those who did not possess passes allowing entry into the forest. This was because these were expensive. The officials were known for their ruthlessness in extorting fines even from the bereaved relatives of tiger- or crocodile-victims who had ventured without passes into the forest. Thus prawn seed collection quickly gained popularity because (i) it could be practiced along the banks of one's island as opposed to having to venture into the forest; (ii) it could be undertaken during one's leisure time; (iii) prawn-seed was easily available and sold for important sums; and (iv) it was legal and not tainted with the stigma of forest-related occupations such as wood-collecting and poaching.

In Bangladesh and West Bengal the growth of an export-oriented brackish water prawn aquaculture industry started in the 1960s and centered on Khulna and Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh and in Midnapur in West Bengal. The industry picked up very rapidly and by the late 1970s prawn collection had become very popular in the Sundarbans. This development represented a major shift from the traditional fishing sector as practised essentially by Hindu caste groups and by men. Prawn collection, in contrast, was started in Bangladesh by Muslim communities who were increasingly disadvantaged as landless labourers and marginal farmers. It soon spread as it was relatively free from the social hierarchies linked to agriculture and could be practised in one's own free time and with very little investment. Moreover, initially at least, it was devoid of stigma.

The islanders narrated how in the beginning it was a craze, nearly everybody took up prawn collection as it was such an easy way to make cash—prawn was then dubbed the 'living dollars of the Sundarbans'. Thus, the wives of school teachers and important politicians were, like their poorer counterparts, known to have hitched up their saris and spent entire days wading in rivers pulling behind them the fine net used to collect tiger-prawn seed. The threat of crocodiles in those earlier times was remote and dealers paid well. Another very important factor for the popularity of the occupation was that the price of a prawn seed did not depend on one's gender or contacts and it was fixed primarily by the laws of the global market economy. Initially, prawn collectors made money

relatively quickly, thus bringing about the wrath of those who considered themselves too *bhadra* or ‘civilised’ to practise this occupation. The fact that this occupation was started first in Bangladesh and therefore mainly by Muslims, and that it became, both in Bangladesh and in West Bengal, popularised especially amongst the very poor, is also of relevance to understanding why the occupation came to take on the negative moral connotations it has today. The antipathy of the village elite towards the prawn collectors has to be understood both as a struggle for control of the economy as well as a resentment about the fact that sharecroppers and wage labourers started thereafter refusing to work their fields for a pittance. Prawn dealers—usually people of the same social background as forest workers and prawn collectors and who live, like them, along the river’s edge were very often ex-forest workers or prawn collectors who ‘have made it’ and they were now able to lend money to their kith and kin further decreasing the landowners’ hold.

The prawn collectors often boasted about how they were their own masters and how easily one could become prawn dealers (albeit this is usually practised by men) through hard work and luck. In contrast to the forest workers and to school teachers—both groups seen to be dependent on the state, for forest passes and salaries respectively—the prawn collectors took great pride in not being subject to the patronage of the state or of landowners. They strove to gain social status by keeping very much informed about world news and by highlighting the fact that they were part of the global economy and therefore more prestigious than a mere landowning cultivator. Even if being a prawn collector meant being subject to exploitation by both local as well as international market forces, s/he saw it as better than being the landless labourer of the local landowner. However, if the two sectors, agriculture and prawn, vie for economic status, social status was still very much the prerogative of the landed gentry. It is in this context that we have to understand the critique levelled at the morality of prawn collectors, the discourses of their ‘greed’ and ‘violence’ developed to prevent their access to social respectability.

Historically, there seems to have always been friction between cultivators and fishers in Bengal. When the British established the Permanent Settlement

in 1793, they left *jalkar* rights—rights relating to the produce of the water – open for the *zamindars* to increase their income. This system increased the dominance of the zamindar landlords even if they usually leased their *jalkar* rights to middlemen who, in turn, hired fishers. Fisheries thus became private properties that could be bought and sold. What is interesting is that the rights to a body of water and that to the land which surrounded it were usually vested in two different persons. When rivers shifted their course, the rights of *jalkar* followed the river so that if it flowed over a cultivator's land, the cultivator lost access to that land and did not gain any compensatory rights to fish even though his land lay beneath water.⁷ However, in contrast to these private fisheries, fishing in the public rivers was allowed and went untaxed. These were defined as the property of the state and the public had the right to fish where rivers were not leased out to individuals.⁸

Over the nineteenth century, the colonial state created a system based on rentier capital and in the process undermined the longstanding customary rights of the fishers. In 1859, the Board of Revenue, in an endeavour to build up revenue, leased out portions of navigable rivers, especially the Hooghly and Ganga, to leaseholders.⁹ But by 1868, in the wake of legal disputes, the Government of Bengal abandoned the policy of auctioning parts of navigable rivers in deference to the views of the Legal Remembrance and the Advocate General who, in following English law on the subject, were of the opinion that the rights to fisheries in tidal rivers were vested in the Crown, in its capacity of trustee, for the benefit of the public and that exclusive rights of fishery could thus not be granted to private individuals or to certain classes of persons to the exclusion of the public.¹⁰ However, customary rights kept clashing with capitalist interests. The *zamindars* pressurised the Government of Bengal through the

⁷ Bob Pokrant et al., *Bengal Fishers and Fisheries: A Historiographic Essay*, in *BENGAL: RETHINKING HISTORY ESSAYS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY* 97 (Sekhar Bandyopadhyay ed., ICBS Publication No. 29, Manohar 2001).

⁸ *Supra* note 7, at 96-97.

⁹ *Supra* note 7, at 99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* at 99–100 quoting *INDIAN LAW REPORTS* 434 (VOLUME 11), quoted in *BENGAL: RETHINKING HISTORY ESSAYS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY*, *supra* note 6, at 99-100.

British Indian Association (BIA) to ensure their jalkar rights (or rights over rivers). Eventually, the chief secretary of the Government of Bengal established that fish, even though in public rivers, did not become the property of the person who had the fishing right as they were *ferae naturae* and therefore belonged to the state. By the end of the nineteenth century, the customary rights of fishers were nearly non-existent.

The ‘Blue Revolution’ in the poverty-stricken land of the ‘living dollars’

In the early 1980s, major improvements in hatchery production and feed-processing techniques allowed rapid advances in prawn farming techniques, making it possible to produce dramatically increased yields. Drawing parallels with the ‘Green Revolution’ in agriculture, which contributed to the growth of large-scale export-oriented agribusiness enterprises in the global south but which were also subject to widespread criticism for their environmental and social impacts, Quarto and others have called the massive growth of the prawn aquaculture industry the ‘Blue Revolution’. It has become a global industry that has an annual farm-gate value of over \$4 billion, and an annual retail value of over \$20 billion.¹¹ However, if the Green Revolution primarily benefited individual farmers, this revolution, especially where it concerns brackish water prawn cultivation, has been seen by environmental activists as spelling ecological, economic and social doom for the communities of the global south.

Ecological doom: tiger prawn seeds constitute only 0.25–0.27 per cent of the total catch; the rest of the entire ‘by-catch’ is discarded. According to Sarkar and Bhattacharya, this wastage, as well as the techniques involved in collecting prawn seeds, causes: (i) immense damage to the mangrove biota leading to severe fish stock depletion and thus threatens the equilibrium of marine ecosystem food webs; (ii) the uprooting of the mangrove seed and salt-marsh vegetation which sets off soil erosion due to the constant dragging of nets along the coast

¹¹ Rosenberry in Alfredo Quarto et al., *Choosing the Road to Sustainability: The Impacts of Shrimp Aquaculture and the Models for Change* (1996), available at <http://www.earthisland.org/map/rdstb.htm>.

and tidal creeks; (iii) a decrease in the quality of water triggered off by mud erosion in the catchment areas; and, (iv) skin infections, waterborne illnesses, infertility and many other diseases which afflict especially women collectors due to their constant contact with the salt river water.¹² Once fisheries, especially those made for the cultivation of the brackish water tiger prawn species we are dealing with here, are abandoned, they become wastelands, unfit for any other resource-extractive purposes.

Economic doom: if over 85 per cent of worldwide farmed prawn production takes place in Asia, the near totality of the product is exported, two-thirds of it mainly serving consumers in Japan and the USA, with the rest being dispatched to Europe, Canada, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Spurred on by governments eager for increased export dollars, prawn aquaculture development has been aided by generous support and incentives from international lending institutions, including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and others. The World Bank participated actively in launching the prawn (or 'shrimp') industry in Asia. Out of an investment of US\$1.685 billion in 1992 for Indian agriculture and fisheries, the World Bank allocated US\$425 million for aquaculture development. A substantial part of this sum was allocated for intensification and expansion of shrimp ponds.¹³ However, as argued by Quarto, the global economic figures and the allure of quick investment returns disguise the fact that prawn aquaculture is a 'boom and bust' industry where the spread of deadly infectious viruses in prawns has episodically caused hundreds of millions of dollars worth of losses.¹⁴ Undeniably, it is an utterly unpredictable source of income. The islanders often talk of the prawn industry as being 'nothing but a lottery'. Whether one is a collector, a

¹² Santhosh K. Sarkar et al., *Conservation of Biodiversity of the Coastal Resources of Sunderbans, Northeast India: An Integrated Approach through Environmental Education*, 47 MARINE POLLUTION BULLETIN 260, 260 (2003).

¹³ Solon Barraclough et al., *Some Ecological and Social Implications of Commercial Shrimp Farming in Asia*, in CHOOSING THE ROAD TO SUSTAINABILITY: THE IMPACTS OF SHRIMP AQUACULTURE AND THE MODELS FOR CHANGE, *supra* note 10, at 15-16.

¹⁴ Alfredo Quarto et al., *Choosing the Road to Sustainability: The Impacts of Shrimp Aquaculture and the Models for Change* (1996), available at <http://www.earthisland.org/map/rdstb.htm>.

dealer or a fishery owner, to engage in the prawn industry is a 'risky' business. People are believed to 'either make or lose millions' and just as they are susceptible to gain in economic and political power, increase their chances of migrating towards the city and thus get access to higher social status, they can just as easily lose their life to tigers or crocodiles or their possessions to a storm or a retributive attack.

Social 'doom'? The islanders, both prawn collectors and non-prawn collectors, are aware of the negative ecological and economical consequences. But what to me appeared surprising was that the village elite usually—usually landowners—framed their resentment in moral terms and spoke about the supposed 'social' degradation of those involved with prawn collection. The reasons for this, in my opinion, lie in the ongoing hostility between landowners and prawn fishers. When breaches in bunds or embankments cause land to be temporarily submerged by salt water, the easy option is to convert one's flooded paddy fields into prawn fisheries. However, by law, this requires permission from the landlords of the adjoining lands, especially if they want to reserve their lands for agricultural purposes since, once a field is converted into a necessarily salt-water fishery, it contaminates the soil surrounding it. As permission is not readily given, those who want to start fisheries sometimes resort to opening breaches in the bunds and embankments that keep riverine salt water out. Once an area is flooded, it becomes difficult to refuse converting it into a fishery. Landowners who want to keep their land for paddy production sometimes resort to poisoning neighbouring fisheries. Equally, as prawn seeds are fragile and suffer very high mortality rates, it is not difficult to accuse one's neighbour of having poisoned one's fisheries. This dynamic gives rise to often murderous fights between landlords who want to keep their fields for paddy production and those (usually small holders) who want to convert their's into fisheries. Also, the resentment of erstwhile landowners seeing prawn dealers become rich in such short lapses of time often pushes them into bullying landless labourers who turn to prawn collecting into returning to work their fields.

The village elites' condemnation of this occupation was often voiced by those involved in the prawn business themselves. Male prawn collectors were

often critical of their occupation as they genuinely believed that by entering the forest to collect prawn seeds they brought upon themselves the wrath of the forest deity Bonbibi and that those who practiced this occupation were ultimately doomed because they flouted the rules of the forest. If prawn collectors often talked about the need for their occupation to gain social recognition they were aware of what they saw as the ethical dilemmas surrounding their work. In fact, many forest workers with family members engaged in prawn collection, usually blamed tiger attacks on these family members. They argued that the prawn collectors had 'de-sacralised' the forest, transforming it into 'a big marketplace' where prawn collectors unscrupulously disturbed animals by walking in and out at all times of the day and night.

Countering these critiques, female prawn collectors retorted that they only fished along the banks of inhabited islands and that they therefore were not flouting forest-related laws. 'It is sad that people die but what are the options for making a living in the Sundarbans, especially for the landless and for widowed or divorced women?' rhetorically asked many poorer women. The islanders often spoke of a time before prawn seed collection, when life was tough and where they could not satisfy their hunger. With prawn collection things had changed, those who had been quick to pick up this occupation were now in a better position to afford schooling and food for their children. Yet, the negative image of prawn collection is reinforced in innumerable ways. When the islanders narrate to outsiders the difficulties of living in the Sundarbans, it is essentially honey collectors and woodcutters who are cited as those who were the most vulnerable groups, never the women prawn collectors who pull their nets along the river banks. What is strange is that even though women prawn collectors are now, as a group, the most affected lot, and despite the fact that crocodiles and sharks are making far more victims than are tigers, the women prawn collectors do not evoke the sympathy the male honey collectors or woodcutters do.

Yet out of need and defiance women prawn collectors continued fishing along the banks of rivers whilst the village elite persisted in lobbying to have the occupation banned. What they argued was for the implementation of government regulations and a greater protection of the prawn industry. This is

for three reasons. The first reason was having the economic reassurance of knowing that their wares would not decrease fourfold in value from one day to the next. The second reason was the ecological assurance that the dwindling prawn seed would not be allowed to disappear through unregulated fishing. The third reason was because they wanted prawn collection to be recognised as a legitimate occupation (as opposed to being seen as a quick money-making scam with no future) so that it might be sustainable in the long run and therefore have a greater chance to gain social approbation.

Choosing Kali over Bonbibi

Even though the southern-most islands of the Sundarbans are yet to be supplied with electricity, the Sundarbans islanders have already had their own ‘general break with all sorts of pasts’—Appadurai’s criterion of a world in which modernity is decisively ‘at large’.¹⁵ Appadurai examines the ‘general break’ or ‘rupture’ that ‘takes media and migration as the two interconnected diacritics which effect on the *work of imagination* – the constitutive feature of modern subjectivity’.¹⁶ Newspapers and the TV are rare but many Sundarbans islanders have migrated in and out of the region in search of work. Radio and word-of-mouth are used to keep extensively informed about what is happening in the world and to argue and fight about how that in turn affects them. So, how was the experience of globalisation felt by the riverside women of the southern islands of the Sundarbans?

Let’s start with what they had to say about the traditional forest deity Bonbibi. One has to know in this context that Bonbibi’s image is prominently visible in the many shrines attached to the different West Bengal government forest offices. The government staff explanation is that Bonbibi’s image is there for the forest workers (who come to those offices to undertake the formalities required to get forest passes) and the tourists. The staff members of these offices are usually not from the Sundarbans; their protective deities are not Bonbibi or

¹⁵ ARJUN APPADURAI, MODERNITY AT LARGE: CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF GLOBALIZATION 3 (University of Minnesota Press 1996).

¹⁶ *Id.*

Manasa but more mainstream goddesses such as Kali or Tara (another form of Kali). Bonbibi's tourist appeal (because of her story and link to the Sundarbans tigers) is slowly transforming her symbolic import for some of the younger and better travelled islanders. Keen to highlight how their 'real' selves are actually 'properly/fully' 'Hindu' or 'Muslim', they are uneasy with her status as a 'marginal goddess' on the cusp of today's Hinduism and Islam and therefore like to explain her off as a piece of mere exotica. Those forest workers who come to collect their passes from these government offices, usually do offer coins and respect to these Bonbibi shrines before setting off for the forest; however, they reserve their devotion for the Bonbibi shrines they have built near their homes or in the forest.

Still, Bonbibi's presence on government terrain points to an interesting paradox. Those seen by the forest officials as believing in her powers i.e. the forest workers, are often discredited as superstitious fools, and the tourists, who are keen to visit her shrines, are laughed off as seekers of exotic practices. Bonbibi's forest-working worshippers are often the butt of jokes by the forest officials who nonetheless usually hang a picture of Kali in their offices. This distinction they maintain between Bonbibi and Kali constitutes another marker of difference between the inhabitants of the Sundarbans and forest officials. While the former are seen as 'superstitious', rural and backward because they worship a local goddess, the latter (who are nearly all Hindu) see themselves as sophisticated, urbane and progressive because they worship Kali. Kali is well-inscribed within the Hindu pantheon (as opposed to Bonbibi, whose Islamic origins are increasingly seen as problematic) and therefore, in their eyes, more suited to their status of forest official—considered a few notches above that of a forest worker.

However, while forest-workers—usually male and middle-aged—continued to have great devotion to Bonbibi, the prawn seed collectors—both male and female and young—were calling upon the powers of Kali to protect them. Although the Sundarbans prawn seed collectors were becoming reticent about worshipping Bonbibi, they did not turn to the relatively common and affordable worship of goddesses such as Lokkhi (the Bengali equivalent of Lakshmi) or

Saraswati or the worship of the more bhadrakali goddess Durga. The prawn collectors took up the relatively expensive worship—because it is more elaborate—of goddess Kali. It is significant that in the Sundarbans, as in many other parts of rural West Bengal, Kali is also famous for being the deity of choice of those who are involved in violent professions. Deities in the Sundarbans (like elsewhere in South Asia) are generally seen as the patrons of particular occupational activities. As an islander explained, ‘you know, gods are like government ministers, they have different departments divided between them and Bonbibi has been ascribed the forest. So just as we have to flatter relevant government officials, forest workers have to flatter Bonbibi, school teachers Saraswati, and prawn collectors, like those engaged in violent jobs such as highway robbers, policemen, taxi-drivers or poachers, Kali.’

What needs to be highlighted is that in the Sundarbans Kali does not entirely conform to her more mainstream portrayal. She is stripped of the motherly qualities attributed to her in urban middle-class homes and her usual symbolism as the magnanimous and compassionate mother, ever-ready to forgive her errant children—an image made famous by the great Bengali poet and song composer Ramprasad Sen and mystic Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa—stand in stark contrast to the stories of gore and greed which are narrated about her in the Sundarbans. Here, popular stories about Kali focus on her association with those practising illegal and/or violent occupations and an assumed fickle, greedy and blood-thirsty nature invoked. Kali’s growing popularity amongst the Hindu prawn collectors, explained on the grounds that their occupation is both ‘bloody’ and ‘risky’ and therefore necessitates a fierce cosmic deity, highlights important consequences. To what extent is the adoption of Kali—a goddess notoriously linked to violent and predominantly male occupations—by net-pulling female prawn collectors, an attempt to redefine the place of women in contemporary Sundarbans, both on an economic as well as on a social level?

¹⁷ Little shack built along an adjoining fishery by a prawn fishery owner. These serve to watch over the fishery at night and are used as a prawn seed transaction area during the day. They also become temporary living spaces for prawn dealers during the busy months.

On a practical level, her worship is undertaken by prawn khoti¹⁷ owners, their dealers and agents, as well as the prawn collectors. This is in contrast to the devotion for the forest deity Bonbibibi, undertaken by individual forest workers or by small family units even if they usually work in teams. As I saw it, Kali's image permits the Sundarbans prawn collectors to reject the '*bhadramahila*' (literally civilised/cultured woman) ideal of womanhood: marked by urban and upper caste/class ideals of female docility steeped in 'tradition' and 'spirituality' as popularised by Indian nationalism¹⁸ while allowing them to feel as if they were more modern, 'civilised' and part of the larger community of Hindus. In the islands of the Sundarbans, people try to assimilate to higher status groups by becoming part of the '*bhadra*' class through what Ruud has called 'modernisation'¹⁹ meaning in this context organising the worship of the household goddesses of the Kolkata bhadrakalok — Durga, Kali, Saraswati and Lokkhi — or adhering to the tenets of what is seen as 'proper' Islam for the Muslims and the garnering of 'civilities' such as the knowledge of poetry and English, drama and Tagore songs. As I see it, the choice of Kali in her aggressive and blood-thirsty form offers a social redefinition of what it means to be a village woman with economic status as well as offers a possibility of (modern as opposed to traditional) 'civility' through association with a goddess who is at once firmly installed within the Hindu pantheon and yet also allowing enough room for a sort of 'contained deviance'.

Roughing it with Kali

The discrepancy of status between the glamorous tiger versus the common crocodile or shark is directly transferred to the inequality of status between the perceived pious and industrious forest workers versus the immoral and greedy women prawn collectors. The motives for this are both the local ethos of the

¹⁸ PARTHA CHATTERJEE, *THE NATION AND ITS FRAGMENTS: COLONIAL AND POST COLONIAL HISTORIES* (Princeton University Press 1993).

¹⁹ Arild Engelsen Ruud, *From Untouchable to Communist: Wealth, Power and Status among Supporters of the Communist Part(Marxist) in Rural West Bengal, in SONAR BANGLA? AGRICULTURAL GROWTH AND AGRARIAN CHANGE IN WEST B ENGAL AND BANGLADESH* 258 (B. Rogaly et al. eds., Sage Publications 1999).

forest with its associated laws and the discrepancy between the status of men of women. Why a person finds death in the clutches of a tiger is often attributed by the islanders to their possessing one of the following traits: violence, greed or arrogance. These are believed to be the characteristics of tigers and thus, if one has the misfortune to display them, one is seen as making a mockery of the tiger and thus unwittingly becomes its target. Those who work in the forest generally accept that becoming a honey collector or a woodcutter means internalising the ominous adage ‘to work in the forest is to tempt the tiger’ (*mohal kora mane bagh chesta kora*), along with the courage this necessitates.

By contrast, the forest workers see the prawn seed collectors as entering the forest without having internalised this threat. They consider the prawn seed collectors to be ‘careless’ not only about their own lives but about the jungle at large, thus putting all the other forest workers’ lives at stake. As a crab collector explained, there are two main protocols that need to be remembered when entering the forest; first, that the presiding deity of the forest is Ma Bonbibi and, second, that the Sundarbans are the ‘storehouse of Ma Bonbibi’ (*ma bonbibir khamar—khamar* means storehouse/granary, usually place where crops are stored). All who enter the forest must do so in a spirit of ‘brotherhood’ and consider the fruits of the forest as being for the poorest. The forest is often spoken about as a sort of ‘commons’: those who work there are obliged to share equally anything they bring back from the forest. In contrast, the forest workers argue, the prawn collectors believe in ‘grab and be gone’ and do not have the same ethos of sharing as them.

In complete contrast to the forest workers who need to respect elaborate rules in relation to the forest, the prawn collectors are seen as uncouth and thieving, and as ‘ill-mannered looters of the forest’ as one tiger-charmer called them. However, the women rarely fished in the forest. They did fish at odd times of the day and often at night though as they have to accord their timings with the changing tides. As most of them are women, they have to look after children, send them off to school, comb their hair, etc. Anita, a veteran prawn collector, explained ‘there are so many forest rules, which ones should we keep and which ones can we safely dispose of? As it is difficult to decide, and as we

work more often along the banks of rivers flowing along villages rather than the ones flowing through the forest, we prefer foregoing of these rules.’ Moreover, although there were specific interdictions against defiling the territory of the tiger, there aren’t any such elaborations with regards to crocodiles or sharks. Neither were the rivers, when flowing outside the forest, considered ‘sacred’.

Prawn collectors who spend their days wading in river water did not choose Ganga as their deity, notwithstanding the fact that she is seen to be just as greedy and occasionally as violent as Kali. The rejection of Ganga as the preferred deity of prawn collectors because she was ‘local’ led me to look at prawn collection and its social content from the women’s perspectives. As one of my female prawn-collecting neighbours explained, Ganga ‘is neither strong nor violent enough, besides, she isn’t a “world deity” (*biswa debi*). Who knows about her? Whereas Kali, with her reputation of being a cut-throat goddess, is just perfect for us.’ It isn’t as if all the prawn collectors worship Kali; on the contrary, she is much less worshipped than Bonbibi. Ganga too is worshipped, but as a minor deity, and mainly by those who own boats. Kali, however, is increasingly gaining popularity amongst prawn collectors on the grounds that she is powerful. Forest workers are seen by a surprising number of women prawn collectors as a generally superstitious lot, whereas the women see themselves as pragmatic and they often express serious doubts about Bonbibi’s potency. For prawn collectors, it is Kali they propitiate and worship.

The reason why Kali, a goddess not previously worshipped by this community, is rapidly replacing Bonbibi is also because she is seen as ‘contemporary’ or ‘modern’ (*adhunik*). When I asked how, I was told that she was ‘modern’ because she was favoured by the police and taxi-drivers—modern and urban professionals. This was also why the poachers had adopted her as their deity of choice. Kali, in the Sundarbans, is seen as a goddess favouring ‘black parties’, that is, those engaged in illegal activities such as poaching and pirating. Once, in the early days of my fieldwork, while discussing the forest with a man who was a poacher, I learnt that he did not worship Bonbibi because he ‘believed in firearms’ and used them against wild animals (i.e., Bonbibi’s animals) and that ‘Ma Kali was therefore more appropriate’. He then explained

that even though the deity of the forest was Bonbibi, he did not worship her because ‘she refuses to protect firearm users, she assures her full protection only if you enter the forest with bare hands. When you are a poacher,’ he went on to drive the point in, ‘you refuse to acknowledge the animals as Bonbibi’s, you not only take the jungle for granted, but actually greedily plunder it, how in these circumstances can you imagine that Bonbibi will come to your rescue? She’s good to fish and crab parties, but for us black parties it’s different, with our firearms we bear more resemblance to dacoits and policemen than to crab catchers.’

In contrast, there is an image of Bonbibi in every forest office—the government’s ‘use’ of her thus signifying her as a ‘legal’ deity. So in some ways Bonbibi is ‘tamed’ while the prawn collectors see themselves needing a goddess who can deal with the ‘illegal’, who is perhaps ‘illegal’ herself. Kali offers the perfect compromise as she is both a ‘mainstream’ goddess, hence giving them status as ‘modern’ people, as well as a goddess linked to the unlawful dacoits of olden days and the poachers of today. The condemnation, both from the local point of view highlighting how their occupation goes against the ‘ethos of the forest’ as well as the global condemnation that their occupation is causing the near annihilation of the Sundarbans ecology, has relegated the prawn collectors to the margins of occupational respectability. This is why Kali is seen as offering the possibility of both, redemption in the context of modernity and progressiveness as well as a space to ‘express their power’.

This popularity of Kali with people who see their occupation as violent and/or marginal may be compared to the growing attractiveness of deities such as Kataragama, Kali and Huniyam/Suniyam in Sri Lanka. In the Tamil-dominated Eastern coastal fishing villages of Sri Lanka where the ravages of war have left the population terrorised and deeply scarred, it is Kali who is increasingly being worshipped because she is seen as the most responsive and powerful deity. Identified by these Sri Lankan fisher communities as ‘rough like the sea’, she is seen as the only deity having the power to ‘change the position’ of those

²⁰ Patricia Lawrence, *Kali in a Context of Terror: The Tasks of a Goddess in Sri Lanka’s Civil War*, in ENCOUNTERING KALI: IN THE MARGINS, AT THE CENTRE, IN THE WEST 107 (R. McDermott et al., University of California Press 2003).

experiencing the immediate vulnerability to a violent annihilation and to return to safety those family members who have disappeared.²⁰ This is not to suggest a common pan–South Asian understanding of Kali. What I am reiterating is how gods and goddesses are given new operative capacities which are perceived as better helping people to deal with the contingencies of changing lifestyles.

Appadurai has argued that ‘in the public sphere of many societies there is concern that policy debates occurring around world trade, copyright, environment, science, and technology set the stage for life-and-death decisions for ordinary farmers, vendors, slum-dwellers, merchants and urban populations’. And that running through these debates is the sense ‘that social exclusion is ever more tied to epistemological exclusion and concern that the discourses of expertise that are setting the rules for global transactions, even in the progressive parts of the international system, have left ordinary people outside and behind’.²¹ Appadurai argues that there is a growing divorce between debates around these issues amongst academics from those that are held by the poor and their advocates. He, however, finds some glimmer of hope in the series of social forms that have emerged to contest these developments and to create forms of knowledge transfer and social mobilisation that proceed independently of the actions of corporate capital and the nation-state system. These social forms, he says, ‘can be characterised as “globalisation from below”’. What I find interesting is how in this case the prawn collectors themselves came up with their own ‘strategies’ to deal with globalisation; even if this strategy involved the undertaking of the worship of a deity, albeit one that was in their eyes, a ‘global’ one.

Sweat and blood: The smell of tiger prawn

Once, while we were sitting on the bund with some women prawn collectors, Arati began telling me about how a young woman called Kalpana had met her death the previous year. Kalpana collected prawn seed to meet the needs of her small family. She went out each morning at the break of dawn with Arati, Shobita

²¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination*, 12 PUBLIC CULTURE 1, 2 (2001).

and Nonibala, her three friends, and pulled the net for four to five hours along the riverbanks of her village, Annpur. On the morning of her death she had pulled the net for three hours before being caught by a crocodile. As the crocodile caught her thigh and dragged her into the deeper waters of the river, Kalpana screamed out in terror and started beating the animal with her net. Her three friends ran to help her. One of them jumped in after her, trying to retrieve her from the murky waters, while the others shouted for help. What follows is keeping as close to Nonibala's narrative as possible. Kalpana's frantic gesticulations, cries and loud splashes as she fought with the crocodile pierced through the heavy white mist. After what seemed a horrendously long time they were replaced by the cracking of her net or bones or both. Nonibala was standing there in frozen torpor and then she swooned. When she sat up and desperately scanned the river for signs of life all she saw were bubbles and ripples disappearing into the stilling beige-brown surface of the river. She then noticed a trail of a slowly dulling bright red moving away from her while a soft cloying wetness, the limp end of a sari, washed itself around her legs. It felt as if a sudden soundless shard stabbed her through the heart, leaving her immobilised and speechless, as she realised her friend had been dragged away to the river's depths by a crocodile.

'In the case of tiger-victims, people make a big hue and cry but what about crocodile victims? There are no big stories for us, no explanation,' exclaimed Nonibala. She continued, 'Dokkhin Rai, according to some people, is someone one can at least pray to and plead with, but crocodiles are dumb creatures, they have no respect for any kind of laws.' The idea that the forest is a sacred place is especially upheld by the crab and honey collectors and the woodcutters through the imposition of minutely elaborated rules pertaining to the forest. The imperative for them is to follow such rules when entering into the forest to prove their goodwill to the forest deity Bonbibi. Because the prawn collectors could not or did not want to respect these rules (as they did not consider themselves forest workers) they were branded as being greedy and with having no 'real' understanding or respect of the forest. The other criticism, levelled by the village elite, was that prawn collection had to be condemned as

it made women 'uncontrollable' and the poor in general 'arrogant' by challenging the understood hierarchies of gender and society.

Let me illustrate this point with an example. One day while I was sipping tea at the marketplace located near the village where I was conducting research, a school teacher (both social and economic elite) seated on one of the benches which surrounded the shop, turned to me and said, 'Do you know the main reason for all these prawn seed collectors' deaths by crocodiles? It is greed. So many of these women, forgetting their children, run at the break of dawn to the river with their nets to pull in dollars. The American and the Japanese taste for tiger prawn is spoiling our traditional way of life. Now the women don't stay at home to cook for their husbands, all they're interested in is making money'. Later, on our way back home, Arati, who worked as a prawn-seed collector asked in a sarcastic tone, 'Do you know what he actually meant by 'traditional way of life'? He meant being able to exploit us on his fields for a few rupees. We're spoken of as being 'greedy', but what is wrong in that? Am I not paying for these prawns with the sweat of my brow? It's not as if I'm staying indoors and supervising my workers and yelling at them while my money multiplies in banks. Here I'm working my limbs off. Have you smelt tiger prawn, don't you think they smell of sweat and blood? It is ours. How dare people say we are greedy and have no self-respect just because we want to earn and make a decent living? Do you now understand why we need Kali on our side? Prawn-seed has saved us, they are the living dollars of the Sundarbans, and we will win against the landed gentry and their ruthless exploitation. I can now not only support my children's education but also buy myself a new pair of slippers when I need them – and that is what they can't stand.'

This outburst leads one to reflect on the paradoxical appropriation of Kali—she has been adopted by the prawn collectors both because of her connection to urban and middle-class professions and in the context of growing Hindutva, and on the other hand because she is devoid of all the rules Bonbibì's veneration is seen as demanding. Prawn collecting is used by the Sundarbans women who practice it to provoke subtle reversals of village hierarchies—both of gender and of economy—and of engaging in an alternative perception of

modernity based on their terms. They reject the middle-class ideals of femininity and participate as active agents in a global trade where, with Kali the strong and violent patron goddess on their side, they see themselves as having better chances to fit in with contemporary times. By offering a contrary discourse to that of the forest workers and landowners, the prawn-collecting women have carved out for themselves a space in which they bow neither to the traditional nor to the urban ideals of femininity. This uneasy space highlights a contrast between the ‘imagined global’ and the very dangerous materiality of working in the rivers of the Sundarbans. Arati’s critique of the school-teachers’ condemning attack on poor women and their bid for economic autonomy, is an expression of how the experience of globalization amongst poor women can also be a study of their bid for social respectability and a voicing of their specific desires – like for a pair of new slippers.