Intimate antagonisms and unlikely friendships between state and society in the Sundarbans Forests of India

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Intimate Antagonisms and Unlikely Friendships between State and Society in the Sundarbans Forests of India

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Forests worldwide are often implicated in histories of violence. The Sundarbans, straddling India and Bangladesh, infamous for its tigers and tiger demons and home to 5 million human residents, sharply expresses this global conflict between those who live alongside forests and the institutions that attempt to keep them out. The Forest Department, tasked with the responsibility of selectively protecting nonhuman life, is arguably one of the most maligned bureaucracies in India. Rights-based activists and Sundarbans fishers often emphasize the forms of dominance exercised by forest rangers, including surveillance, harassment, extortion, and arbitrary punishments. However, over the course of 22 months of ethnographic fieldwork, as I obtained access and began to spend days and nights patrolling the mangrove creeks with forest rangers, alongside their punitive power, I encountered a wide spectrum of associational behaviors, including co-option, conviviality, and mutual care. Building on these experiences, this article traces varying modes of intimacy among individuals classically characterized as political antagonists. I ask why and in what contexts do rangers inhabit and defy their vocational responsibilities through forms of sympathetic relatedness with forest-dwelling humans, demons, and deities. I also examine the processes and new technologies through which these forms of "compassion in repression" might be ruptured.

The headline of a national newspaper in India reads, "Poor indigenous fishing communities allegedly tortured by the Forest Department since the imposition of Project Tiger in the Sundarbans."[1] Such reports emphasizing the mistreatment perpetrated by forest officials toward forest-dwellers are neither surprising nor unique to the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve in West Bengal, a heavily patrolled global conservation hot spot famous for being the only mangrove habitat in the world home to Bengal tigers.[2] The Indian Forest Department, in large part because of its colonial inheritances (Rangarajan 1994), is arguably one of the most maligned bureaucracies. Colonial forestry was indeed the naked capture of resources by the state that incited frequent rebellions, a practice that carried forward largely unchanged in the postcolony, this time under the guise of "protection" (Sivaramakrishnan 2015). During 22 months of fieldwork, I was based in a neighborhood of crab collectors, honey collectors, and fishermen. My first impressions were that "doing the jungle"[3] was fearful work not simply because of the tiger but also because of the forest rangers who fined, harassed, and confiscated fishing licenses and whose violence was evidenced in the surveillance, fear, and power they exercised.[4] From both rights-based activists, advocating for the rights of fishers, and fishing communities themselves, I heard a litany of complaints against forest rangers, forest officials, and forest bureaucrats.[5] My initial impressions during the early months of fieldwork were also admittedly shaped by academic writing that pits the state against peasants and fishers, within which a particularly well-established consensus is of the dominance and extraction carried out by the Forest Department.

These initial impressions transformed into something far more complicated, when, a year into fieldwork, I serendipitously obtained access to spend nights and days patrolling with

1. Project Tiger is a tiger conservation program launched by the government of India in 1973 that created national parks across the country for tiger protection.

2. The Sundarbans forests straddle the India and Bangladesh border. The findings of this article are based on long-term fieldwork in West Bengal, the Indian side of the Sundarbans.

3. "Doing the jungle" or *jongol kora* is a long-standing trope of the region (see Jalais 2010) and refers to livelihoods that depend on the forest: crab collecting, fishing, and honey collecting. Before timber logging was banned in 2000, it also included wood cutting.

4. Fishing in the Sundarbans works on an archaic and flawed regime of licences known as BLCs or boat licence certificates. Those who "do the jungle" must rent BLCs for exorbitant sums of money from middlemen. This is because the licenses have not been renewed in generations, so few genuine fishers have a fishing license in his or her name (Mehtta 2021*a*).

5. Several local and national activists have been campaigning for the recognition and implementation of the Forest Rights Act. The full form of the landmark legislation of 2006 guaranteeing forest rights is the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights Act). The Forest Rights Act has not, to date, been implemented in the Sundarbans forests.

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Figure 1. A beat officer (*choto babu*) and a forest guard (*bono shromik*) on patrol duty on a hot day. I had access to accompany these patrols, which in the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve entail 7–10 hours spent meandering the river creeks on motorized wooden boats or *bhotbhotis*, onomatopoetically named for the *bhot bhot bhot* sound their engines emit. Photo credit: Megnaa Mehtta.

the rangers (see fig. 1).[6] It feels pertinent to emphasize that the access I had to do participant observation at range offices, which allowed me to understand the work, daily lives, and points of view of frontline forest rangers, was almost impossible to obtain. When indeed I did obtain access, because of a chance meeting with the senior-most bureaucrat of the Forest Department, an entirely unanticipated dynamic of intimacy between rangers and fishers was revealed to me.

Take, for example, the following two vignettes, the first from a ranger and the second from a crab collector.

Kaushal da, the range officer of Haldibari, part of the "core area" of the Sundarbans forest, said to me, "They [referring to the fishermen] have no other way to feed their families. I try not to be too harsh on them. . . . Unless they are committing an actual [*ashul*] offense, I usually let them be. We give them warnings sometimes, but this is just our job. You see, I'm obliged to fine them occasionally."

We had been patrolling in the "core area" of the forest, a jurisdiction where through the Wildlife Protection Act passed in 1972, no fishing is legally permitted. We had encountered a "trespassing" fishing boat. Instead of confiscating their catch or conducting behavior that might be considered a form of harassment, Kaushal da and the other rangers present on the patrol boat launched into a casual conversation with the three fishermen. While the two groups were shooting the breeze, one of the fishermen uncapped a plastic bottle with puffed rice (*jhalmuri*). The rangers extended their cupped palms, as did I. We shared the snack after which our patrol boat carried farther into a narrow creek with dense foliage on either side of us in search of more "trespassing boats." It was obvious from this encounter that the two groups knew each other well. This was Kaushal da's patrol jurisdiction, and the particular fishing boat that shared their snack with us frequented this part of the forest. It was evident that such encounters between forest rangers and forest fishers, with convivial conversations and food exchanged, were commonplace.

Later that evening over dinner at the range office, I tried to understand why Kaushal da decided to let some boats off without a fine, how and when he chose to fine other boats, and what he meant by an "actual" offense. He explained that there was the official rule—no fishing allowed in the "core area"—but there was no way to enforce this rule, and besides, how else would these fishermen run their households? However,

6. Getting access to the Forest Department proved very difficult in the first year of my fieldwork. It was impossible to get formal interviews with rangers or senior officials, who were especially guarded when it came to journalists and researchers. It was through serendipity, as is often the case, that I was invited to a biodiversity conservation conference on a luxury cruise ship cohosted by the Japan International Cooperation Agency. A former World Wide Fund for Nature adviser who I knew because of my research now worked as a high-end tour guide on the cruise ship. The two-day conference was attended not only by corporate interests and conservationists but also by all of the highest-ranking officials of the West Bengal Forest Department. Here I had the chance to meet and interview Pradeep Vyas, then the principal chief conservator of forests, who as head of the Forest Department of West Bengal granted me official and written permission to visit and conduct fieldwork with range offices and patrol with forest rangers in the interiors of the mangrove jungle. Without this chance encounter, it would have been impossible to get the access I had in studying the point of view of the of lowest level of the Forest Department.

there were other offenses for which he did punish fishing boats. For example, there were many endangered species of fish, and fishing for them was an offense that could lead to a court case. If he encountered a fishing boat with, for example, a manta ray or shark, he was sure to fine its owners and even confiscate the fishing equipment. He explained that he felt pity for the fishermen, and their lack of alternatives led him, along with other rangers, to create a new set of informal norms. Permitting trespassing boats to fish was one of those unofficially recognized irregularities in which illegality had been incorporated (Andersson 2014). Rangers were under increasing pressure from higher-level officials to catch trespassing boats, but despite this pressure and their own obligations to the job, Kaushal da's words reveal the space to bend, break, and astutely maneuver through what are seemingly rigid conservation laws.

Relatedly, when I queried those who "do the jungle" about the fisher-ranger relationship, Arnab da, a long-term crab collector, used the term *byabohar*—that is, how two people treat one another based on their social rapport—to reveal how the relationship pendulated between sympathy and strictness, respect and disrespect. After Arnab da returned from a week-long trip with a quintal (100 kg) of crabs collected in the Sajnekhali Wildlife Sanctuary—also officially out of bounds to fishermen—I asked how he had managed to successfully collect such a large quantity of crabs in an area where he was legally not allowed and in a forest that was so heavily patrolled. He explained, "You see, if you have a good relationship over time . . . they [the rangers] aren't going to suddenly confiscate your nets and ask you to leave. Imagine if I just asked you to leave my house today. You are not a stranger. I can't do that. Sometimes they'll say, 'Don't come next week, the bosses [sahibs] are coming on a tour,' and if we still don't listen to them, then they will fine us. Ultimately, it all depends on byabohar."

Byabohar encompasses a gamut of social relationships and includes ill treatment or bad behavior (*kharap byabohar*) or a form of comportment that is respectful, cordial, and good (*bhalo byabohar*). For many like Arnab da, the relationship between ranger and fisher oscillated between getting a *danda*, or "the stick," referring to any kind of punishment, and *chaad*, literally meaning "to let go" or describing situations in which allowances or concessions are made. Long-term social relationships that undulated between good and bad forms of treatment of one another was key to the dynamics between rangers and fishers, which newspaper headlines and activist narratives failed to capture (see fig. 2).

Resource use was and continues to be predicated on violence (Peluso 1992, 2017). There is no doubt that the Forest Department is more powerful than the fishers. The creation of protected parks that render livelihoods illegal and the accompanied paternalistic discourses of conservation have undoubtedly generated fear and a misplaced sense of blame among the fishers (Mehtta 2021*b*). My interest is not to disregard the harassment meted out to fishers at the hands of the rangers or the increased risk to their livelihood. And I do not deny the asymmetries of power in state-society relations. Instead, this article is an attempt to reveal the lesser-explored spectrum of associational behaviors between these two groups, and in doing so I show how in many instances the relationships that emerge between

Figure 2. Rangers and fishers having a convivial conversation after sharing a meal. Such friendly encounters between patrol boats and "trespassing" fishing boats were commonplace and became a part of my experiences of patrolling with the rangers too. Photo credit: Megnaa Mehtta.

rangers and fishers cannot be reduced to one governed by hostility, stranger sociality, indifference, or solely the performance of insider knowledge (Gupta 1995). Instead, I show that rangers and fishers have relationships that inhabit different modes of intimacy. I argue that it is these informal rules, a deeper understanding between fishers and rangers garnered from daily interactions over several years, with empathy on one hand and fear and obligation on the other, that also comprises an integral part of state-society relations. This article reveals how social relationships shape both convivial and hostile interactions in what I call the "antagonistic intimacy" between an already embedded and intertwined state and society.

In the section "The Sundarbans Tiger Reserve: Who Protects the Protected Area" we patrol the mangrove creeks together with forest rangers who live inside range offices within the interiors of the forests. We find out who the rangers are, what their work entails, and how they make meaning of the forest landscape in which they work (Allerton 2013; Basso 1996; Ingold 2000). In the section "The Importance of Social Relationships or Byabohar" I explore social relatedness within a hierarchy, described to me by the repeated use of the word byabohar or *somporko*. If fishers knew certain rangers or if they had developed good social relationships with them, their treatment oscillated between leniency (*chaad*), mutual care, and an interested hospitality (*khatirdaari*). I argue that this form of interested hospitality is distinct from bribery or corruption (cf. Parry 2000) but is a form of gift giving motivated by a codependency and understanding of each other's commitments and obligations. By unpacking when and why rangers act with leniency and when they behave with severity or strictness (*koda*), this article explores the forms of "compassion in repression" (Fassin 2005) by revealing moral and social logics that mediate the fisher-ranger relationship.

Finally, I address the ways in which these social relationships are ruptured. Internal fragmentation within the fishers based on jealousy and competition leads to complaints against rangers who are being lenient to other boats or to informing on other fishing boats. New technologies of surveillance are also changing byabohar by taking the "man out of the state" (see Brown 1992) and putting new pressures on fishers and rangers alike. Alongside a broader contribution to what is by now a vast subfield within political anthropology (i.e., the relationship between state and society), the analysis presented might prove useful in providing insights into local social movements on the ground that, in their fight for fishers' rights and dignity, end up targeting the wrong functionaries of the state, those who are at times equally subaltern and obliged in their hopes to provide for their own families with a job that they themselves find physically and emotionally challenging.

Revisiting State-Society Relations

The relations between state and society, be it in the state's spectacular form or through mundane interactions, have been of interest to generations of anthropologists, political philosophers, and social theorists. Domination and dispossession employed by the state on the one hand and the "repertoires of resistance" (Peluso 1992) of farmers and fishers on the other has been a classic framework to understand conflicts over resources. Revisiting E. P. Thompson's 1975 work, Nancy Peluso (2017) notes that "the themes and findings of *Whigs and Hunters* link the violent realization of private property in eighteenth-century rural England with distressingly similar experiences in sites across the globe in the twenty-first century" (312). Much before Thompson's writing, the Charter of the Forests, signed as early as 1217 in London, began the process of enclosing common lands. Contemporary forms of forest grabbing that include state and corporate encroachment "on land and resources are stories foretold—if different in their details—as are myriad subversive efforts" (Peluso 2017:319–320; see also Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012).

Within South Asia, the region's anthropology and history have a uniquely rich tradition of writing about environmental issues. From Ranajit Guha's (1963) *Rule of Property for Bengal* to K. Sivaramakrishnan (1999), Ram Guha (2000), Guha and Gadgil (1995), Mahesh Rangarajan (1996, 2006), Ajay Skaria (2013), Amita Baviskar (1999, 2020), and several others, there exists a rich archive that enables a deeper understanding of the control of natural resources under colonial and postcolonial state formations. Relevant to this article, the notion that social relationships matter in deeply hierarchical state formations is evident in Ranajit Guha's (2009) analysis of how peasants and cultivators under colonial rule commonly made distinctions between "good sahibs" and "bad sahibs," that is, good officers and bad officers. In fact, generations of scholars, much beyond South Asia, have been inspired by the scholarship of the Subaltern Studies Collective and James Scott's (1985) *Weapons of the Weak* in order to understand conflicts, co-option, and collusion accompanying resistance movements. The writings of Antonio Gramsci, Eric Hobsbawm, and E. P. Thompson—each spanning different contexts—are foundational in revealing how state and society relations are entangled and that such entanglements are precisely how power is reproduced as hegemonic.

Within the subfield of the anthropology of the state, it is a well-established fact that the state is responsible for providing welfare while also being the harbinger of violence. In the Sundarbans, this contradiction takes the form of the Forest Department further exacerbating risk while doing it under the veneer of "protection." As distinct from this Janus-faced character of the state, or the state as both a "giver" and a "taker" (Singh 2015:73), the encounter between state and society has also been conceived of as two strangers interacting with one another. Take, for example, the famous phrase of Althusser (2008) when the man on the street is interpellated by a police officer. In the "Hey you!" that the policeman shouts, we might safely assume that the police officer does not know this person. Such an interaction in which the two are strangers is a common occurrence of the everyday encounter with the state, from border checkpoints to protests to encounters with traffic police.

In contrast to the impersonal and anonymous, citizens also interact with lower-level state bureaucrats in settings where they might over time, after repeated visits, recognize each other, forge a relationship, and eventually gain "insider knowledge" to get their way with the frontline bureaucrats. Take, for instance, the "discourse of corruption" that takes us to bureaucratic offices in India where in order to get one's work done, the "common man" learns to posture and participate in certain gift exchanges, bribes, or favors. Here, intimacy is thought of as a performance of intimacy through insider knowledge (Gupta 1995). The anthropology of the Indian state is perhaps most famously characterized by red tape, paperwork, form filling, waiting, and shoulder shrugging, which are features of a form of structural violence built into the gargantuan bureaucracies of welfare states (Gupta 1995). In relation to such seemingly built-in bureaucratic indifference, Michael Herzfeld (1993, 2005), distinct from Akhil Gupta, argues that such indifference is in fact an affect that is generated on the basis of creating otherness and the categorizations of insiders versus outsiders. For Didier Fassin (2017), it is not the indifference of bureaucracies but the passions that bureaucracies instigate from the politics of pity to the politics of control that act as the basis of "compassion in repressive" regimes.

For most, the first thing that comes to mind in relation to bureaucracies is not compassion but the image of "a small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism" (Weber, Roth, and Wittich 1968) or, more ordinarily, the tedium of paperwork (Hull 2012; Mathur 2016), form filling (Graeber 2015), and rule following. Laws, rules, licences, and fines for "illegal" fishing in the Sundarbans had the power to generate affect (Navaro-Yashin 2007, 2012), uncertainty (see Kelly 2006), and anxiety vis-à-vis the state (Sharma and Gupta 2006). The Indian bureaucracy is perhaps one of the most rule-bound institutions, and an inevitable result of the excess of rules is that it is an institution in which rules are constantly broken. Informality is rife. Laws translated into the seemingly rigid black and white of paperwork in fact resolve into many shades of murky gray, with the state imposing its own agendas and "paper truths" through its bureaucracy (Tarlo 2001)

This "illegibility of the state" (Das and Poole 2004) is not unique to South Asia, with recent scholarship on European bureaucratic offices also revealing their distance from any Weberian ideal type of the state. Anna Tuckett's (2018) ethnography of migrants encountering the Italian immigration bureaucracy reveals how migrants learn to navigate the distinction between "real" rules and "official" rules through their insider knowledge. She shows that formal rules exist but that the informally recognized rules are the ones that are implemented. Similar to Kaushal da, the ranger with whom I began this article, unofficial rules were adhered to more rigidly than "official rules," underscoring the immense gap between policies and the lived reality of "officially recognized irregularities" (Tuckett 2018). In the Sundarbans, one of the grossest "officially recognized irregularities" is that thousands of fishing boats go into the legally "out-of-bounds" core and sanctuary areas of the forest every day according to a whole set of unofficial norms where illegality has been incorporated (Andersson 2014; see also Das and Poole 2004; Goffman 2014). But what informal rules, patterns, or reasons might act as the basis for breaking rules?

Uday Chandra (2017), writing about the antagonism between Adivasis and the postcolonial state in Jharkhand, India, shows that it is far more intimate than it is taken to be and that the "two are isomorphic, and that subaltern resistance, whether violent or peaceful, is best understood as the negotiation, not negation, of modern state power" (223). Similarly, the basis of this intimacy between rangers and fishers is, I show, forged through a longer-term social relationship that far exceeds formality or stranger sociality. Such an understanding need not deny the obvious power inequalities inherent in this relation. However, well-meaning activists often miss the spectrum of associational behaviors between rangers and fishers and, in their attempts to fight for justice on behalf of the fishers, reify the state (Gupta 1995:394), targeting the wrong functionaries of a hierarchical bureaucracy.

David Graeber (2015), as part of a much broader analysis of bureaucracies, portrays them as "dead zones of imagination" (102). Where, above all else, there is rigidity in rule following, blind implementation of official procedures and practices set by a formal hierarchy. In contrast to this legalistic model, this article shows how the lowest rungs of the West Bengal Forest Department full of deliberation, interpretation, and even creative labor. I use the term "interpretive labor," or what Josiah Heyman (1995) calls "thought-work," to express the opposite of rule following and show the ways in which forest rangers often (not always) go out of their way to be sympathetic to trespassing fishers and the ways in which the fishers themselves negotiate the space delineated by unofficial rules. As we saw in the opening vignette, "norms shape how officials interpret and apply rules and procedures in practice" (Mangla 2015:895). This article is a step toward understanding or making legible the emotional and rational motivations and norms for the informality of the state.

Disaggregating bureaucracies (Gupta 1995) allows one to understand the encounters of people with different levels of the state.[7] In line with such disaggregation and in an attempt to understand rangers' contested positionalities as part of both state and society, this article builds on the seminal work

7. In neighboring disciplines, such as political science or political sociology, as well as in the vast literature on state capacity emerging out of India (e.g., the Centre for Policy Research's State Capacity Initiative), there exists a different scale of disaggregation (e.g., Heller 2000; Kohli 1987). While this is not irrelevant, the strength of anthropology and long-term participant observations is the possibility of a more minute disaggregation. This article is interested in revealing the complex differences at the horizontal level of the state, let alone differences in its verticality or comparisons with other states, regions, or ministries.

of Sudha Vasan (2002). Her ethnographic research set in Himachal Pradesh reveals the multiple pressures that influence the actions and discourses of forest guards and the opposing social roles and identities they negotiate (Vasan 2002:4126). In addition to the conflicting positionality of rangers, I attempt to explore the precise logic and rationale, often affective, of this vast unofficial space of informality and rule breaking. In what follows, I reveal the complex rationalizations and emotional states that both rangers and fishers use tojustify their actions, including individual discretion, identity, personal bonds, networks of connections (*jog-a-jog*), sympathy, self-interestedness, and, most importantly, pendulating social relationships (byabohar). But, first, let me introduce the landscape of the Sundarbans forests, its resonances with other protected parks across the world, and its extreme singularity.

The Sundarbans Tiger Reserve: Who Protects the Protected Areas?

The Sundarbans forests of West Bengal, courtesy of their large number of tigers, are one of India's most heavily protected and patrolled national parks. Proclaimed in 1987 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site regarded as a natural wonder, its habitat is home to a "cosmopolitan tiger" (Jalais 2008), a flagship species for wildlife conservation globally. While national and international conservationists lobby for and fund the protection of flora and fauna, the day-to-day responsibility of governing the tiger reserve lies with the West Bengal Forest Department. Similar to other postcolonial states, the West Bengal Forest Department has the sole preserve of "protecting" the ecosystem, a discourse that glosses over and guises dispossession. Sivaramakrishnan (2015) summarizes precisely this sentiment: "Protection was always, of course, also the language that masked acts of expropriation. Resources, livelihoods, homes and futures were taken away, by national and regional states from their citizenry, in the name of protecting everything from soils, to species, to sacred spaces, and citizens themselves" (1295). The Wildlife Protection Act of India passed in 1972; the creation of inviolate areas where fishing communities are prohibited from entering and the subsequent creation of the region as a "critical tiger habitat" have led to exponential investments in patrolling and surveilling the forests through speedboats, drones, and e-patrolling apps.

These stringent conservation laws that have rendered Sundarbans' own people out of the Sundarbans (see Mukhopadhyay 2016) alongside military-grade investments in the "war to save nature" (Duffy 2014; Lunstrum 2014) have intensified the classic conflict of "parks versus people" that plagues many parts of the world (see West, Igoe, and Brockington 2008). For the thousands of landless or land-poor households who belong to some of the lowest-caste communities in India (Scheduled Castes, formerly known as untouchables [such as Namasudras, Poundra Khoitro, Rajbongshis, and Jalia Kaibartas]; Scheduled Tribes [such as Munda, Oraon, and Santhal]; and Muslims) and live by fishing, crab collecting, and honey collecting in the jungle, the creation of the national park has made large swaths of the forest, often directly in front of their homes, out of bounds.

International conservationists watch the Forest Department bureaucracy with hawk-eyed scrutiny, as senior level bureaucrats put immense pressure on the foot soldiers of forest protection to curb "trespassing" fishing boats. These men (and it is only men) live in the range offices and floating check posts located in the interiors of the jungle. Each range jurisdiction is subdivided into forest beats, blocks, and their constituent compartments. Offices double up as living quarters with dormitories, communal kitchens, and shared bathrooms. Each range office has its own human hierarchy. There is a range officer, known colloquially as *boro babu*—the "big boss"—who heads the range. Under him is a beat officer known as the *choto babu*, the "small boss." Under them are several forest guards or *bono shromiks*. Each range, depending on its size and requirements, has a few daily wage workers—boatmen, cleaners, cooks—hired on a contractual basis from neighboring villages hugging the forests through the Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs).[8]

Alongside the huge distance—evinced through proficiency in English, caste backgrounds, educational qualifications, and infrastructural benefits—between the senior-most bureaucrats posted in Kolkata and Canning and the range officers and forest guards who live in outposts in the forests, there is also an immense diversity at the horizontal level of the forest bureaucracy.[9] The job of the range officer and beat officer is a highly coveted government job for which young men take competitive exams, often studying for them for years. Upon being recruited into the West Bengal Forest Department, these lower-level bureaucrats can be transferred to any posting in the various forests of West Bengal. In contrast to the range officer and beat officer, with their semiurban or urban upbringings and their higher-caste and educational backgrounds, the majority of the forest guards grew up in neighboring villages in the Sundarbans and began their work with the department as daily wage laborers doing odd jobs ranging from manually rowing boats loaded with paperwork to cleaning and cooking for officers. These differences at the horizontal level were easy to observe. For example, at mealtimes the former were served by the latter, who did the cooking and cleaning. There were also stark differences in how those who belonged to the region and those who were posted in the Sundarbans from afar related to the mangrove landscape, the movements of the river and winds, and other forest-dwelling beings, deities, and demons. Despite crucial divergences at the horizontal level, there were

8. JFMCs are government initiatives that began in the 1990s to include forest-dependent communities in forest management and were started as a means to counter "fortress conservation" models.

9. Such as the principal chief conservator of forests, the additional principal chief conservator of forests, field director, deputy field director, and additional field director.

fundamental common experiences of being a ranger, which I turn to next.

The Life of a Ranger: Boredom, Madness, and Social Alienation

While the bureaucratic hierarchy is not unique to other forests in India, the physical landscape of the Sundarbans forest (i.e., their specific place of work) is perhaps one of the toughest in the country. Forest rangers live on land-based or floating camps. Life on these camps is rather strange. A floating check post is a large wooden boat that has been gutted from the inside to make room for bunk beds. The toilet consists of a hole opening onto the river. Water comes from plastic drums, and electricity is hooked up to solar panels. Rangers often described posts on floating camps as extended bouts of camping, except that these posts can last up to five years. Space, both to live and to move around, is limited to a small deck on the top of the boat (see fig. 3). This is not that different—though marginally more spacious—from life on a fishing boat. The exception being that fishing boats go back to the village after 7–10 days in the forest creeks and rangers live in their outposts throughout the year.

Space is also, unexpectedly, a luxury in the land-based camps (see fig. 4). They are in the depths of an inhospitable mangrove jungle, enclosed—like prisoners or perhaps like tigers in a zoo—within a fenced cage topped with barbed wire. A recently married ranger in his late 20s having been posted in Champta, a range office in the interior of the forest, described the monsoon season—from June to September—as being "jailed in the jungle." Range offices and floating check posts are far away from villages, shops, markets, and the routine rhythms of life.

Range offices and beat offices look like military barracks, painted in camo colors and equipped with rifles and walkie-talkies. Buildings are constructed many meters above the ground because of regular floods and the undulations of the twice-daily tides. Each camp is slightly different, with even the smallest variation affecting the well-being of the staff that inhabit it. Some range offices have tourist watchtowers overlooking the forests. In the evenings, when the forest is closed to tourists, and during the nine months of the year when there are barely any outside visitors, these watchtowers become scenic hangout spots for rangers. They sit there with their evening cups of tea, playing cards or reading the latest newspaper from the last trip to the mainland. Often one could see rangers wave their phones in the air with their arm outstretched, desperately attempting to catch cellular network, hoping to call their wives and children at home.

As men charged with "protecting" the forests, they spend anywhere from 5 to 10 hours every day patrolling the jurisdiction of their particular beat on motorized wooden boats known as *bhotbhotis*, named onomatopoetically after the loud hacking coughs their engines ceaselessly emit. Once back at the camp, they spend hours filling fat ruled registers with information regarding their patrols: offenses encountered, the coordinates and timings of their excursions, the quantity of fuel spent, the rations used at the camp, and so on. Each time a fishing boat is caught, several intricate details are filled out about both offense and offender. Papers, files, registers, and forms covered every surface of their offices. During my time in the field, higher-level bureaucrats were at the cusp of pushing e-governance reforms in which everything—from patrols to the plantation of mangrove nurseries—would be monitored through the internet and SMART (spatial monitoring and

Figure 3. Floating check posts were the hardest postings for most rangers. Photo credit: Megnaa Mehtta.

Figure 4. Interior of a land-based range office where the dormitory doubles as an office. The range office, if located within the mangrove forest, was akin to a carceral space surrounded by high boundary walls and barbed wires. Photo credit: Megnaa Mehtta.

reporting tools) technologies. Despite these "advancements" and investments, when I visited the offices, unsurprisingly, paperwork was still one of the biggest responsibilities of the job.

The rangers shared a feeling that they had a difficult, and at times nightmarish, posting.[10] After a few days in the range offices, I could not help but feel claustrophobic myself. We spent hours and hours on a boat, with endless forested sandbanks on either side and no sign of life—human or animal. The Sundarbans is famous for its vibrant megafauna, and while outsider perceptions are of dramatic encounters with wild tigers, in reality very little happened and rarely did the rangers encounter any awe-inspiring wildlife. The sound of the *bhotbhoti* throbbed, the engine fumes stank, and the scorching heat beat down. There were some punctuations to this monotony. Every now and then the boatman or ranger pointed out a bald eagle, spotted an Irrawaddy dolphin, or stopped to photograph fresh pug marks. These punctuations were met with overexaggerated excitement, revealing yet again the exceptionalism of such moments. Intermittently, we also came across a "trespassing" fishing boat, leading to an exchange—that lasted for 15–20 minutes or entailed sharing a leisurely meal together for two hours—after which the boat was either fined or "let go." But then the patrol carried on as before. After several days of the same drill, my initial excitement for having acquired permission to patrol with the rangers in the depths of the mangrove forest quickly waned.

The life of a forest ranger in the Sundarbans is characterized by deep loneliness. Forest rangers confirmed to me that the hardest aspect of their work was not the danger or the physical strain but that their job was truly boring. Much like the work of Fassin (2017) in which he shows how the ordinary aspects of law enforcement in Paris are often characterized by inactivity, boredom, and eventless days and nights, rangers posted in faraway outposts in the middle of the forests felt both bored and lonely. The main challenge and the unanimous concern for all rangers was their social isolation and their desperate desire for human contact (see fig. 5).

At some of the camps, a ranger has no one to talk to except one other ranger for days at a stretch. Sometimes there is no cell phone signal. Some camps have a TV, but the cable connection is weak and disappears entirely in the long months of the monsoon. Often the only form of entertainment is to play cards. The floating camps brought their own dire litany of complaints. Rangers expressed how they had no space to use their legs to walk, going from patrol boat to floating camp, and feared that both their minds and their bodies might atrophy. Manoranjan Gayan, a ranger in the Tetultola floating camp who grew up in a neighboring Sundarbans island, said matter-of-factly: "I fear I will go mad [*pagol*] if I'm not transferred. . . . It is hard not to lose one's mental balance [*manoshik santulan*] here." This sentiment was repeated to me by dozens of rangers. They shared anecdotes of their counterparts who had begun to hallucinate, how in the months of the monsoons they felt so socially alienated that they began to talk to

10. By reviewing existing reports and publications, Anagnostou et al. (2022) have recently conducted an international review of rangers' precarious employment conditions across the world in which they also look into rangers' well-being and mental health. In contrast to my article, their review is not based on fieldwork, but it is important in showing the scale of the problem.

Figure 5. Rangers posted on a floating check post most acutely missed the village but also just the experience of land and being able to use their legs to walk, as they not only lived permanently on a boat dormitory but also patrolled the creeks on smaller boats. Photo credit: Megnaa Mehtta.

themselves, and how the turbulent waters made them so seasick that they lost their appetite to eat for weeks at a stretch. Each range office had its own variation of a particular forest guard who had been posted on a floating camp for several years who now felt listless, depressed, unable to move or talk very much. Would they also become depressed like their colleagues? Rangers were genuinely worried that they would go mad.

At the center of the rangers' suffering was the sensed deprivation of missing out on family life, the rhythms of the household, and village festivals. For married men, taking on this job was to be resigned to a life without their wives. They missed not being able to be present for births, deaths, and watching their children grow up. One particular boatman narrated how he had lost his daughter while on duty. At the time, there were no cell phones, so he had heard the news of his daughter's death only on the radio a day after her passing. By the time he returned to his village, a full day's journey away, she had already been cremated. He had fresh tears in his eyes as he narrated this story and stated that the fact that he was far away from his family and so cut off from their life and well-being haunted him. There was no alternative though. This was his only means to make a living, so he continues to work in a range office. Far from family and friends, pushed to the point of mental breakdown, the rangers also simultaneously acknowledged that they were lucky to have a job. While their work was neither easy nor meaningful, it was a job they were obliged to do to maintain their own households. Like the fishers, the logic of being a ranger was motivated by an attempt to provide for one's own household and family.

Apart from concerns for one's faraway family members, there were unspoken but obvious tensions in relation to the sexual encounters of the rangers with women from the neighboring villages. I did not dare to ask the rangers about these themes. It was already awkward for these men to have a woman living among them in their range offices. Nevertheless, there were rumors and stories that I could not help but overhear. I gathered that it was a common practice in many range offices, especially those located close to inhabited islands, where village women—under the guise of contractual cooks and cleaners—visited range offices for illicit sexual liaisons. One ranger—Birendra Bhaumik—had sparked a scandal for having been "caught" (*dhora podey chey*) by senior Forest Department officials on tour, with the matter having reached the principal chief conservator of forests, and for the weeks that followed, horizontal and vertical tiers of the bureaucracy, including local conservation nongovernmental organization staff who work closely with the Forest Department, openly gossiped about the scandal.

The gendered aspects of the interactions between rangers and fishers ranged from respectful treatment to casual phone flirtations to entirely unequal sexual liaisons and outright assault. Over the course of fieldwork, while I became aware of the spectrum of possibilities regarding sexual and romantic encounters, this was a theme that seemed too taboo for me to explore as a female researcher in an entirely masculine space. My fieldwork entailed days of sleeping, bathing, and eating surrounded by men—and only men—in interior mangrove outposts that elicited a unique sort of discomfort for both parties. Rangers felt self-conscious of my presence, and I was

acutely aware of being the only woman in those outposts. Within this context, it was out of the question for me to probe, let alone "interview," the rangers about their potentially unequal sexual encounters with village women. Distinctions in gender were not the only criteria that elicited an initial discomfort toward my presence.

"We Didn't Make the Laws, but It Is Our Job to Follow Them"

During my first patrols with forest rangers, I witnessed rangers shouting at the fishermen, fining them for their offenses, and even verbally threatening them. Some rangers took photos on their smartphones with a newly installed e-patrolling app capturing "offenders" (*aporadhi*). Much of this reprimanding and photographing seemed as if it was being performed, both for me and for the fishers. It is in moments of doubt, when the limits of the Forest Department and its authority become visible—such as when thousands of fishing boats are constantly breaking the law—that the desire to perform one's power is strongest (Mathews 2011). My presence certainly buttressed their desire to perform. As mentioned, it was the first time that rangers had an anthropologist from London, and moreover a woman, patrolling and living with them. Initially, they thought that I was going to send reports to their superiors on whether they were doing their job. My first few patrols in each range office were an awkward experience for both parties. A few days in, as I ignored their files and paperwork but persistently inquired about where they grew up, what they did during their free time, what kind of school their children studied in, and what they missed most about life in the village, their performativity wore off. Once they realized that I was not a "madam" sent as an auditor from Delhi or Salt Lake—the area in Kolkata where the West Bengal Forest Department is headquartered—the rangers began to share their opinions more openly. Over the course of the next few months, I began to take note of the mundane aspects of the life of these "petty environmental sovereigns" (Massé 2020) and their ways of relating with each other, the forest creeks, and the fishers.

After our first few patrols, the majority of forest rangers acted with leniency toward fishers, or perhaps it was not leniency as much as a general sense of lethargy and matter-of-factness toward their own job. During later interviews and informal chats over meals, my observation of this "leniency" and laid-backness was backed up by explanations and an awareness among rangers that there were few options for the majority of fishers to provide for their families (see fig. 6). While both kinds of rangers, those from the Sundarbans and those who grew up in other parts of West Bengal, expressed empathy for the fishers, the former were more acutely aware of the lack of alternative options to make a living. Similar to what Sudha Vasan (2000, 2002) describes, many had parents, siblings, sons, and neighbors who were themselves fishermen, honey collectors, and crab collectors.

Alongside their empathy and understanding that fishers' had little alternatives for dignified work, many rangers, especially those in the farthest outposts, openly admitted that they survived thanks to the company and friendship of fishers. Their posts in a particular range office lasted several years, and over time they had forged relationships with individual

Figure 6. A range officer fines a "trespassing" fishing boat. Fishermen request that the ranger let them go. The ranger expresses his sympathy but explains that he is obliged to follow the law and do his job. This kind of interaction can last from a few minutes to more than an hour, with conversations that evince camaraderie. Photo credit: Megnaa Mehtta.

fishermen. As the opening vignette revealed, when we ran into "trespassing" fishers on our patrols, the conversations indicated knowledge of the personal lives of the fishers. They asked about earlier illnesses and children, and alongside general small talk, these conversations evinced a deeper knowledge of deaths, births, and marriages. These interactions were at one level between two deeply unequal groups: "powerful" state functionaries with government jobs on the one hand and poor fishermen with precarious livelihoods on the other. However, their behavior with one another revealed another side to this relationship: they were friends working in the same hostile landscape. Or they were obliged to be friends as a result of this shared landscape of labor. Several rangers explained that during their endless patrols and lonely lives in secluded camps, fishermen were the only other human beings that they had a chance to chat with, share *beedis* (cheap cigarettes), and offer each other food. It was hard to be too strict on the fishers if they were also the only people you had a chance to share a meal with after days of eating alone.

This was the case not only between Sundarbans fishers and Sundarbans residents who had become employees of the Forest Department but also between Sundarbans fishers and forest rangers and beat officers from other parts of West Bengal, many of whom were from upper-caste backgrounds with higher levels of education. Even among these men, there was no choice but to be on good terms with fishers, for otherwise they feared that they would go insane in such social isolation. However, it was not just self-interest that was motivating these convivial relationships.

Naveen da, a ranger officer, provided a deeper sociological explanation for his leniency that went beyond his need for company: "Many have families here. They don't want to leave for Bangalore, Kerala, Maharashtra to work in 'companies' [referring to factory shop floor work], so they 'do the jungle.'. . . Their fathers and grandfathers have done this. They didn't have the opportunity to get an education . . . but now the jungle is under a lot of pressure. We have orders that they are not allowed into the jungle anymore, so I fine them, but this is because I have to, but I know they have nowhere else to go." He said, "You see we didn't make these laws, but we have to follow them because this is our job." Naveen da and other rangers have a tough job, as the sheer number of trespassing boats is immense. There are just 924 active boat licences in existence—that is, the number of boats allowed "legally"—for nearly 140,000 fishers in the region (Chacraverti 2014). Such a discrepancy demands interpretive room. Instead of just blindly doing their job, rangers were constantly breaking the law and creating informal rules that officially incorporated illegality into the system.

Relations with Forest Demons and Deities

The distinction between rangers from the Sundarbans and those from elsewhere also played out in relation to the religious beliefs of the region, especially their belief in Bonbibi: a forest deity considered the protector of those who "do the jungle." For those forest guards who grew up in the Sundarbans, faith in Bonbibi was much like that of the fishers. In my conversations with them, they tried at first to distance themselves from the villagers' beliefs, but on further probing, they quickly admitted that the forest was her abode. After all, they grew up partaking in the annual Bonbibi *pujo* (prayer ceremony) and watching the *Manusa jatra* and *Dukhey jatra* (theatrical performances that last several nights) in their villages. They knew of the tigers that inhabit the forest and had grown up with stories of Dhakhin Rai—the tiger demon—that inhabited their dreams, acted as a form of entertainment, and made up the mythology that was a part of their daily lives. They were aware of Bonbibi's powers and the intricate set of prohibitions and proscriptions known as the "rules of the jungle" (*jongoler niyam*) that when followed gained her protection in the jungle.[11]

The rangers from elsewhere in West Bengal had a more fraught relationship to Bonbibi. They were desperate, at least initially, to create a distance between themselves and the village folk (*gramerlok*) and village beliefs (*gramer chinta bhavna*) and performed their skepticism more aggressively. I sensed that range officers believed that they belonged to a "great tradition" with their urbane rationality as government employees, upper-caste sensibilities, and levels of education, in comparison to the fisherfolk's "little tradition," illiteracy, and faith in obscure goddesses (Redfield 1955). Tapas Mullick, a ranger in Sajnekhali, made it clear that he was not from the Sundarbans and did not believe in Bonbibi within the first few minutes that I met him, pronouncing: "These are very, very poor villagers. They are illiterate. . . . You see, educated men and women [*podha lekha manush*, referring also to himself] don't keep superstitions." There was no doubt that Tapas da worshiped the goddesses Durga, Saraswati, and Lakshmi—who like other deities in the Hindu pantheon were worshipped by upper-caste counterparts. Bonbibi was too "folk," worshipped by the poor and "uneducated," an observation that Annu Jalais (2010) also made in her ethnography of the Sundarbans distinguishing *gramerlok* from *bhadrolok*. It was common to hear comments from rangers who grew up in other parts of West Bengal to vociferously state that it was the fishers' blind faith in Bonbibi that was causing their deaths.

There were clues, however, that implied a more complicated story. Amid the rifles, camouflage, and walkie-talkies, all the ranger offices have a Bonbibi temple (see fig. 7). Each forest outpost I visited had fresh flowers, incense sticks, and oil lamps

11. It is beyond the purview of this article to expand on *jongoler niyam*. My article (Mehtta 2022) entitled "Nonhuman Governance: Care and Violence in South Asian Animism" details the voluminous "rules of the jungle," the source of these rules, and the aspiration to follow these rules despite the challenges in doing so. I explore the ways in which these rules engender a form of care for the commons while also constrain the movement of women.

Figure 7. Bonbibi shrine in the Haldibari beat office that is tended to and taken care of by resident rangers and forest guards. Photo credit: Megnaa Mehtta.

lit in front of the Bonbibi idol. In addition, each range office had its own annual Bonbibi *pujo* or religious celebration. Just like the village *pujos*, the *johurnama*—the origin story of Bonbibi—was read out, and similar ritual offerings were made. Other rangers from neighboring camps are invited to attend these *pujos*, and special food is cooked and eaten communally by the Forest Department staff.

At the range offices, Bonbibi seemed much more than a tourist gimmick. Take, for example, a Netidhopani range officer, who during our first few conversations had repeatedly distinguished himself and his colleagues' beliefs from that of "irrational" fishers. After having spent a few days together, when my formal interviews had clearly ended and I was simply hanging around, patrolling during the day and sharing meals in the evening, the same ranger decided to tell me a number of stories featuring the various spirits, deities, and demons that resided in the forest. There no longer seemed to be a separation between himself and the fishers. Instead, his stories contained a collective "we" referring to all those who spent long periods of time dwelling in the forest and who heard, saw, and felt the strange and awe-inspiring things that happened within it. Later, just before I was leaving the range office, he asked if I might consider purchasing and sending a new brass gong for the Bonbibi temple, voicing how crucial it was to keep offering the deity of the forest prayers and that any offering would be a good blessing for my own work too. The skepticism in our formal interviews had disappeared, and Bonbibi had been reinstated as the deity of the forest. Other rangers wavered more indeterminately between devotion and doubt, aware of their own psychological need to have a protector but also conscious of the many who, despite Bonbibi, were killed in a dangerous forest.

The Importance of Social Relationships or Byabohar

Recall Arnab da, the crab collector with whom I began this article. For him, the logic behind the relationship between forest rangers and fishers, despite the asymmetries of power, was encapsulated by the following thought: "At the end of the day, it is byabohar." It is a social relationship that can be built over time according to an individual's personability, and the way the same two people treat each other can undulate between respect and disrespect.

Good social relations (bhalo byabohar) were established through a basic form of civility with one another through sustained personal interactions and sometimes even led to friendships over the course of years. According to the fishers, certain rangers had the reputation of being consistently rude and inconsiderate and lacked any form of warmth. With such individuals, they explained, no relationship forged through long-term interactions changed the basic demeanor of the ranger. In contrast, fishers shared that some rangers, even as they fined fishers and confiscated their catch, did so respectfully and at times apologetically stating their obligation to do so to maintain their own jobs. If individual personalities and forms of comportment were more or less fixed, the way in which two people treated one another could also transition or entirely switch on the basis of rangers' mood or as a result of certain "pressures from above." Like in all friendships, there were also ruptures, with fishers and rangers falling out with

one another. At times these too were resutured toward cordiality and good relations.

Take, for example, the case of Piyali, a crab collector prone to years of ill health. She uses the words *koshto* (hardship) and *anando* (joy) to describe the duality of "doing the jungle." She described "the life of the jungle" or *jongoler jeebon* as one where a camaraderie between various groups was necessary. This included the other fishers on one's own boat, fishers on other boats, and the rangers. Piyali recalls several instances where rangers and patrol staff chatted and smoked *beedis* with the fishers, asked questions about the whereabouts of tigers, and passed their time together. "They aren't all bad. They are just trying to make a living. . . . It all depends on how you treat each other," she said. She continued boastfully, "My vegetable preparations were famous among the jungle doers and the rangers." On days when she was sick and could not go into the jungle, the rangers asked after her, saying that they had come looking for her food. She continued with more instances that revealed a mutual care between rangers and fishers. A particular ranger she knew called her sporadically to check in on her and see how she was getting on after her kidney stone operation. I asked whether he might have had a romantic interest in her. Piyali said, "No, it's just that he's lonely, stuck in the middle of nowhere, it's a way for him to pass time [*aimni time paaser junne*]." Piyali insisted on stating that they were good friends and had been for years. Piyali, for her part, sometimes gave a few crabs to these men whose families were in far-off places. She felt bad for the wives of rangers, imagining their sleepless nights worrying about faraway husbands who had landed a government job but had the worst kind possible. In Piyali's view, most of the rangers were very sympathetic men, good natured but with orders from above to follow the laws that they had no part in making. Unlike Akhil Gupta's "performance of intimacy," the intimacy between Piyali and her ranger friend did not seem performed but instead seemed genuinely felt. Despite my repeated attempts to find instrumentality or a form of calculated exchange in their relationship, she insisted that when he did not have his uniform on, he was just like "one of us." Vasan (2002) in her analysis of forest guards in Himachal Pradesh notes that lower-level functionaries exist in a gray zone "torn between the demands of the state for which they work, and those of the society, in which they live and socialise" (4126). Similarly, the ranger-fisher relationship was fraught with oscillating loyalties, with some rangers who had family members themselves who were fishers, blurring the line between state and society. The key point here is that the two were not strangers to one another but knew each other's material and social obligations well.

The observation that social relationships matter in a deeply hierarchical bureaucracy is not new. Ranajit Guha's (2009) analysis of Dinabandhu Mitra's play about indigo cultivators published in 1860 reveals an uncanny resonance between the language with which peasants (*ryots*) referred to their planters, magistrates, and officials and that of Arnab da and Piyali. In his article "Neel Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt," Guha (2009) discusses the ways in which cultivators differentiate good sahibs from bad sahibs. He says, "All the planters' victims in the play, from landlord to day labourer, are seen to be discussing the relative merits of good and bad officials all the time" (141). Piyali, Arnab, and others are not then, in the words of Guha, peasants up in arms against their oppressor. Writing about one of the characters of the play—Torop, a peasant who is wrongfully jailed alongside others—Guha says, "He, like the baboo who created him, is full of a sweet reasonableness which is ready to exonerate the colonial regime for its crimes against the peasantry. For every bad planter, bad magistrate, bad Governor named by the harassed and embittered ryots, our so-called rebel has a good planter, a good magistrate, and a good Governor to name" (176). In some senses, Piyali and other fishers in this article "at their radical best only wanted 'improvement' instead of a revolutionary transformation" (176). One might see this as deeply conservative, almost a form of false consciousness. Yet there was no denying that they saw the trials and tribulations in the lives of the lower-level rangers as being similar to their own. They are able to disaggregate the state and blame the law and the bigger sahibs but exonerate their immediate oppressors.

Fishers did complain about the rangers. Social relationships, Arnab da and Piyali both admitted, were changing. Increasingly aware of the high-priority status conferred on the protected park with new technologies of surveillance and stricter patrolling to "protect" the Sundarbans tigers, Arnab da was in constant fear of patrol boats. Nevertheless, and despite increasing fines and harassment, during our conversations he insisted that it was not the fault of the rangers. He said that he was aware of the fact that the rangers' hands were tied by their responsibility to their bosses (sahibs). He used a phrase I had heard many other fishers use in relation to the rangers: he said, "They are just pawns [*gulaam*] in a game of *shatranj* [an old form of chess]." These were the months when I had simultaneously begun to attend meetings of forest rights activists, which centered on highlighting the misdemeanors of the Forest Department. The narratives in these meetings, given often not only by activists but also by fishers themselves, were so different from those of Piyali and others given to me in the private settings of village homesteads.

Khatirdari: Mutual Care or Mutual Bribery?

There is no doubt that the relationship between rangers and fishers is asymmetrical. In the context of the obvious power imbalances between the Forest Department and the fishers, these relations have the potential to become extractive and exploitative. However, the lesser-known reality revealed through long-term patrolling with rangers was that the codependency runs both ways. While the fishers depend on the rangers to carry on their work in the jungle, the rangers also depend on the fishers for their own sanity through conversations, stories, and material connections to the village and a lifestyle beyond the jungle.

Sometimes rangers will ask a fishing boat to bring some basic items from village markets, such as a shaving blade, hair oil, or fried snacks, for them. Fishers described this form of gift giving as form of khatirdari for rangers. "Khatirdari" is a term that means "hospitality" in Urdu and Bengali but implies to take care of, show concern for, and appease another. In the Sundarbans case, it is, as we will see, a sort of interested hospitality but a form of hospitality nonetheless. Take, for example, the case of Nitesh kaku, who explained khatirdari to me through a variety of examples. He said that fishing boats sometimes take small gifts for rangers. The best kinds of presents are in the form of meat (*mangsho*), alcohol (*maudh*), or other items that rangers crave in the middle of the forest like fried snacks, betel leaves and nuts (*supari* and *paan*), or sweets (*mishti*). He says, "Poor rangers, they also enjoy eating well. A little of bit of meat and alcohol makes them happy. They are just like us. We can't imagine a meal without fish, like us they are not vegetarians either, but where will they get chicken in the jungle."

When I discussed these favors with crab collectors and fishers, their motivations were twofold. First, they felt genuine sympathy for the rangers stuck in the middle of nowhere and totally devoid of the creature comforts and social bonds of home. In parallel, these small favors were the currency of exchange for unofficial permission to collect crabs in "out-of-bound" parts of the forest. In many cases, fishers held both of these motivations at once. In Nitesh kaku's case, he made clear that such gifts were not offered by his boat solely out of altruism but also with the strategic intention to try to forge a favorable relationship with rangers. In some cases when the byabohar is good, specific gifts are even solicited by the rangers. Waving his cell phone in the air, he said boastfully, "I get calls all the time" from rangers making requests for various items from the village. He then decides when and which rangers he would like to favor. Nitesh kaku, an older man who is himself the father of two middle-aged crab collectors, feels that he has tangible power over the rangers and chooses, based on the rangers he likes, whom to show his interested hospitality to.

For Piyali, Arnab da, and Nitesh kaku, there is no bitterness around these gift exchanges. There were several ways to purposefully improve one's relationship with certain rangers, and this was one of them. They know exactly what kinds of relationships of dependency they are entering into and do so willingly. Crucially, instead of using the term "bribe" (*ghoos*) for the exchange of small gifts, Nitish kaku distinguishes khatirdari from being solely about a form of rent seeking and corruption. Parry (2000) writing about the "crisis of corruption" drawing from case studies at the Bhilai steel plant distinguishes between gifts, commissions, and bribes. In the Sundarbans villages and government offices, there are several different words for bribes. These ranged from "bribe" (*ghoos*) to "pocket money" (*haath karoch*) or "small change" (*cha paani karoch*). These were usually made in cash. Instead, the forms of khatirdaari and giving gifts out of goodwill in the jungle were always in-kind. One stark difference in the narrative of corruption sketched out by Parry is that there is a sense that the "bribe" is traveling up the chain all the way to the topmost politicians, with the ones at the bottom taking small cuts if any. Parry shows, like Gupta (1995), how certain transactions can be seen as purely commercial, while others are seen as friendly deeds done out of one's good will. The "gifts" given to forest rangers were those given for the consumption of the rangers and were often consumed together, as would be the case between friends. Khatirdari as practiced in the Sundarbans cannot simply be characterized as bribery. It provides the interpretative space for two low-status groups, the fishers and rangers, to develop sympathy for the other's obligations to family and household and to reach arrangements for mutual survival (Singh 2015: 95–96).

How did this camaraderie square with news reports of harassment, torture, and the confiscation of one's catch and fishing equipment? These too are certainly true. My interest is not to flatten the skewed power relations between the two groups. While I reveal the less obvious dynamics between state-society relations, it is also crucial to acknowledge that several fishers find it impossible to sustain these "gift exchanges." Anjali and Manoj are also a crab-collecting couple, and at the time I met them, they were desperate to repay a loan taken to build their new brick home. Anjali's take on khatirdari was more similar to what is classically thought of as a form of bribe giving: "How many times and how many rangers will we feed [*kato lok key khetey debo*]? We've never done it, and we can't afford to. . . . Today we bring them one chicken, tomorrow what if they start asking for goat [which is much more expensive and a luxury in the village]. . . . How will we manage?" In their view, once you begin to "feed" the rangers—a word that also refers to bribing in South Asia—it is endless, and they do not have the means to play such a game. The couple feel disgruntled by the khatirdari of other fishers, and often complain to the rangers about other fishing boats, a theme I return to in the following section. As mentioned previously, perhaps the most extreme case of an asymmetry of power between rangers and fishers is when *bado babus* arrange for village women be ferried to range offices for their sexual enjoyment, a phenomenon I am aware is rampant but one that I neither witnessed nor directly probed rangers about.

Rupturing Byabohar: Internal Splinterings, Jealousy, and Co-option

If so far it has seemed that there are some inherently good officials and others that are characteristically bad, in reality the same ranger might sometimes act with leniency and warmth and at other instances be rigidly rule abiding and capable of harshness. How might we understand how rangers flip—from being someone with a reputation of treating fishers respectfully to suddenly behaving with unkindness? To explain this, I turn to Manoranjan Gayan, the ranger who was nervous about his own mental health in the forest, who shares the

dynamics that not only lead him to limit his own lenience but also often trigger a sense of anger toward fishers that manifests in ill treatment. The main reason for this was the dynamic of complaints and how internal hostilities between fishers imperil intimacies. Manoranjan da felt that if he let a boat off without fining it, another boat—out of a sense of disgruntled envy and competition—might inform on him to his boss. Rangers face accusations not only of shirking their duty but also of favoritism and self-interest. Many rangers felt that fishers had a lot of jealousy (*hingsha*) and infighting among themselves. When I asked fishers whether they complained about other boats, many of them immediately launched into long stories that confirmed such internal rivalry and envy vis-à-vis other boats.

When I asked Kamal da, the crab collector whose household I had become a part of during fieldwork, whether he complained about other boats, he immediately replied in the affirmative (see fig. 8). He gave me a concrete example of some simmering discontent in our own neighborhood: "This Nilanjan babu [a beat officer] at Dobanki [a forest beat], he never writes on Tarun's *resty* [fines him]. They have a good relationship [*bhalo sampark*] with one another. Tarun will get caught 5–10 times, but he won't get fined. Whereas we, our boat will get fined. . . . So the next time we go to pay the fine, we will let the *bado babu* [range officer] know. We'll say 'so and so boat doesn't get written [fined] by so and so *choto babu* [beat officer].'"

Figure 8. A fisherman shares with the range officer the direction of a particular creek where other "trespassing" boats are hiding. Rangers often solicit this information, and fishers, depending on their own personal feuds with others fishers, often indulge complaining on fellow fishers while at other times protecting them. Photo credit: Megnaa Mehtta.

Tarun da, the beneficiary of this preferential treatment, came from a poor household himself and fished with two other men who, like him, were also particularly vulnerable, as the eroding river had eaten into their homestead land. I was aware that Tarun da was struggling to pay his own debts the year that I was in the field. His wife had been diagnosed with cancer, and the medical bills from the private hospitals he had been accompanying her to for the past year already seemed unaffordable for him to pay back in his lifetime. It was good for Tarun's boat that they were being allowed to fish without a fine, I reasoned. Why did not everyone, Kamal da included, just keep quiet? A large part of the answer related to prior tensions in the village. These hostilities ran the gamut from extramarital affairs that inspired festering interpersonal jealousies to long-standing kinship discords to inequitable land ownership. At times they started from trivial issues like cattle grazing in someone else's fields or the felling of a tree on someone else's land. Kamal da agreed that Tarun da was struggling, but he said his own situation was no different: "We all have debts to pay back. I haven't managed to rebuild the roof from the last monsoon." No one has extra money to spare for fines to contribute to the Forest Department coffers, so why should some be let off and others be squeezed of their meager profits? Fishers, like Anjali and Manoj, might also harbor resentment against other fishers' khatirdari, or boats with legal fishing licences might inform on "unlicensed boats" (*beypaasi naukas*) who had not bothered to rent the licences and were trying their luck with rangers they knew well.

I wondered whether this infighting was a direct result of the increasing competition for crabs and fish. The fishers agreed that, with volatile market prices, shrinking fish stocks, and an enlarged "core area" that legally prohibited them to enter, an increase in the infighting among fishers was inevitable. Interestingly though, most villagers did not shift the full blame to structural forces of the market and state. Instead, they said that such infighting with the fishing community had always been there. Any complaint against another fishing boat always accompanied an older story of an unresolved tension related to matters of debt, property, or women. Taking village problems—household, financial, and marital discord—into the forest was against the "rules of the jungle" (*jongoler niyam*) proscribed by the forest deity Bonbibi (see also Mehtta 2022). While this was something the fishers aspired to respect, their own social entanglements with other fishers—neighbors and relatives—were laced with tensions, jealousy, and anxiety that inevitably created enmities and alliances that corrupted relationships in the forest creeks.

Even though it was fair to suggest that internal jealousies always existed, there was no denying that increased patrolling

and new forms of surveillance that disciplined not just the fishers but also the rangers led to heightened tensions. Fishers often had to rat out other fishing boats because this information was solicited by rangers. Often, rangers persuasively asked boats to point them in the direction or even guide them toward the specific creeks where they might find other trespassing boats so that they could meet their targets more quickly. The fishers in question have the option either to protect other fishing boats or to comply. Kamal da elucidated this dynamic for me with the following example: "Imagine that the ranger *babu* has caught us. The *babus* asks if there are more [boats] in the creeks. We know that there are five other boats inside a narrow creek close by. . . . I try to save the other boats and say 'no, there aren't.' I tell the *babus* to go in the other direction. Later, the *babu* catches them anyways. . . . When that same *babu* sees us, he says 'why did you lie? . . . We asked the others, and they said you had all been fishing together.'"

There are many such situations where the fishers are stuck in a prisoners' dilemma. In these moments, both telling the truth and concealing it can get them into trouble, depending on the actions of their fellow fishers. On the one hand, fear of the rangers and the Forest Department's increased surveillance can turn boat against boat. At other times, fishers will give away the location of other boats to assist and cooperate with the ranger. This earns that boat brownie points and the chance to curry favor in the future. These internal splinters and the competition between boats often buttressed by long-standing rivalries compel rangers, despite their sympathy toward fishers, to follow punitive rules (see fig. 8).

From the point of view of rangers, leniency and strictness are also shaped by the temporalities of their own work pressure. There are certain times of the year when their work is under heightened scrutiny: this is at the close of the financial cycle when reports have to be reproduced and logbooks have to represent their reconnoitring with precision. There is also a typically fretful energy and exaggerated anxiety in the lead up to preparing for an "official visit" or the "field tour" of a senior bureaucrat. During such visits, several of which I was present for, all rangers—regardless of whether their inherent character might be of paternalistic benevolence or sympathetic kindness—become rigid rule followers, indiscriminately fining fishers, overlooking and denying any prior social relationship or long-standing intimacy. These ruptures to intimacy, it should be pointed out, are also instigated at other temporal instances by fishers. In January 2017, five fishermen had died from tiger attacks, and a panicked Forest Department issued a blanket ban on crab collecting. Immediately afterward, more than 300 fishers alongside a deputation of fishers' union leaders assembled at the Sajnekhali Wildlife Sanctuary in protest of this blanket ban at the time when crab prices—in the lead up to the Chinese New Year—were at their highest. Office windows were broken, stones were pelted, and violence broke out injuring two range officers and making local and state newspaper headlines. Just as an official visit of a senior forest bureaucrat can make all rangers forget any long-standing friendship, examples like a blanket ban on crab collecting are capable of leading to violence, revealing that this intimacy is at best antagonistic in nature, especially when survival is at stake.

There are also concerted efforts, such as the restructuring of hiring policies at the range office, that have led to deeper ruptures in what are already very embedded social relationships of the state and society. In recent years, the Forest Department has deliberatively begun to co-opt local communities and has made a systematic attempt to employ men at its lowest rungs from fishing neighborhoods and households. This is usually through the JFMCs, which, as explained previously, are an attempt to include local communities in forest management and provide "alternative livelihoods" to wean fishers from being "forest dependent." Some of this daily wage or short-term contracted labor involves cooking and cleaning at range offices, while other jobs are in the form of a boatman who accompanies rangers on patrols.

Take, for example, the following case of Sanjay that shows not only how the line between state and society has been blurred but also how, within the span of a few months, the roles have been entirely inverted. Sanjay had been a crab collector for 12 years, and at the time I met him, his parents were also crab fishers. They have no land, so this was their only means of subsisting. The first time I had met Sanjay was at his home when his parents happened to be in the jungle on a fishing trip. A year into fieldwork, after I had managed to get permission to patrol with the rangers, I arrived at the Tetultola floating camp only to be met by Sanjay. He recognized me immediately and recalled our long conversation at his home, right opposite the camp, from the previous year. Surprised, I asked what he was doing here. After receiving a brick house from the JFMC, he had been asked to work as a boatman at the floating camp. In hushed tones, with the beat officer only a few meters away, he said, "I don't have an option anymore. I work for the Forest Department now. We have to stop the fishermen from fishing in this part of the jungle. These are the laws." Suddenly realizing the vocational volte-face, I also asked in a whisper, "So what happens when you come across your parents while patrolling?" He replied, "It's embarrassing for me. The ranger lets my parents off without fining them out of sympathy for me. But what can I do. . . . Usually, I have no choice. We come across people from my village, from my neighborhood all the time, and there's nothing I can do. This is my new job. That is theirs." Raising his index finger to his lips and eyes gesturing toward the beat officer, he signaled that he would continue this conversation with me later. He loaded the patrol boat in which we were about to set off for the day and carried onto it the offense register—a ruled notebook in which the beat officer would write down the details of the "trespassing boats"—one that certainly had his own name and that of his parents from just a few months ago.

Through such recruitment processes men and women like Sanjay end up policing their own brothers, sisters, and parents,

and despite their conflicted loyalties, over time they begin to adopt the Forest Department's paternalistic narratives. In a subsequent meeting, when we were not confined to speaking in whispers, he said: "They [the Forest Department] say that we do this work [referring to crab collecting] out of greed and that we must stop taking such risks." This was in sharp contrast to our conversations a year before in which he had explained that it was necessity, and desperation, that drove his household to "do the jungle." Sanjay's parents, sitting with us, were glad that their son had found the opportunity to do something else, even as they were obliged to continue "doing the jungle" to pay back their debts. There is no denying that in a region without jobs, and for those who do not want to migrate out, the Forest Department is one of the only stable employers for many young men like Sanjay. Employment, however, had come with a deep sense of self-doubt. The Forest Department's official speak and everyday forms of "environmentality" (Agrawal 2005) had become part of Sanjay's way of talking about the work of "doing the jungle." I sensed in his tone and disposition his own internal antagonisms in relation to his new job and that of his parents (see also Ibrahim 2021).

New Laws and New Technologies of Surveillance

Even as fishers were astute in disaggregating the different functionaries of the Forest Department, they universally complained that the Forest Department's regime of patrolling, fining, and harassment had increased over the past decade. This mapped onto new laws, the expansion of the "core area," stricter accountability systems, and new technologies for surveillance. Recent annual reports from the Sundarbans boast of "special raids on forest criminals," an increase in "mobile patrolling squads," and their collaborations with the Border Security Force for more efficient law enforcement. Each report tallies the number of boats seized and the number of "criminal offenses" encountered and aims to put all "forest criminals" in a computerized database (STR 2005).

In 2016 each ranger was given a smartphone with an "e-patrolling" app. This automatically tracks their patrols and obliges them to upload photos of the "offenders" they encounter to a criminal database. The more elderly rangers were used to the "offense" notebooks and registers. Their new smartphones came with a plastic cover that hung around their necks. Carefully opening the waterproof pouch, rangers showed me the new app and complained about not being technologically savvy enough to operate it. Their main complaint, however, was that they were now being watched. Laughing nervously, they said, "Now we can't shirk off from our patrols. There is no room for faking it anymore" (see fig. 9).

In addition to e-patrolling apps, the first unmanned aerial vehicle drones were purchased by the Forest Department in 2017. Kamal da's boat had been caught by a drone during the time that I was staying in his household. This was the first year that they had been operationalized and were presumably still in their trial phase. After the incident, shaken and distraught by the experience, he explained in intricate detail the "small helicopter" that had chased his boat, with a speedboat of forest

Figure 9. Inside the waterproof blue plastic pouch hanging from the bamboo slat is a smartphone with an e-patrolling app turned on. From 2016 onward, rangers were obliged to patrol with these apps, heightening their fears of being surveilled for their work of surveilling the forests. Photo credit: Megnaa Mehtta.

rangers that intercepted him soon after. In his narration of this episode, he revealed that the speedboat had a ranger friend who he knew well and with whom he had a good social relationship. He pleaded with the ranger to let him go, but the ranger had apologized, explaining that he himself was being watched by his superiors and was obliged to act according to the law. Context, the custom of adopting informal rules, and the empathy borne out of social relationships were not something the drone and those operating it could factor in. These new technologies—ubiquitous across several Indian national parks—were not only surveilling the fishers but also disciplining the discipliners (see Simlai 2015, 2021), generating daily anxieties of an omnipresent panopticon watching each move. Despite Kamal da's dejection and humiliation, it was only a matter of a few days before his anger toward the Forest Department dissipated, and he reasoned that the ranger friend was also just doing his job (see fig. 9).

In this rising tide of new technologies and new discourses of conservation, sympathetic rangers have limited interpretative wiggle room. For rangers like Manoranjan Gayan, these apps made it even harder for him to be lenient to fishers. I asked Manoranjan da what was stopping rangers like himself from turning a blind eye to the fishers more often? He replied that this was impossible to do because he was a government employee and ultimately had to do his duty as a forest guard. "I have to write it down in the notebook every day, and now we even have this phone [referring to the e-patrolling app installed on it]. . . . The sahibs are watching. If I don't fine anybody, what will I say I've been doing all day?" Many rangers like Manoranjan da felt that they were in a bind, as their own government jobs were at stake if they acted too leniently. By taking away the agency and interpretative room for maneuver of the rangers, the e-patrolling app broke down byabohar by quite literally taking the "man out of the state." On subsequent trips, rangers—as expected—had found small ways to subvert and tinker with the new technologies, figuring out ways in which these new technologies could also be domesticated, creating limited but crucial space for a form of human negotiation.

These new military-grade technologies were also shaping mindsets and inculcating a pride in their jobs. Abhijeet da, a ranger who had grown up in the Sundarbans, said: "They [the Forest Department] are really taking every effort to save the tiger, and so how can we slack on our jobs? We have to do as they say. Actually, this is not just doing our job, this is saving a national pride." Perpetuated by the new technologies of conservation and increased expenditures on such campaigns, the discourse and rhetoric of conservation is shaping new environmental subjectivities (Agrawal 2005) among Sundarbans forest officials too. Manoranjan da's and Abhijeet da's submission to the law shows the limits of the interpretative bureaucratic space in which byabohar and khatirdari flourish. For all their algorithmic efficiency, these technologies take away the human empathy and embedded social relationships on which even very unequal power relations in the Sundarbans are based.

Conclusion: Everyday, Intimate, and Antagonistic Governance

Peluso (2017:312) asks, "Is there a forest in the world that does not have a history of violence in its understory?" Perhaps not. The relationship between rangers and fishers, both historically and today, is perceived to be characterized by hostility and violent conflict. Vociferous campaigns spearheaded by fishers' unions and rights-based activists blame the forest rangers for harassing, extorting, and oppressing the lives of fishers. Local and national newspapers often highlight the skirmishes between these two groups. My own first impressions of the fisher-ranger relationship, news headlines, activist narratives, and academic writing that pits the state against the people were in line with campaigns that accused the more powerful Forest Department of governing the forests through a reign of terror. However, after patrolling with the forest rangers, and gleaned from insights living in their range offices, this article argues that the relationship between state and society cannot be characterized merely as one of dominance, harassment, or indifference. Despite their power differentials, I show the varying degrees of intimacy, albeit at times an antagonistic intimacy, that exists between the two groups. The basis of this intimacy is a social relationship and a form of interested hospitality that far exceeds formality, stranger sociality, or solely the performance of "insider knowledge." Instead, it is more akin to a form of mutuality that arises out of a combination of codependencies and a sympathy for each other's commitments and obligations.

Rangers live in cage-like military-style barracks equipped with rifles, walkie-talkies, and new technologies of surveillance. What this outward appearance of power, both real and performed, conceals is the subalternity of these individuals too who are so socially alienated that they depend on fishers for one of the most basic forms of survival: human contact and sociality. In exchange for a few hours of fishing without harassment, physical commodities such as crab and fish or offerings of meat, alcohol, fried snacks, cheap cigarettes, and *paan* (betel leaves) from the village were prized alongside less monetary needs such as just chatting, shooting the breeze, playing cards, and sharing meals during endlessly lonely patrols. I have attempted to show how rangers allow fishers to "trespass," motivated by a combination of their empathy and a matter-of-fact reality that there are too many rules, and most of them are too unreasonable to follow. Simultaneously, rangers are also obliged to do their job, and fining fishers, confiscating their equipment, and uploading offenses to a database of "criminal offenders" were duties that they had to fulfill to keep their own government jobs. From both the point of view of rangers and that of the fishers, I locate specific temporal instances when long-term intimacy and civility are ruptured and how the two groups become antagonistic and then return to their older forms of mutuality.

Despite these breaches, and more generally, what I have tried to show is that rangers and forest fishers are no strangers

to one another. Rangers were strict, but they were also sympathetic, and the pendulum between the two relied on social relationships that were cultivated but could also be severed. Rangers did indeed harass fishermen, but they also went out of their way, at times risking their own jobs, to be lenient to fishers. The two groups are, without a doubt, imbricated in a deeply unequal relationship, but while the commonplace understanding is of fishers being at the mercy of the rangers, I reveal how rangers are also dependent on and vulnerable to the fishers. Pitting the "reified" state against the people belies the much more negotiated relationship between fishers and rangers that oscillates between violence, strictness, and cooption but also sympathy, mutual care, conviviality, and a shared obligation to dwelling in the same hostile landscape unquestionably governed by the same deities and demons, regardless of one's faith, skepticism, or, at times, performed skepticism.

Finally, without flattening out the asymmetries of power—be it in the lopsided gender dynamics or as a result of the increased militarization of the forest—this article has also addressed the ways in which the forms of what Didier Fassin (2005) calls "compassion in repression" is ruptured. Internal fragmentations within the fishers based on jealousy and competition lead to complaints against rangers who are being lenient to other boats. Fishers, playing out prior rivalries from the village, inform on other fishing boats. New SMART technologies of surveillance and the pressure to log, report, and attend to senior officials' field visits on the one hand and the unreasonable laws and blanket bans on fishing on the other are also rupturing modes of relatedness and putting new pressures on fishers and rangers alike. Despite all of the asymmetries of power and the violence with which the use, control, and protection of forests is rooted, this article has tried to show how some of the most classically antagonistic relationships rely on different modes of intimacy and even conviviality.

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Comments

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Mehtta's exciting article navigates an array of complex "intimacies" that constitute a rarely discussed dimension of state-society relations in the Global South. Through a prolonged and embedded ethnography in the Sundarbans forests, a global conservation hot spot, Mehtta brings out the lived-in realities that connect the lives of the forest rangers with the local fishing communities. These intricate, personal, and interpersonal relationships that constitute the core of environmental governance in the Sundarbans—illustrated via a richly detailed, thought-provoking, empathetic portrayal—can open up newer ways to think about conservation, bureaucracy, power, and the state itself. Furthermore, the article is a testimony to Mehtta's skills as an ethnographer and makes a significant contribution to the limited anthropological scholarship on how South Asian biodiversity is governed.

Several broad argumentative strands suture the article, and we emphasize two particularly critical ones here. First and foremost, Mehtta successfully problematizes the mainstream academic scholarship that tends to highlight the extractive and punitive character of a dominant state pitted against the people. While acknowledging the structural power asymmetries, she uncovers certain lesser-explored facets of the lives of forest rangers and their relationships with local fishing communities, demonstrating a spectrum of interactions between the "regulators" and the "regulated" that range from recognition, dependency, and trust to fear and obligation. For example, the article highlights instances where rangers show compassion, permitting fishers to "trespass" but in return for informal interactions and the occasional material support. Mehtta describes such relationships at the heart of conservation initiatives as constitutive of an "antagonistic intimacy." It is a compelling concept, encapsulating nuances that illustrate state power to be not merely a dominating force but also a complex interplay of relational dynamics and contested positionalities.

Second, in exploring the structural and institutional contexts of this intimacy, Mehtta demonstrates the "recognized irregularities" (Tuckett 2018) between the "official" and "social" realities, something known to characterize the postcolonial state (Åkesson 2022). Yet what sets the article apart is its

portrayal of the relationships as deeply symbiotic, encapsulated by *byabohar* (social rapport) and *khatirdari* (hospitality). Mehtta shows how regulatory encounters are mediated by social rapport and hospitality overtures, shifting from by-the-book enforcement of regulations to expressions of leniency and even occasional friendly exchanges between the rangers and the fishermen. She also explores the mutual dependencies of the two groups via a vivid portrayal of the challenging circumstances in range offices and floating check posts and the social isolation and mental health of the rangers and forest guards, all of which necessitate their dependence on the local communities (albeit problematized by the covert sexual dynamics that the article also hints). Incidentally, given the power asymmetries embedded in these relationships, what constitutes good or bad byabohar remains somewhat contingent and imprecise in these anecdotes, although we get a relatively better sense of what khatirdari entails ("gifts" such as meat, alcohol, fried snacks, or sweets).

Given the ethnographic richness of the article, one might wonder about certain conceptual questions it raises but offers a limited engagement with. What Mehtta veers toward in documenting the intimate antagonism is the aspect of "categorization" as a central theme of bureaucracy (O'Connor 2001), which, in this case, entails sorting people according to multiple criteria of judgment—legible and illegible (Scott 1998), deserving and undeserving (Katz 2013)—that are neither coherent nor seamless. Administrative categorizations at the lowest level often transgress their official remits, sometimes in ways that can possibly enhance their impact, as these permeating categories can shape how people relate to each other, form new relationships, and redirect resources. Who or what is legitimate and deserving and when so are modes of categorization that fundamentally shape the state's ways of seeing. In a similar vein, stories such as that of Sanjay, the crab collector turned ranger, could lead to further questions about the dual positionality of "street-level" officials, a recurring theme in studies of state bureaucracy (Lipsky 2010). The threshold experiences of people who are demographically part of the regulated population but have professionally transitioned to the regulating group is an important dimension of the state's lived reality. Mehtta could have also persuaded us to rethink dimensions of tolerance by questioning Partha Chatterjee's (2011) division of civil and political society in such contexts. Rather than tolerance based on democratic norms and a moral community (a la Chatterjee), the rangers' tolerance comes across as a mix of personal discretion, social norms, and practical necessity. What could be the basis for this social contract? The empathy or sympathy that Mehtta successfully demonstrates as integral to the intimate antagonisms has a distinct normative location that is touched on but not taken up for deliberation.

Mehtta also examines personal context and historical relations to a degree, but the aspect of religiosity and associated questions about caste could be taken more seriously. The negotiated existence of the Bonbibi temple in the forest outposts is a particular case in point. In narrativizing the distinctions between the urban (*bhadralok*) rationality and the village "superstitions," she acknowledges the caste question but only in passing. One suspects there is much more at play here, especially in the distinctions between *bhadralok* and *gramer lok* (village people) and the derisions of the latter's "blind" faith in folk deities by the former. As the Netidhopani range officer's story demonstrates, the distinctions between a rational "us" and an irrational "them" are eventually displaced by a collective "we." What leads to this transition and, in turn, what might that mean in determining both the positionality of the subaltern and the process of subalternization itself (echoing Thomas 2018)—and that too in a caste-ridden society—are questions we would like to invite Mehtta to reflect more on.

In closing, Mehtta has illustrated the myriad and complex rationalizations and emotional states of the forest rangers and fishing communities in the Sundarbans through a wonderfully thick description, raising critical questions about not only the state but also environmental governance initiatives. It is possible to reflect more on these fieldwork experiences—both on her part and the readers'—as a form of knowledge production, paying closer attention to experiential language, cultural contexts, and the ambivalences therein.

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12 I 24

With the recent exponential growth of human populations on Earth, the tension between humans and other animal life are now being pushed to the limit in every part of the planet. I remember first learning about how we humans crowd out everything else from a Swedish children's science fiction book about extraterrestrials who visit Earth to restock animals, since they have wiped out everything on their own planet—like we are doing now, during the sixth human-induced mass extinction in Earth's history. Today, counting biomass, human bodies already make up about six times the shrinking populations of all other nonhuman land and sea animals and birds (that is excluding fish but not counting our livestock whose biomass is twice again that of *Homo sapiens*; Bar-On, Phillips, and Milo 2018; Greenspoon et al. 2023).

Humans are taking over the world. No wonder, then, that there is now a different kind of conflict: intrahuman disagreements over how to manage the last remaining pockets of wildlife. This article offers fascinating insights into one such area: the Sundarbans delta forests of India (and Bangladesh), where government forest agency rangers disagree with fishing communities and honey collectors and punish those who break the rules.

Among wild animals, tigers, along with river dolphins, crocodiles, and more, are prime conservation objects. Sundarbans once had rhinos, but they have already been hunted to extinction, along with other species such as wild buffalo. The tiger ranks at the top, in the manner that grizzlies and snow

leopards in other places become star species. Recurring human conflict with tigers include attacks on wild honey or crab collectors, who try to fool them by carrying human face masks backward (I saw this when visiting once, in 1987).

The author has conducted penetrating, long-time fieldwork among both fishermen and rangers and discovers that they also, at times, do interact amicably. There is a form of "compassion of repression" that allows rangers to show leniency and amity while accepting snacks and other gifts (even visits from village women).

Importantly, the two kinds of humans share not only this "antagonistic intimacy" but also an understanding of not just the wildlife issues but also the demons and deities that they all recognize as codenizens of the forests. Unfortunately, we do not learn much here about what people think of animals, demons, or gods. We do learn that many rangers are recruited from within the Sundarbans communities, and they believe in tiger demons as well as the Bonbibi goddess, who has rules of her own; if obeyed, she would protect you (we do not learn much about what the rules are and whether they intersect with wildlife management rules). We learn that Bonbibi has shrines in every ranger station, indicating that even outsiders often bent on condemning her as superstition will accept her protection as a way of surviving the Sundarbans.

Much of the state management is about fishing monitored by ranger boats. Certain species are protected. Yet riding with enforcers' boats, the author discovers that despite their asymmetric power relationship, rangers do not necessarily use their powers to fine or punish violators, if they are known locals. They show leniency, with their eyes open for other intruding boats.

The author discusses how this pragmatism relates to the endemic problems of bureaucracies prone to corruption, which would be when intimacy goes too far. But it seems to me that this human intelligence is also reminiscent of what I heard at the panopticon prison buildings in Joliet outside Chicago, which are not used for surveillance the way we imagine: cells have curtains and privacy. Instead, it is intimate intelligence collecting based on amicable negotiations with give and take that is the foundation of a prisoner management more effective than any impersonal policy to shoot from the centrally isolated panopticon tower.

If approached in such perspectives, the author's observations on how new surveillance technologies can potentially threaten the current pragmatic approach come perhaps in a new light. Today, even though "thousands" of fishing boats are knowingly let in, rangers have an understanding with these fishermen not to take certain threatened fish, like manta rays, on pain of confiscating their equipment. Such pragmatic management is difficult to program into new systems of monitoring, with new forms of recording and drone cameras that remove the power of individual ranger teams to negotiate their encounters with fishermen—also the rangers' only freedom from the boredom of daily robotic routines.

There is a wealth here of perceptive observations on the complexities of ranger-locals' interactions and their possible futures, which I am sure will be of intense interest to everyone who is either studying or managing human-wildlife relations all around the world. It is also a rich, even exemplary anthropological demonstration of the inconvenient truth that in reality, the state is made up of its individual agents, who must be studied as such.

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Megnaa Mehtta's invitation to consider varying modes of intimacy among individuals typically understood to be political antagonists in the context of a violent regime of forest protection both colonial and postcolonial is generative—and it is a pleasure to comment on her article here. The author's ethnographically rich text takes us into the lives of forest rangers posted in the Indian Sundarbans, a global conservation hot spot where national and international efforts to protect tigers and other flora and fauna have produced a classic instance of parks-versus-people politics. Extending studies of human-animal relations through which a site such as this has been discussed, Mehtta turns to the relations between forest rangers and forest dwellers.

Mehtta situates her discussion of ranger-fisher relations within the now-vast scholarship in political anthropology about the state and state-society relations. The Indian Forest Department, which under the guise of protection continues with violent practices initiated by colonial forestry, is typically the behemoth of the story, pitted against forest dwellers, the subalterns. Following Gupta's (1995) call to disaggregate the state, the article unfurls the structure of the Forest Department bureaucracy, detailing the "human hierarchy" within each forest range office and the range of socioeconomic backgrounds from which its members hail. The article turns to the "unofficial rules" around protections and prohibitions in the Sundarbans forests that forest rangers and dwellers share; we see Kaushal and Naveen, forest range officers, ignoring laws around trespassing fishing boats during their patrols and explaining not only why they do so but also the informal norms they follow instead. Even as members of the forest bureaucracy are set apart from the forest dwellers in structural and socioeconomic terms, living and working together in the Sundarbans demand renegotiations. Forest dwellers like Piyali and Arnab recognize the constraints under which rangers must work, disentangling the law and higher-ups from these men in the outposts, regarding them with sympathy instead. Even as many officers insist on a distance between themselves and the "irrational" faith of fisherfolk in Bonbibi, the forest deity, they nonetheless participate in mundane practices of its material and ritual upkeep across the physical sites of the range offices. I would note that attention to such spaces of blurring—of distinctions of legality, belief, categorial roles, and hierarchies—does more than simply explain

the conditions of possibility of a shared sociomoral consensus around the forest's governance. It provides insights into the contours of the "intimate" in "intimate antagonisms."

The material conditions in which forest rangers live and work are akin to those of military barracks, the author notes; an interlocutor describes the land-based camps as being like prison enclosures. In detailing these material and aesthetic dimensions, the article acknowledges (without making this aspect explicit) the carceral and securitized aspects of ranger life. I would go a step further to argue that while policing as protecting is deemed to be the work of the forest ranger, their own lives and work are also within the bounds of that which is being policed. This kind of policing, increasingly resonant across multiple contexts in our contemporary world, is not explicitly punitive or repressive. It also makes binaries of who is policing and who or what is being policed (much like that of the state-society categories) less stable and separable. As we learn from the article, rangers are watched by a large heterogenous community of forest dwellers and also by new digital technologies of vigilance and accountability within the state. Sociospatial intimacy allows certain kinds of information to become powerful: locals know of the everyday habits, longings, dependencies, and vulnerabilities of rangers. The spatial, aesthetic, and material registers of life and work on the land and floating camps thus shape the social relationships within the hierarchical bureaucracy and the human-animal-ecological worlds, quite literally, enclosing them. To that extent, the securitized and carceral nature of such spatial, aesthetic, and material registers are significant and need more extensive engagement.

Mehtta disaggregates the state vertically, providing insights into the rhythms of daily life and the struggles of its lowest-level functionaries: the days are oppressively hot and humdrum and the evenings are desperately lifeless and lonely. But the state could be disaggregated horizontally too, and how rangers and forest dwellers relate to other key state actors and bureaucracies as they negotiate interdependencies and distinct agendas with one another in the Sundarbans remains a question. For instance, I wondered what, if any, relations the Forest Department officers have with the other policing faces of the state that cohabit in the Sundarbans, namely, the Border Security Force and the Coast Guard.

Recent anthropological scholarship on policing and civil-military encounters, as instances of state-society interfaces, particularly in borderlands, have theorized ambivalence and interdependence as registers of relationality (Gupta 2019; Ibrahim 2019). The discussion of *khatirdari*, described as an economy of favors, could be read in the light of these debates. Forest dwellers offer gifts to rangers ostensibly to make their daily lives marginally more comfortable, and rangers unofficially permit crab collectors and fisherfolk to operate in prohibited parts of the forest out of mutual recognition of the needs in their lives. However, the contrast between Nitesh, an elderly, experienced forest dweller who boasts of the power to choose whom he may bestow his gifts on, and Anjali and Manoj, a crab-collecting couple who do not think that they can afford to participate in this economy of favors not least because of its material demands and their lack of leverage, gives pause. While it is tempting to view these intimacies as codependencies—and to a certain extent they are—I note that we should not lose sight of the kinds of power relations they shape and are shaped by within the forest-dwelling community. Nitesh enjoys a relative position of power among his community because of gatekeeping in such an economy of care and information, a constitutive part of uneven and volatile state-society relations that Farhana Ibrahim (2019), for instance, theorizes in the context of the heavily policed western borderlands of India. Viewed in such a way, khatirdari as mutual dependencies and *hingsha* (jealousy) as rupture are integral parts of the same spectrum of relationalities, for information and complaints circulate as gifts too. As Mehtta notes, although this line of analysis is not pursued, resource scarcity is increasingly securitized, in the Indian Sundarbans and across the border on the Bangladeshi side too (Cons 2021); policing under such conditions of acute ecological and livelihood vulnerability reshapes social ties such that intimacies are no stable refuge but fraught and unstable.

Finally, the "social relationships" that Mehtta rightly argues "shape both convivial and hostile interactions" are not generic or all-purpose even as they remain unspecified in the analysis. The ethnographic depictions clearly suggest that they are particular kinds of social relations: homosocial and the mutual recognition of heteropatriarchal roles of the providing male householder from which spring forms of care and claims making. Regrettably, the author forecloses the potential—and really, necessity—of an analysis that integrates gender centrally in the study of power and "agonistic intimacy" by citing the lack of women in the forest bureaucracy, disavowing insights into the sexual experiences of men, and distancing from the further exploration of gendered and sexual economies. Gender does not equal women, as feminist scholars continuously remind us, and underpinning the forms of care, claims, and refusals that make up the spectrum of antagonistic intimacies depicted are productive and reproductive concerns of the heteropatriarchal household and the shared pressures of productive (and respectable) householder. Taking more seriously the material, affective, and embodied vantage that the view from the patrol boat offers could open up such heteropatriarchal socialities as the form that holds lives of care, work, policing, and social reproduction together on and around the forest camps.

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In the conclusion of her article, "Intimate Antagonisms and Unlikely Friendships between State and Society in the Sundarbans Forests of India," Megnaa Mehtta quotes Nancy Lee

Peluso as asking, "Is there a forest in the world that does not have a history of violence in its understory?" Mehtta's article may be read as a rejoinder to this question that a focus on violence will yield a picture of violence, whereas a broader frame stands to bring into view the ordinary relations that may also prevail. Within her field context of the Sundarbans in India, Mehtta takes violence to be the ongoing tensions and skirmishes between the different constituencies who live off the forest and the state functionaries whose work it is to cast these livelihoods as trespasses and to restrict access. Drawing on two years of fieldwork, Mehtta shows the range of relations among the antagonistic groups, with emphasis on what she calls "associational behaviors" characterized by *bhalo byabohar*, which she translates as "good relations," and *khatirdaari*, translated as "interested hospitality." I am taken by Mehtta's descriptions of the daily lives of the forest rangers who patrol the forests and the cramped conditions within which they live, which bring on feelings of isolation and loneliness, even that of going mad. There is a hint of suggestion within her writing that these urban or small-town transplants to the forest almost need trespassers not only to break the monotony of their existence but also to interact with so they can retain their capacity to be social beings. People need others on account of which they cannot be nourished by the well-being of the forest alone or by upholding the dictates of the state. These are important considerations, and Mehtta's work contributes to explorations on the difficulties of pursuing environmental ethics in the present (see Mathias 2024).

While Mehtta enlivens this milieu and its entanglements for us, my question for the author is, What else is underfoot? I imagine that the response may well be that I should await the monograph that will surely follow, which I look forward to reading, but I still ask my question in the hope that the forest rangers may get better parsed. My question arises from my consumption of colonial and postcolonial literature of the region, specifically, *English August* written by Upamanya Chatterjee in 1988 and "Shooting an Elephant" written by George Orwell and first published in 1936.

English August is an account of a young civil servant posted to a remote rural region of India. The protagonist cannot bring himself to be very interested in his job, maintains desultory relations with his subordinates, and spends most of his days masturbating, getting stoned, or reading Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. However, this being a bildungsroman, there is an evolution in the young Agastya Sen, who is ultimately moved by the plight of the villagers in their desperate efforts to draw water from a drying well to do something for them. As one reads Mehtta's account of the state functionaries, one is struck by the image of the civil servants of the Forest Department as oddly flat, vacillating between being vexed by their task of depriving villagers of their livelihood and by the fear of being too closely associated with them. Are there any other inner monologues that play out within these individuals, stories that they tell themselves about themselves? Given how riven the rustic is by talk of sex and love that dare not speak its name within songs, stories, jokes, and innuendos, why was the author unable to access these registers, in lieu of the confidences of the rangers? What was the perceived need to maintain these boundaries with them, and how does it speak to the author's own embroilment in relations of bhalo byabohar and khatirdaari? In other words, how might a certain politeness enshroud the fieldwork situation obfuscating the rough and tumble from the ethnographer's view, and how does she think with it?

The terms Mehtta excavates from her fieldwork, bhalo byabohar and khatirdaari, recollected those I have heard used by people with whom I have worked in the context of riverine Bangladesh, often in relation to state officials but also in relation to their sons-in-laws, specifically their daughters' spouses who are treated with tremendous deference and hospitality on the occasion of their visits to their wives' natal homes. The treatment of sons-in-law almost borders on the performative, like one would treat someone who is known to be fickle, unreliable, or temperamental. These phrases also recollected for me how villagers treated the protagonist in George Orwell's short story "Shooting an Elephant." The story is that of a petty officer of the British Raj stationed in Burma who despises both the empire that gives him employment and the "natives" who openly disregard him. However, despite these antagonistic relations, he finds himself pulled into a situation of raising a gun and shooting an elephant, encouraged by the crowd thronging him, beseeching him to use his position and ammunition to ensure their safety. It is a very unnerving story, as it leaves unclear whose power the colonial servant was channeling—it may be that of the crowd or it may be that of a skittish state. It leaves me with my final set of questions for Mehtta: What may be the possible darker undertones of the associational behaviors that she tracks? How may they be directed at assuaging state power that may rear up at any time through these rangers? And how do we know in advance who or what moves the rangers?

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Reading Megnaa Mehtta's article evoked memories of my fieldwork decades ago in Madagascar, where I focused on conservation labor and the experiences of low-wage conservation workers as they negotiated their dual roles as rule enforcers and subsistence farmers. The state and its proxy organizations typically employed these low-wage workers from the very communities they targeted for surveillance, using them as a means of reducing the practices of slash-and-burn agriculture and overfishing. As is the case elsewhere, the enduring labor structure reflects a colonial legacy. Madagascar and India share a history of oppressive forest services, where colonial powers

benefited from differential treatment that relegated local populations to forced labor while allowing outsiders to exploit resources.

I argued that the structure of conservation labor in Madagascar inadvertently increases the scarcity value of the island's endangered biodiversity, slowing its decline and focusing global attention on it yet failing to preserve its current state for future generations. The dual subjectivity of "conservation agents," equivalent to the forest rangers in Mehtta's study, exposes the ambivalent morality of the conservation mission, especially when it involves taking land rights away from people who have so little. It seems a cruel business against the backdrop of stark global disparities in wealth and privilege between donor nations and biodiversity hot spots in the Global South.

One aspect I had not deeply considered was the construction of postcolonial affective environments shaped by these state- and donor-driven conservation efforts. Mehtta's nuanced ethnography in the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve beautifully depicts how conservation labor cultivates a specific type of sociality she calls "antagonistic intimacy." Her examination of the conservationist state in India traces how this peculiar sociality and associated affect take shape. By "affect," I refer to a ranger's feeling of when and how to express strictness or clemency to rule breakers. While not "new"—as it stems from colonial projects—the emotional landscape is engendered by the impossible tasks imposed on workers who are themselves have-nots. The dynamic exposes how the systems designed to protect our planet also inflict hardship on the most vulnerable while positioning those who live very far away on the moral high ground.

Her study also suggests how ecologies contribute to this antagonistic intimacy, pushing forest rangers toward social connection in a difficult workplace. Forest rangers in tropical regions navigate dense, dimly lit vegetation and steep terrain, facing physical challenges and the constant presence of potentially dangerous wildlife, including predators and mosquitoes, as well as unpredictable invisible forces. These conditions often take a toll on both bodies and mental health. Rangers often travel long distances from their homes, spending days or weeks in the field.

While I considered the mountainous forest cores of eastern Madagascar to be remote and hard on the knees—the workers themselves complained only of the darkness and the presence of capricious forest spirits, never the steepness of the footpaths—the tiger preserve of West Bengal presents a more extreme case of social alienation. As Mehtta illustrates, the profound loneliness of forest rangers is marked by stretches of claustrophobic stillness on cramped floating camps or barracks-style offices in the heart of the forest. They live there while yearning for the family life they have been forced to leave behind for years on end. In stark contrast, conservation agents in Madagascar are deeply rooted in their households and villages, feeling the weight of kinship obligations that emphasize solidarity rather than penalization. Most returned home at the end of each day or spent significant portions of the year within their own communities. This connection stands in sharp relief to the deprivations faced by their counterparts in the Sundarbans.

Yet, despite these differences, similar social strategies emerge—an intimacy with fellow subsistence fishermen and cultivators that is more or less "antagonistic," depending on rapport or, perhaps, the time of year or the use of newer tracking technologies. Mehtta explains the concept of *byabohar*, denoting "how two people treat one another based on their social rapport," to illuminate the varying behaviors of forest rangers toward fishermen—sometimes harsh, exploitative, forgiving, or convivial. Yet she emphasizes the point that rangers often demonstrate a desire to build relationships and extend kindness to others, all while navigating the precarious balance of maintaining their jobs.

In Madagascar, I also observed variability in how conservation workers enforced regulations. During "crackdown" missions aimed at forcibly removing families who had illegally settled in the forest, enforcement was strict. However, once these operations concluded, life returned to normal, although there were often lingering resentments from other villagers. Conservation agents would usually resume their more lenient approach or turn a blind eye to unauthorized forest exploitation. This leniency stemmed not only from social pressures to support their own communities, in the spirit of *fihavanana*, a concept of social harmony, unity, and mutual support among Malagasy, but also from the understanding that strict enforcement could jeopardize their safety. Although rare, there were instances when subsistence farmers aggressively defended their illegally cleared land. The absence of menacing animal predators—apart from the occasional wild boar, often seen as a fortunate hunting opportunity—meant that angry farmers could pose a more immediate danger than, say, lurking tigers.

The exploration of conservation labor through the lens of Mehtta's detailed study sheds light on the specific emotional landscapes shaped by asymmetrical bureaucratic structures. "Antagonistic intimacy" captures the paradoxical relationship between rangers and the communities they police, conveying the tensions between the imperative to protect nonhuman wildlife and the harsh realities of human poverty. As these forest rangers navigate their dual roles as rule enforcers and members of marginalized communities, they embody an emotional landscape characterized by essential solidarity and conflict imposed from above.

Reply

It was August 2024, and I was meant to travel to Bangladesh for fieldwork on a new research project in relation to the Bangladeshi community that had emigrated to Venice, but I had to cancel my trip days before departure because of the country's unprecedented political protests that ousted the

Awami League leader and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. It happened to be amid this time of uncertainty in Bangladesh that I received the comments to this article. As I scoured several news sources to follow the happenings in Bangladesh, a photograph on the front page of an Indian newspaper caught my attention, allowing me to linger on the themes of the wonderful commentaries and responses to the "intimate antagonisms" article. The headline above the photograph read "Bangladesh army refused to suppress protest, sealing Hasina's fate." The photograph accompanying the headline was of five or six young army personnel with military uniforms, helmets, and large AK-47s sitting atop an army tanker. Below the tanker were protestors—students and civilians—who had their hands outstretched toward the army men. They were shaking hands. Both groups sported euphoric smiles. In the days that followed, several news reports and op-eds analyzed the lead up to the ousting of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Amid widespread nationwide discontent, we learned that the soldiers had refused to fire at the civilians and that the army disobeyed her orders. It was this, the article stated, that finally ousted Hasina.

It is precisely this counterintuitive moment of two adversarial groups—the army and civilian protestors—shaking hands and smiling at each other that one rarely comes across or imagines that I attempt to capture in this article. The context of forest rangers and fishers is distinct, yet there are several similarities, including the armed hierarchies and imbalances in access to punitive force. The army men are holding rifles in their other hand, the one not outstretched toward the protestors. Despite these asymmetries, what the photograph reveals are similarities and sympathies, different associational behaviors of agonistic intimacy and a unique, even if temporary and fragile, social contract between the two groups.

Following from this, Ritanjan Das and Zaad Mahmood urge me to further elaborate on what might be the basis of this social contract between the two groups. In their opinion, which I gratefully receive, my material stands as being able to rethink the dimensions of tolerance by questioning Partha Chatterjee's (2011) division of civil and political society. Why do rangers practice toleration toward fishers, if not always, then occasionally? If it is not democratic norms and a moral community (a la Chatterjee), what could it be? I have two answers to this question, and the two contradict one another. My first response is that in these resource-scarce environments, where the means to earn a living are so limited, one way to look at the interaction of these two adversarial groups is that they are both subaltern and vulnerable. They acknowledge each other's helplessness and help each other out, within constraints. One basis of this social contract is the ability to empathize with one another's struggles and recognize each other's obligations and imperatives. The fishers are aware that the rangers did not make the laws. The rangers themselves would happily question the law that they are ordered to enforce but have no power to do so. The enemy is someone else, higher up in the bureaucracy, a more powerful sahib or officer (even as the sahib too is a pawn in the face of the law and his senior sahibs). Tolerance emerges from the intimacy of the workspace and of long hours spent together. As Sahana Ghosh says in her commentary, "Attention to such spaces of blurring—of distinctions of legality, belief, categorial roles, and hierarchies—does more than simply explain the conditions of possibility of a shared sociomoral consensus around the forest's governance. It provides insights into the contours of the 'intimate' in 'intimate antagonisms.'" The basis of tolerance are these very "contours of the intimate."

Another basis of this social contract, somewhat antithetical to the first, is to see tolerance as the basis of survival and mutual extraction. The rangers appropriate as much as they can from the fishers, and the fishers appropriate as much as they can from the rangers. Tolerance allows for appropriation and extraction. The rangers get the foods they are craving and social company in their lonely patrols, including taking help from the fishers to arrange for the gratification of their sexual desires. The fishers get to fish and collect crabs for a few hours without harassment. Each group is taking advantage of the other. Tolerance then, in this second explanation, does not emerge from any normative space but is in fact a guise for what is indeed the only form of survival for both groups in a hostile, almost carceral, forest, with both parties being obliged to tolerate the other because it becomes the basis of appropriation. As Genese Sodikoff points out in the context of her field site in Madagascar, very strict law enforcement had the potential to jeopardize the safety of the rangers themselves. This was certainly the case in the Sundarbans too, especially historically, where the hostility and rigidity between the two groups were so extreme that rangers often feared stepping foot into inhabited villages because they could be violently attacked by villagers. Toleration, leniency, and supplication in this case become part of strategies of self-preservation.

This brings me to a related question posed by Das and Mahmood as well as Naveeda Khan, which is with regard to the unpredictability of these social relations and the possibilities of rupture. If tolerance is indeed a survival strategy, a means to get by for both groups, then it is inevitably a fragile tolerance. It is unstable, full of fears, suspicions, and doubts and can be easily broken and ruptured. It is along these lines of rupture that Naveeda Khan asks, "What may be the possible darker undertones of the associational behaviors . . . ? How may they be directed at assuaging state power that may rear up at any time through these rangers? And how do we know in advance who or what moves the rangers?" In responding to this question, I return once again to the photograph that I began with, of the army soldiers shaking hands with the civilian protestor. This photograph is interesting because it is counterintuitive to what we usually see as the terms of engagement between the army and civilians, between forest rangers and fishers, between the state and society. We are much more used to violence and the image of violence perpetrated by the army, police, and Forest Department from tear gas to *lathi-charge* (the use of long sticks or batons by the police or the military to disperse large crowds) because the identity of the state is most often understood as a primarily punitive force in South Asia,

unexceptional in its violence, extractive in its everyday interactions. Most news media, inasmuch as they are still free, are replete with one or the other such images, violent or extractive. The "darker" undertones are the obvious ones. What we do not see images of as often is how everyday alliances emerge, through smiles, a handshake, or a meal shared, a different form of interpellation, in an Althusserian sense, not of fear but of intimacy, as solidarity or as mutual benefit in the two senses of intimacy described above.

Nevertheless, as many of the commentators emphasize, these resource-scarce environments create the conditions for an intimacy that is inherently unstable. Within this broader instability, daily interactions over long periods of time implied that one could indeed predict moments of heightened anxiety. Fishers were well aware of the rangers' individual personalities, their reputations, patterns of behaviors, and the times when rangers were under pressure from the sahibs above. Even within these, at times, helpful "negative" predictabilities, there is no denying that intimacies could rupture, were fraught and competitive, and could also culminate in violence perpetrated by either of the two groups. Ultimately, both groups are leading lives of acute vulnerability in a broader political economy of scarcity. Affects often oscillated from tolerance and sympathy to the desire to appropriate and compete as much as one could.

Das and Mahmood also ask how rangers and fishers end up inhabiting a collective "we" vis-à-vis Bonbibi, the forest deity, and Dakkhin Rai, the tiger demon. In a caste-ridden society, how might differences and forms of othering disappear—such that upper-caste rangers too express their faith and daily devotion to folk and subaltern deities such as Bonbibi? The answer to this question, I would like to suggest, lies in the force of the landscape itself. This collective "we" emerges as a result of inhabiting and working within the landscape with its singular forces of fear and wonder. Elsewhere in my writing (see Mehtta 2022), I emphasize the singularity of the Sundarbans forest: a forest with tigers, crocodiles, and sharks and a forest that despite all attempts to map, know, and understand, remains largely illegible, unpredictable, and mysterious. Wonder and awe often cut across class and caste with the biggest source of this "enchantment" being that tigers and other death-dealing potentialities do not differentiate between upper and lower castes. While rifles act as a source of protection for the ranger, such weapons often allow them to perform power rather than wield it, for instance, vis-à-vis tigers. This fear of the tiger, tiger demon, and a water-borne, cyclone-prone forest act as important equalizers, creating a collective "we" in ways that other landscapes might not engender. Even the upper-caste rangers have little escape from certain kinds of risks, and in such a context, even a subaltern deity is revered for potencies for protection. Relatedly, I appreciate Magnus Fiskesjö wanting to know more about the relations of Sundarbans fishers with the nonhuman forces of the forest, the demons and deities, and fishers' ethical comportments as a result of these forces. On this theme I build on Annu Jalais's (2010) extraordinary book *The Forest of Tigers* in an article titled "Nonhuman Governance: Care and Violence in South Asian Animism," in which I expand on the "rules of the jungle" (*jongoler niyam*). This was a topic that was beyond the purview of this article, but it remains an enduring aspect of the imprint that this landscape has left on my psyche and ought to leave on a global imaginary of how one might govern a forest commons.

Sahana Ghosh's exciting comments take this article in new directions while also providing more in-depth analysis to the ethnographic material presented. As she rightly suggests, the binaries of who is being policed and who is doing the policing are blurred. Despite the Sundarbans being one of the world's largest contiguous mangrove forests, instead of thinking of it as an expansive jungle, as a result of several constraints not least tigers on the land and crocodiles and sharks in the water, the jungle feels akin to a carceral space. Rangers are not the only ones doing the work of surveilling but are also the ones being surveilled. It is precisely the rangers' own awareness of being watched by their own bosses, by other rangers, as well as by the fishers that at times shifts the relationship of camaraderie between rangers and fishers and creates new layers of suspicion. As Ghosh puts it, "Information and complaints circulate as gifts too," and they are very much a part of these ambivalent and uncertain relationalities. I agree with Ghosh on the potential to expand on the securitized and carceral nature of the region. In fact, as an anthropologist within this highly securitized geography, I too felt that I was under constant surveillance. I was observing but was also constantly being observed. I was acutely aware of being watched not just by the rangers but also by senior bureaucrats who had been apprehensive of my intentions of wanting to visit the range offices and to go on patrols with rangers. Any missteps could very easily mean my access being rescinded.

This constant surveillance, in part, allows me to respond to Naveeda Khan's question of why I, as an ethnographer, needed to maintain "polite" boundaries with the rangers. She correctly perceives my own *bhalo bhyabohar* (good relations) and *khatirdaari* (interested hospitality) vis-à-vis the rangers. Researching rangers was a subset of a much longer arc of fieldwork. For most of my fieldwork, I lived in a densely populated village on an inhabited island, in a neighborhood of fishers, farmers, daily wage laborers, shopkeepers, and so on, with easy access to the market and surrounded by festivals, marriages, deaths, schools, and the ordinary and extraordinary events of everyday life. Fieldwork with the rangers in the Sundarbans forests was an exception precisely because it requires disembedding oneself from the village into the depths of the forest. At times, I was the only woman for several hundred kilometers. We were in range offices and floating camps, outposts in the interiors of mangrove forests, and it would take from seven to eight hours to a full day's journey on a boat to get back to the inhabited islands and villages. Access to these range offices was hard to obtain and rarely given to outsiders. After a visit to one range office, I was always nervous that a particular ranger might complain about my line of questioning and that my access to visit the other camps and to continue my patrols in the core and sanctuary area of the forest would be suddenly withdrawn. As

such, my bhalo bhyabohar, or good behavior, was a form of my own interested hospitality. I behaved politely, in fact much more so than politely but as a good, moral, veering on shy South Asian woman for my own self-interest—which was to gain access to these otherwise heavily restricted worlds. Furthermore, as a single woman, unaccompanied by a man, even in the form of a friendly local research assistant—I was, as perhaps every South Asian woman in a similar position has been or will be—a preoccupation for the patriarchal male imagination. Why was I not married, when would I get married, and when would I have children were constant questions directed at me. Just in the ways that perhaps the rangers were performing for me, I too was certainly performing throughout my days and evenings with them. There was a conscious effort not to enter into the "rough and tumble" of their sexual exploits. Far away from the villages in remote carceral camps in the jungle, surrounded only by men, talking about their sex life was one among other restrictions. I was purposefully keen to stick to the polite registers and avoid what I knew all too well existed just under the surface. Even as I was constantly uncomfortable sharing proximate space with the rangers, I politely pretended I was comfortable. I would have liked very much to smoke *beedis* with them and share their small portions of whiskey (that they did indeed offer me) but did not do so. I insisted that I did not smoke or drink. To admit to partaking in those habits or to speak of sex would immediately slot me, in their minds and imaginations, as a particular type of woman. The politeness and good behavior were conscious and crucial for maintaining both my own propriety (very much in line with their imagination of what "proper" meant) and my own safety. I was careful not to pry too much into their paperwork and registers enumerating fines and fine amounts too. In the way that rangers feared that I might send a bad report to their bosses, I was also nervous that someone might complain about me to the senior officials in the bureaucracy, which would lead to my access being immediately terminated. In contrast, in the villages on the inhabited islands, as opposed to the range offices, my behavior was not performed (or at least, to this extent). In fact, the divergence of this aspect of the intimate was so palpable and structurally significant that it opened up different registers of experience depending on the milieu, such that an entire chapter of my book manuscript, set in inhabited villages, is indeed devoted to love, marriage, elopement, and romance.

There is, however, another, much more interesting gendered aspect of this article that is not my relation vis-à-vis the rangers but the rangers' own internal monologues and pressures of being good householders vis-à-vis their wives. This is an aspect that Sahana Ghosh invites me to further analyze, which is the interaction of the productive and reproductive concerns of the heteronormative household. In line with Ghosh's comments, the rangers are indeed motivated by very similar life projects and aspirations, namely, to provide for their families and to earn a living to take care of one's wife, children, and parents as their fisher counterparts. The inner monologues of these men were indeed often in relation to their households, and this holds true for the rangers and the fishers in their respective occupations. Both of these groups are concerned ultimately to earn a living to provide for the household and family (*shonghshar*). Working in forest camps and patrol boats, despite being hard and in a hostile landscape, is done as a means to act as a responsible householder. The inner monologues of these men were longings of domesticity, of home and the village. This is yet another commonality between these two antagonistic groups. Fishers who are also often migrant laborers in more distant parts of India for several months of the year easily relate to the rangers' longings for home.

To end, I really appreciate Genese Sodikoff's contextualization of the article within the wider hypocrisy of conservation, one that I have written about elsewhere (see Mehtta 2021*b*), where those that are most responsible for degradation are far away, unimpeachable, and on a moral high ground, while communities living alongside biodiverse areas are disenfranchised from their livelihoods by equally subaltern functionaries tasked to do the work of surveilling their own brothers, sisters, and neighbors, in what is ultimately a small snapshot into the dynamics of the violence of how our forests are governed.

That said, however temporary and fragile these everyday alliances might be, as the opening image of a country's regime change reminds us, depending on the day or the occasion, a smile, a handshake, and a form of intimacy between antagonists can be as politically potent and historically significant as a strike, a protest, or the breaking of a wall.

—Megnaa Mehtta

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