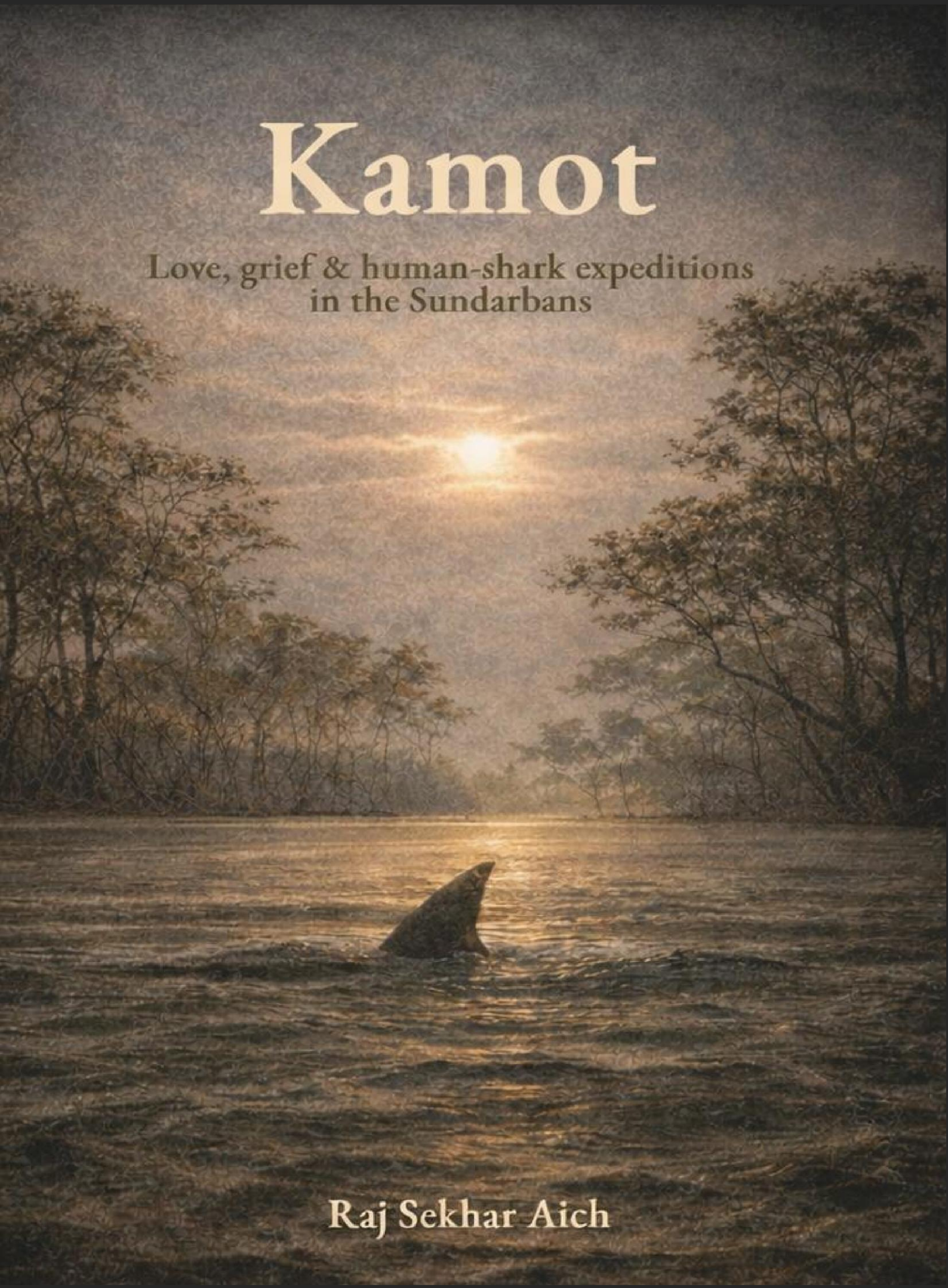

Kamot
Love, grief & human-shark expeditions
in the Sundarbans
Raj Sekhar Aich

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By *Raj Sekhar Aich*

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Dedicated

To my beautiful Soosan who with her words and actions have always taught me about .....hope.

Rock star, 2025

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Prof. Raj Sekhar Aich
31.12.25

Book Summary

Set against the haunting beauty of the Sundarbans, this book journeys into a world where myth, memory, science, and human vulnerability flow together like the waters of the delta itself. Raj Sekhar Aich brings readers into intimate proximity with the enigmatic Kamot— sharks of the Sundarbans whose presence is rarely seen yet deeply felt in scars, stories, and silence. Through encounters with women whose lives have been irrevocably shaped by shark bites, and communities living on the precarious threshold between land, forest, and river, Aich explores a powerful and rarely told narrative of human– animal entanglement. Blending anthropology, ecology, emotion, and lived experience, he shifts between analytical inquiry and lyrical introspection, revealing the complex realities of coexistence: fear and reverence, grief and endurance, destruction and hope. This is not merely a study of conflict but an exploration of love—for people, for animals, for fragile ecosystems, and for the possibilities of healing. It is also a deeply personal journey, tracing the author's own struggles, questions, and transformations as he searches for meaning alongside those who must live with danger as a daily companion. Provocative, compassionate, and profoundly human, this book challenges how we see nature, "conflict," and ourselves. It asks what it truly means to live among predators, to carry wounds both visible and invisible, and to imagine futures where care, knowledge, and dignity might coexist with the wild forces that shape our lives. For additional information and images visit www.rajsekharaich.com

A word from the editor

This book is a heart song— a melody of love, loss, and grief woven together by Raj and the deep connections he shares with us. It binds us to one another, to animals, to marine life, and to the Earth itself, all set against the Sundarbans. Working alongside Raj, whose words give soul to these pages and to the story he tells, has been an honour. H is love for the mythical *Kamot*— a creature of mystery, wisdom, and unseen beauty—reflects the spirit and true beauty of this book. Through his own love and grief, Raj teaches us that love transcends time, space, and even the boundaries of worlds unknown. To those who have known the depths of love, and the ache of its absence—to the humans who carry memories like sacred relics, the animals who leave their marks on our souls, and the Earth that grieves in silence yet continues to give—this beautiful work offers so much. Raj has brought this to you. May his words bring comfort, remembrance, and the certainty that though loss may take, love always remains.
Thank you, Raj.

Soosan Lucas
Christchurch, New Zealand
31.12.2025

Foreword

The book you are holding in your hands (physically or digitally) is quite unlike anything you have read before. I say this for at least four major reasons.

First, Raj Aich is quite unlike any human I have encountered in my six decades on this Earth. I first met him in September 2015 on Rakuira (Stewart Island), at the south end of TeWaipounamu (South Island) in New Zealand. I was conducting research interviews to document Māori and local ecological knowledge regarding the population of great white sharks in the area. Raj was just embarking on a second PhD, this one investigating firsthand the personal and cultural relationships between sharks and humans, and ex pending ' bucket list' resources to participate in cage-diving ecotourism experience. My first impression of young Dr. Aich was that he represented an extraordinary combination of passionate personal interest in sharks and radical scholarly cross-disciplinarity, combining art, culture and his then-new connections with the hypotheses of natural science. Raj was fascinated with everything, everywhere, all at once. Based on his writing in *Kamot*, it's clear that the reader will come to know the same unique and extraordinary fellow I met a decade ago at the bottom of the world.

Second, Raj shares his extraordinary experiences with the Sundarbans ecosystem, its sharks and associated human cultures in a narrative style that shifts (sometimes shockingly) between intensely subjective and objective perspectives. Many of my science colleagues will be jarred by his weaving of natural history with introspective auto-ethnographic narrative. Conversely, cultural and artistic scholars will likely struggle with the importance of scientific hypotheses, uncertainty, taxonomy, distribution, and abundance that Raj brings into consideration when trying to understand the profoundly personal and devastatingly tragic relationship between sharks and the humans that live with them. "Such were the stories of the spirits in the Sundarbans, as said an old fisher." I see this jarring cross-cultural clash of worldviews as an essential step out of

our comfort zones, and toward a pursuit of genuinely new perspectives and insights about our place in the world. Buckle up, because no matter your background, I suspect this rollercoaster will take you far outside your own cultural comfort z one.

Third, Raj explores a very deep cultural analogy that has existed since time immemorial: the human relationship with a pair of sympatric, endangered, and iconic predators in the Sundarban ecosystem— the Royal Bengal Tiger on land, and the *Kamot* in the murky delta waters. The extraordinary local people who Raj meets in this odyssey provide unique insights on what it means to live and die in ways that are virtually unchanged over millennia. This work thus uncovers insights into nonhuman-human relationships that many readers from elsewhere in the ' developed' world may struggle to understand.

Finally, on repeated occasions throughout this narrative, Raj is confronted with a fundamental question about the cultural relationship between Kamot and the associated humans of the Sundarbans: “I still had not figured out why there was no artistic representation of sharks in the region. Dr. Mondal just said, “ O ut of sight, out of mind. What we don’t see in our eyes, does not affect our imagination.” I knew then, I had to go back to the Sundarbans.”

If you choose to accompany Raj on this extraordinary journey, it will surely take you out of your comfort z one, while conjuring valuable experiences and insights found nowhere else. I hope you enjoy this challenging experience as moving and illuminating as I did.

Stephen Craw ford
Department of Integrative Biology
University of Guelph, Ontario Canada

31.12. 2025

Introduction

"For most of history, man has had to fight nature to survive; in this century he is beginning to realize that, to survive, he must protect it"– Jacques Cousteau.

The murky waters of Ma Ganga glisten as they wind through the Sundarbans delta, carrying with them ash, flowers, food – and shit. Straw skeleton of a deity floats half-submerged on her breast, forming momentary islands for crows to perch, and small fish nibble at the remnants of sweets that clung to the idol. Suddenly, the fish vanish. A triangular grey fin slices through the sweet, pungent waters. It belongs to *Kamot*, the shark of Sundarbans –
an ancient predator that hunts fish and crustaceans in the mucky depths, guided by their fine-tuned senses. But sometimes, the sharks find something else: the supple foot of a mammal wading in their waters. As they bite – hard and deep – the mammal splashes and screams, and the water turns vibrant crimson. The brute force of these predators tear through pretty pink sarees and human flesh into shreds, as the muddy banks of the Sundarbans look on.

The Sundarbans form part of the largest delta on planet Earth. It is a densely forested mangrove area famous for its Royal Bengal tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*), situated only 70 kilometres from the hustle of the metropolitan city of Kolkata on the eastern side of India. To earn a living, the region's men and women venture into the forest to harvest honey and wood – tasks that ex pose them to danger and 'accidents' (the colloquial term for tiger attacks and predation on humans) . Their stories have long echoed through folklore, public discourse, contemporary literature, and academic research. Hence, concerns for both tigers and humans, entangled in a complex human-animal conflict, have been acknowledged and discussed across the globe for decades.

However, there is another story that remains largely unexplored – the story of *Kamot* and humans. The bite of a Kamot is said to be so sharp that victims do not often realize that they have lost a limb

until they re-emerge from the murky waters of the Ganga. This is my expedition into this century-old encounter between humans and Kamots, the mythical aquatic animals of the Sundarbans. This is also a story of love and grief of the people, the environment, the non-human animals (hereafter animals) , and this lost researcher. In the end, we may find more than just a monster; we may discover a deeply enmeshed existence of humans and an animal that has been an important part of the ecosystem for thousands if not millions, of years.

At this juncture, I must clarify a critical linguistic choice. Throughout the text, I have used the terms *'shark attack'* and *'shark bite'* interchangeably to describe incidents in which humans were bitten by sharks. This decision is based on the subjective perception of these terms within specific contexts. The term *'attack'* often conveys the idea that humans are deliberately targeted with malevolent intent, thereby implying an unprovoked act. In contrast, the phrase *'shark bite'* lacks this emotionally charged connotation and is more neutral in tone. Ideally, the term *'shark attack'* would disappear from common usage, as it misrepresents the complexity of these interactions. However, it remains the more widely recognize ed term in public discourse. For this reason, I alternate between the two terms, depending on the appropriateness to the emotional and contextual nuances of each situation. To clarify, both terms ultimately refer to the same phenomenon: a bite inflicted by a shark. Shark bites can occur for a variety of behavioural reasons, including curiosity toward an unfamiliar object (which may sometimes happen to be a human), territorial defence, aggression during mating, or intentional predatory behaviour. Despite these varied motivations, I use the terms interchangeably based on how such incidents resonate with public perception and emotion in each context.

Secondly, although globally now the term fisher-people is used, in this particular case, I am using the term fishermen, as almost all the people who fish that I interviewed were men, and it is a more recognized term in the region.

All the images are taken by me (Raj Sekhar Aich) or been donated for the book by friends. Any image shared by other professionals are credited.

The book does not follow a conventional chapter structure. Instead, it is dissected into four acts and is an experience in diametric realms of living. I invite you to journey with me through stories and lessons drawn from my sub-Antarctic expedition on one hand, and from the warm soft waters of the Sundarbans on the other. One moment, we will travel through the chaos of cars, glass buildings, and the polluted crowd of metropolitan Kolkata, and the next, we will enter the lush jungles, cool waters, and beautiful hospitality of the Sundarbans. One side exhibits intellectual enquiry, and the other side beholds a quiet contemplation of what remains unseen but can only be felt. This book situates you first in discovering human-animal interactions, and indeed, conflict. It then moves toward imagining and co-creating real-life solutions.

This expedition came at a pivotal moment in my life, when the journey itself became necessary for my survival through the turbulence around and within myself. I do not claim to be an expert on in all things Sundarbans, nor do I pretend to speak with authority on all the complex issues facing the region's animals as well as people. Many others, far more qualified experts, have addressed these matters. This is my personal story, unfolding between 2019 and 2023. By now, I have lost count of how many field-visits I have made or the number of people I have met. Nothing in these stories is a figment of my imagination, although I have taken the liberty of the perceived circularity of time.

As I ventured deeper into my scholastic written ex pressions through the years, I struggled with a sense of dissociation and a perceived lack of identity— Was I a scientist or an artist? Who was I writing for— the general population or the *experts*? I suppose that in the last five years, I have come to terms with the fact that I am all of these at once: an artist, a scientist, and a curious common man. Rather than seeing this as an identity crisis, I have embraced the

frequent and malleable travels between the arts and the sciences in this book, and that itself is its identity.

From the scientific perspective, this book creates a platform for understanding the nature of these attacks in the Sundarbans, and the socioeconomic and ecological effects of those attacks on the local women. It also raises fundamental questions about the other species involved: Who are these animals? What is the condition of their contemporary life and waterscapes? Most importantly, what can be done to support both the women and the animals entangled in this conflict. Furthermore, I take the premise of this research and argue for a transdisciplinary methodology of human-marine animal research.

From an artistic perspective, this story is told as an introspective auto-ethnographic narrative which unapologetically contemplates the destruction around me, through the lens of my thought and modalities of perceiving and feeling. This form of multimodality is important because otherwise, much is lost in translation when trying to communicate something verbally that was never experienced in verbal terms, or vice versa. This dichotomy of existence has always been a part of my life, ever negotiating between the analytic and artistic sides. However, it is also true that this conundrum shaped the lucidity of my writing and influenced the exploration and expression of various sensations through paintings and other art forms. Herein lies the essence of my being, beliefs, and life's work, broken down and rebuilt, again and again. The vigour of my mental, emotional, intellectual, and sexual energy— converges here. However, perhaps unconsciously, something else got entangled in it— my depression, scattered among the pages of the book as sensitive connecting tendons. The dynamic interplay of ideas, realizations, sensations, and theoretical and ethical considerations has now shaped the book into a sensitive narrative. It is about the people involved, the sensory experiences of being in the environment and co-existing with these animals, and my own story as both scientist and an artist. But it is also very much about the deep ecological and anthropological investigation.

I welcome you, the reader, to this fascinating journey, among humans— and *Kamot*. Be part of this path-breaking research, witness stories of creating a unique Ganga puja to bring attention to these aquatic animals and women entwined with them, spend nights in the forest, imagine a sustainable solution, engage with significant ecological discourse through native and expert knowledge, and dive into the water to stand beside an animal that may have swum these murky waters since time immemorial.

Prof. Raj Sekhar Aich

Publisher Note

On one level, this is a book about the 'Kamot', the shark that swims in the murky waters of the tidal rivers in badabon, the forested lands of the Sundarbans. Virtually invisible, the presence of this creature is marked only through the scars left behind on human bodies, by never to be erased memories of trauma and pain, and through stories of encounters ex changed by those viscerally affected. Nevertheless, this is not simply a book on or about close human-animal encounters.

It is rather an often-lyrical reflection on how the lives of living beings, both human and non-human, can cross paths and alter each other individually equally as in terms of family and community. The author's concerns in this book span environmentalism, biodiversity, human values, marginality et al, all embedded within an overarching concern for a completely unique but fast disintegrating ecosystem.

This volume is being published at a time when higher education in India is actively encouraging the looking at of interfaces between social responsibility, ecological awareness and academic knowledge formation. Aligned with the declared objectives of NEP (National Education Policy) 2020, the present work represents a study that is empirically rich, anthropologically oriented and environmentally sensitive. In publishing this volume, Sister Nivedita University is indicating its sense of responsibility towards the encouragement of original research-based information about our lesser-known ecosystems and the peripheral human communities that inhabit these spaces.

This book should contribute to knowledge at both national and international levels, and it is hoped that this volume will provide new information and encourage further scholarly investigation into our nation's coastal riparian realities.

SNU Press will always remain committed to supporting good and sound academic studies that will contribute to specialist knowledge and lead on to a general public awareness.

Sister Nivedita University Press

Act 1: The Longing

The rain is fading in the distance. A light, amber-grey hue pastels the wet sky far away. Draped across the branches of this great banyan tree, a long, white-and-red pleated saree drips soft, sweet water onto my soaked black t-shirt. Bloody, wet, shivering with fever, teary-eyed, and smeared with mud and grease, I pick up a
damp cigarette. After a few attempts, the lighter finally ignites, flaring timidly with joy. With a deep drag, I close my eyes, still trying to bring myself back to my senses.

Today my field work in the Sundarbans ended with a press conference alongside women who had suffered shark bites in Gosaba. Now, I sit beneath this ancient banyan tree, somewhere between Canning and Baruipur. Perhaps this rising sun can shelter me for a moment— long enough to contemplate my journey so far.

I closed my eyes for a minute, and I find myself transported back:

Journal Entry
Christchurch, New Zealand, Feb 2017
The River Tour, Bruce Springsteen

The clouds, the seductive smell of sweat, the dusty ground— and Soosan standing beside me. I stood still, discombobulated and silent on my feet, as thousands of glistening ecstatic bodies leapt around me with ex posed teeth, feet, and breasts pulsing in transcendental beats of belongingness and rhythm. After the last song was over, the band paused. He took out his acoustic guitar and sang 'Thunder Roads.' I felt like he was singing just to me and tears invariably started rolling down my eyes. By the end of the night, I was not sure what I had felt— if I was fulfilled, or if I had done what I came to do. But somewhere inside, I felt a loss in my soul. As Soosan and I drove back from Christchurch to Timaru— armed with some

free McDonald's (they somehow forgot to charge us in the drive-through) — I kept asking myself:
Where is the ecstasy I came here to find? More importantly, what is going to be my next work, my next adventure? I think that's when I came to terms with the fact that, as my lecturer Mike Grimshaw once told me, I am not a typical academic. "You are an intellectual, you grab life by the balls!"

I realized that I was not someone who would be happy without the limelight, and with simply conducting research and digesting knowledge in silence. I envisioned myself like a Cousteau or an Erwin— not that there is anything wrong with that. The only risk is this: there is a chance that such individuals might begin to crave the accolades more than the subject and process of the research itself. That's a danger I must always guard against.

Perhaps, all I ever truly wanted was a deep passion for something. At the heart of my heart, I often wondered if I would ever feel a passion like Bertrand Russell's three great passions at a subliminal level.

"These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a great ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair. I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy - ecstasy so great that I would often
have sacrificed all the rest of my life for a few hours of this joy… With equal passion, I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine... Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors… and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate this evil, but I cannot, and I
too suffer." (Russell, 2000).

Even though I never felt quite as impassioned by the three, I was certainly driven by two as I grew up. The first one was the love of art. Raised in the family of an artist, art was a way of life, and I knew that was going to be my profession anyway. Naturally, a major part of my life has been an exploration of visual arts, music, and acting. The second driving force was the perfection of physical strength and prowess. As a weak young man grappling with Dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADH D, I yearned to achieve a state of physical finesse. Bodybuilding has been a 24-year-old ritual; Hapkido, a 17-year-old commitment. It requires no extra equipment, no help from others, and no obligation to be in the best physical or mental state. I can still focus on it if I have a 4x 4 feet patch of ground— be it grass, dust or marble— and my breath. When I'm home, I often practice with my sword, which further reminds me of the significance of focus. One moment of lack of concentration and the results are self-evident. I must admit that this inherent strength has proved vital in my expeditions.

I knew I was not smart, but I was curious. Y ears ago, I expressed this to 'Krisna Kaku' (one of my gurus in Kolkata): "I feel like knowing more." To this, he replied: "You have a roof over your head, and food in your belly. Knowing is your duty. An unexamined life, in such a case, is not a human life at all." I think it was from then the urge started growing, bit by bit.

After I finished my bachelor's in psychology, I decided to pursue a master's degree in the subject, hoping I would finally learn something this time. Back then, I had no wish to pursue it as a career. Two years and a master's later, I heard myself saying: "I
did not learn anything this time… perhaps I should do a PhD, and maybe then I will finally gather some knowledge". And so, I began my journey of PhD in psychology, and once again, I had no intention to pursue it as a career. But I always had the wanderlust, and wanted to travel, and explore, and perhaps be

a global explorer. I started looking for ways I could do that. Even after completing my PhD, I felt that I had not got any knowledge during my PhD, so I needed to study more. Thanks to this hunger for knowledge, and freak strokes of luck, I was with the White
Sharks of New Zealand. For five years, the waves of the New Zealand wilderness became my playground as I dove into its deepest oceans, explored its coldest caves, and most importantly, lived in the Sub-Antarctic with the largest predatory sharks on the planet— the Great White Sharks. I had the opportunity to do the first-ever White Shark cage diving ethnography. My mental, emotional, scientific, artistic, spiritual, and sexual energy—all converged together. It was a fulfilment of everything I had ever done. In the process, I started building an identity as a human shark researcher. It became something that gave my soul meaning and my fingers intention… and my life a purpose. And just like that, I found the love of my life— this work, and my sharks.

Romantic love, on the other hand, was always elusive to me. As the world lit up with the touch of culture and art in my early childhood, I distinctly remember feeling that my mother was Gouri and my father was Shiv. My father was the dark creator and destroyer— strong, turbulent, the protector who looked over everyone. He was someone who could create something when there was nothing yet always held the potential to destroy in an instant the world that one had created minute by minute, over years and decades. My mother, on the other hand, was truly named Gouri. She was beauty incarnate. There was no living being she could not show kindness to, and no eye that did not want to look back at her. But life had other plans for them, and they drifted apart on separate journeys.

But I know the story of Shiva and Gouri goes beyond them. Their story began millennia ago with Sati. Sati was the divine embodiment of feminine energy, born in the human form as the daughter of Daksha Prajapati. From a young age, she was

deeply devoted to Lord Shiva, renouncing worldly comforts to pursue rigorous asceticism in the hope of winning his heart. Eventually, Shiva agreed to marry her against the objections of her father, moved by her devotion. Daksha, however, disapproved of Shiva' s unorthodox ways. Despite the wedding and initial celebrations, Daksha continued to harbour resentment towards Shiva. He held a grand yagna (ritual sacrifice) but intentionally excluded Sati and Shiva from the event. Hurt and angered by her father' s disrespect towards her husband, Sati attended the ceremony against Shiva' s advice. There, Daksha insulted Shiva publicly, causing Sati immense anguish. Overcome with despair and a sense of betrayal by her father, Sati immolated herself in a yogic fire. Upon learning of Sati' s death, Shiva was consumed by grief and rage. He created Virabhadra, a fierce warrior from his hair, who wreaked havoc at Daksha' s yagna, killing him and many others. The gods intervened, pleading with Shiva to restore order. Overcome with sorrow for Sati' s loss, Shiva revived Daksha with a goat' s head and forgave him, restoring peace but mourning deeply for Sati. Unable to let go of Sati, inconsolable Shiva roamed the earth carrying her lifeless body. The gods, unable to help, turned to Lord Vishnu. He dismembered Sati' s body with his Sudarshana Chakra, scattering her remains across the earth, creating sacred places known as Shakti Peethas. In deep meditation beside the Ganges, Shiva finally found peace and remembered his eternal bond with Sati. He resolved to wait for her return in another form, eventually reincarnated as Parvati, the daughter of the Himalayan King and Queen. Their divine love story continues through cycles of birth and rebirth, echoing through eternity.

My father has been my guru, and for a long time, I think I wanted to become him. But, as they say, be careful what you wish for. I was blessed to have some part of his work ethic and energy, but with that energy of creation, came that of destruction too. Thankfully, however, I had recognized this

about myself at an early age. I knew I never wanted to take anyone down with me in this cycle of destruction. So, even though it has been a privilege to be adored— and perhaps even loved— by a few beautiful women, I always chose to keep myself aloof and distant. This act of self-imposed isolation only deepened as I got older, and my identity grew clearer. Perhaps, on this path, the Parvati within my soul— shaped by the separation of my parents, and the touch and separation from all these beautiful souls— was shattered into a hundred pieces and scattered across the planet. And perhaps that is why, as if driven by a subconscious calling, I was compelled to roam around the planet, looking for her.

As my PhD in New Zealand was coming to an end and the final extension of my visa—and funds—was running out, I had to make the decision to complete my thesis from home. So, in March
2019, I came back to India. I expected to spend a few months awaiting results and planned to be on my way back by the end of the year. I was happy being back home after almost 3 years, surrounded by my loved ones and my mom's cooking. Everyone looked at me with admiration. I was the travelling rogue scholar, hyper-focused on my work. I was up by 5 AM every day, doing my reading and writing. I had lost a lot of weight after my last fieldwork among the Sub-Antarctic Great White Sharks and was planning to work out two times a day and get in the best shape I have ever been in my life. This was like a rest before going back to the larger world again. I had a real shot of making an impact on my discipline. Most importantly, I was getting ready to create the first-ever shark documentary series in India.

One night I was in Timaru, at Soosan's seaside apartment, and there was a large cruise liner that had grounded itself in the Timaru harbour. I was about to come back to India and was a bit scared about making my way back to my future and my purpose. I confessed to Soosan about my apprehension— that

once I go back to India, I may not have the will to come back. That I may end up taking a teaching job. That my adventure will be over. As the early morning was coming up over the Timaru dock, it occurred to me that I needed a deeper purpose before returning to India. What was it that my ego had always longed to envision? Being a globetrotting shark adventurer— part explorer, part scientist, part
storyteller. And at that very moment, I heard myself asking… Has there ever been a shark documentary in India?

For the next few days, I started looking into shark documentaries from my country. I realized that there was only one ever made 16 years ago in 2009. It is called 'The Shores of Silence' (Pandey,
2010) by the famous filmmaker, Mike Pandey. Not only did this bring in front of the world that Whale Sharks were indeed present on the Gujrat coast, but also that their numbers were decreasing, and they were regularly hunted. The deeper I went into my investigations I realized that the Indian Ocean is one of the most nutrient-rich waters in the world inhabited by sharks, and there used to be a lot of them. I aimed to find out a few major stories of human-shark interaction along the country's coast, which was harder than it sounds despite the large coastline we have. I soon came to the conclusion that the most prevalent stories in India were about Whale Sharks. So, one Tuesday morning I called up the head of the Wildlife Federation Whale Shark Project in Gujrat— Sajan John. Sajan was extremely kind and explained to me a lot about Indian shark research, and the challenges both the animals and the researchers face. Sajan got me in contact with a lot of shark scientists in the country. In about a week, I had gathered four such stories from across the country— from the Andamans, Karnataka, Mumbai, and Gujrat. My fascination with long-distance road trips on motorcycles had not gone yet. Naturally, I conceptualized my next step: touring the coast of India on

my motorcycle, gathering and telling stories about sharks, from the west to the east.

There are at least 41 major species of sharks present in the Indian Ocean as well as India's rivers. Interactions between the humans and the sharks inhabiting the Indian subcontinent since time immemorial have created a complicated relationship: these two apex predators survive, hunt, co-exist, and have occasional conflicts when they hunt each other. However, the world—and sadly, most Indians— do not recognize that we have sharks in our waters. Indeed, we don't recognize how deeply they are connected to our lives, our stories and myths, and most importantly, how in danger they are of losing their habitats due to current anthropogenic effects. In a first-of-its-kind series, this documentary will aim to bring forth the stories of human-shark conflict and cohabitation and attempt to forge a way forward in shark conservation efforts in India. Even though some scientists before me tried to create documentaries on the subject, none of the project panned out. However, I was sure that I could make it, given my experience in research and TV, and most importantly, emboldened by the fact that National Geographic India had already shown interest in it.

But the question was, where did the story end? The answer came to me the night before catching my flight back to Kolkata from Christchurch.

'The year was 1972. Young Samir took a trip to Canning. It was a beautiful morning. Around 5:30 AM, as the sun gently skimmed over the maroon waters of the Matla River (a tributary of the Ganga), the boys jumped in for a quick dip. All proficient swimmers, the boys laughed and splashed around, drifting farther and farther into the heart of the river. Suddenly, a boatman spotted them and began shouting, his voice urgent: "Get out of the water immediately!" Flummoxed, the boys began to swim toward the boat frantically. One by one, they

clambered aboard, unhurt. But the boatman was livid. “Don’t you know there are Kamots in this water?’

My eyes opened, sweat running through my chest among the chill goosebumps in the frigid New Zealand night. I walked to the terrace that looked out to the sea. Soosan and Minion were asleep on the couches, and Milly— the cat— was asleep on top of my suitcase, aware of my plan to leave. I didn’t have any evidence at that point, but my senses told me that Kamots were sharks— sharks of the Sundarbans. And I knew that it is where my story will have to end.

I was at the last phase of my PhD. I had joined the University of Canterbury, New Zealand in 2014, with an aim to build a new avenue of human-shark research. My supervisor, however, had other plans, and the last 3 years were full of endless struggle. I had no money, but I had the love of Soosan and the support
of my university friends—John and Darel. It got so bad that my university had to fire my supervisor in the end for the way he had treated me and three other students. Following this incident, my candidature was entrusted with Mike Grimshaw, who saved me and my journey. But by that time, the years of depression and struggle had started taking a toll on me. Later, Soosan told me how I used to walk around her house, wearing only a black robe and deeply immersed in my own thoughts, with a face full of beard and deep sunken, sleepless eyes. I used to mumble to myself about sharks, and visions of them haunted me every night. I was obsessed with them, and yet, constantly terrified. Even in swimming pools, I’d get startled, convinced a shark was coming for me. After my last fieldwork, I had lost 11 kgs and was down to my original weight. Even though I was afraid, that was the direction I knew my life had to go. The day Soosan and
John dropped me off at the airport, they felt they didn’t need to come inside. To them, I was coming back to my friends and my adventure in only six months. Now, as this book comes to

a close, it has been six years since I have been able to leave India or see my dear friend Soosan.

This series was conceptualized to be the first of its kind documentation of human and shark interaction in India, and it had aimed to do so by creating a holistic overview of this interaction through five stories. Travelling by motorcycle from the west coast of India down to the south and then to the east, I planned to trace a route from Gujrat along Highways 8, 17, and 47 (in the west), continuing on 45, 67, and 5, all the way to West Bengal. We would bring together a diverse group of experts—scientists, fishers, artists—individuals who engage with sharks regularly from a cultural and embodied dimension,
as well as those playing significant roles in shark conservation efforts. Each adventurous and intriguing episode would take the viewers deeper into the stories of various species of sharks found in different corners of the country, exploring their relationship with the local humans. The international nature conservation artist group Pangea Seed expressed strong interest in creating shark-based murals in selected locations across the country, aligning to the documentary's purpose. They would be joined on this journey by shark experts, mythology scholars, divers, and fishermen to investigate this millennia-old relationship.

Episode 1— titled 'The Return of the Beloved'— would have included the Whale Sharks of Gujrat as the focus. Gujrat Whale
Shark conservation effort is an amazing example for the rest of the world, where multiple scientific, fishing, cultural, industrial groups, and artistic collectives come together and create a sustained environment for the conservation of the lesser-known aquatic species. In the episode, we would have travelled deep into the ocean to spot the sharks, combined with a strong narrative highlighting how these groups work together to make this effort possible. We were to be joined by

the head of the Whale Shark Conservation Group Dr Sajan John, and sociologist Farukhkha Husenkha. We had planned to live with the scientist at the field office and meet with the local fishermen as well as the cultural and religious leaders of the region who help to bring about this change.

Episode 2— entitled 'Blood Runs Dry'— would have been based in Bombay, Maharashtra, investigating one of the largest
shark landing sites in Asia. We had planned to explore the effect of large-scale commercial fishing on the shark population on one hand and the diversity of the species caught on the other.
We were to investigate the Mumbai fish markets, identifying the various species of sharks, and interviewing the fishermen regarding how the sharks are caught and distributed nationally and internationally. We were to consult scientists as well, initiating a discussion on the serious ecological concerns that large-scale fishing and shark conservation. Dr Dipani Sutoria and another scientist from Mumbai were to join our team to explore the devastating effects of these landings on the shark population, and other related concerns.

Episode 3 was to be called 'Eating the King.' In this episode, I planned a ride down to Tamil Nadu, the southernmost state of the country, and explore the story about humans consuming sharks, the cultural undercurrents to this exotic cuisine, the financial transactions, and the ecological effects on the sharks. The episode would also witness a dive into the sea with the 'Deep Sea Fishers' and encounter one of the last surviving traditional
shark fishing communities in the country. Dr Divya Kannad, an eminent shark researcher who focuses on sustainable fishing, was to be an integral part of building the narrative about the cultural significance of shark consumption in the region.

Episode 4 was to be set in the Andamans. H ere, I was planning to explore the plights of deep-sea sharks, locally called the Oil
Sharks. These sharks are a targeted species, hunted by fishermen who go out into the deep sea in the middle of the night to capture and harvest them for their valuable liver oil. There are handful operations of such shark hunting around the country, one of them being the operations based off the coast of the Andamans. We had planned to talk to the scientists and accompany the oil shark
fishermen to their hunting trips in an attempt to observe their fishing practices. The episode also intended to investigate the effects of shark fishing on the ecology of the coral reefs, and potential shark finning in the region. Dr Bineesh KK from ZSI was to accompany us on this very interesting fishing expedition and elaborate its effect on the ecology of the region. Zoya Tyabji, whose work focuses on sharks in the Andamans was eager to support this project as well.

The final episode would have been set in the Sundarbans, where we would go in search of the Kamot— the mythical sharks of the Sundarbans. We had planned to take a launch from Kolkata, sailing down to the Sundarbans and hopefully discovering fascinating stories of human-shark interactions. The episode was supposed to end with a celebration of conservation initiatives across the country. It would have served as the perfect opportunity to bring all the major actors together, including scientists, fishermen, and artists. The plan was to sit together, break bread, and chat with school students, ruminating on our next steps. In the backdrop, we had planned to incorporate a mural about ocean and its animals made by Pangea Seed, the internationally acclaimed conservation group. This would have served a specific vision, of course: The lights would dim, and we would sit surrounding a campfire, discussing our concerns, hopes, and plans to

conserve not only the grand and delicate sharks but also the millennial-old human-shark cohabitation.

So, after returning to India in mid-2019, I took the opportunity to meet Sajan John, the whale shark expert while visiting my brother in Delhi (for my nephew Haloom's six - month birthday). This presented me with the ideal time to get in touch with the National Geographics editors in India at Noida. I did a presentation pitching the project. Unfortunately, National Geographics informed me that they could offer only about 10% of the budget required for the documentary, even though they had found it interesting. In fact, they proudly stated that their most popular show— a cooking show— cost only half of that. In the end, however, one of the major reasons that Nat Geo, and later even Discovery channel (and other broadcasting networks), did not want to invest in an Indian shark documentary because capturing live underwater shots of the sharks was nex t to impossible. Each one of them
asked me the same question: "Will we be able to capture live shots of the sharks underwater"? And every time, my answer: "No, especially in the river Ganga!" The lack of awareness of sharks because of the scarcity of their visibility for television programming was causing further lack of their awareness! No one wanted to pay all that money, especially if you could not show ex citing shark action in a shark documentary. And thus, the plan had come to an end.

'The orange glow of the sun ignites the purple murky waters of the river. There is no one around me, but in the distance, ambers of people making tea in the tea stalls can be seen. Leaving the safety of the cold concrete, I enter the warm water. I take a dip wetting my face and body, and then slowly, start going deeper.
Now that I am away from the ghat, I can finally see life waking up. I look up into the sky and relax my body back into the
water…and suddenly something sharp bumps my legs. I don't know what it is, but I know I must get back to land now… I

start swimming faster. As I near the ghat, I look back and see a big fin slicing the water and racing toward me.'

Flustered, I wake up again from the same nightmare, sweating and shaking. The ceiling fan slowly fans the ambers of the mosquito incense at the end of the darkened room. Now, lying awake in my mom's apartment (where I was crashing because my house had been demolished), I recalled that the year was coming to an end, and I was still here.

Journal entry
Kolkata, October 26, 2019, 1.30 AM

"It seems no matter what I do, I am fumbling around. I'm getting fat, almost back to the weight before my last fieldwork. I don't feel like working out, and the excuse I give myself is that I am trying to concentrate on my work. But at the end of the day, it is just an excuse. I am 36, down with my last adventure. I have $ 11 in my account, but I can't bring myself to accept that I need to have one more adventure before I disappear into mediocrity".

I think in the last few years, I have recognized that there is a state of everyday meditation that I am always looking for. It is a bit unlike the state of 'Flow' that scientists relate to the process of extreme creative endeavour. In essence, it does not take me out of everyday life, and neither does it come in short bursts. Rather, it comes when I have found a state of being. Sometimes, it is surprisingly longer, lasting for months. In this state, I am able to do all the daily activities of my life, but I remain in a state of bliss, engrossed in the work. I may be on my motorcycle, or teaching, or simply eating and watching cartoons... maybe making love— I am constantly engrossed in the point of creation. When I was younger, I thought that I had to wait for grand 'happenings' to occur to be inspired: sunset, sunrise, mountains, heartbreak, perhaps the death of a loved one. I looked for inspiration in the clarity these 'happenings' brought and all that in between. As I got older, it became

evident that the search for inspiration was a state of being. One was always looking for it, whether it be the mundane. This state could have been triggered by sudden incidents or happy accidents of inspiration— my health scare, a new piece of poetry I stumbled upon in my head, or even a good sip of orange soda. I was like a fisherman in front of a pond, sitting with his hook all through the day, and sometimes even the night. In the search for inspiration, I always carried a diary and pen with me, even by my pillow. Many a night I even slept with music on my speakers. As I slept, these music and songs malleably enmeshed with my conscious and subconscious states and took me on wayward journeys. When I woke up, I tried to document them the best I could.

Whatever it might be, it gave me a purpose. And when I am out of it, life turns into a misery. I suppose, at the heart of my heart, I wanted to make sure that I would be able to create such a state and the raw potential that accompanied it when I did go back to India. Even now, in search of my ecstasy of purpose, I roam around in my mind and the path of life. Money never motivated me, and I never even learnt how to save it. Romantic relationships never motivated me either, and hence I never got around to having an "official" relationship till now. And even though the art and meditation of physical pleasure had never eluded me since early adulthood, I had always chosen to be on my own. Always aversive that 'being' with someone, and the responsibility associated with it would take me out of my journey. However, I would be naive if I didn't have the wise words of Springsteen still echoing deep somewhere in the recess of my soul: "Every fool has a reason to feel sorry for himself and turn his heart into a stone." Maybe, I felt that my heart had turned into stone, and nothing moved me to tears. But always the longing to be with my sadhana haunted me and guided my actions.

5:40 AM

“I am another year older, another day, and still not sure what I’m supposed to write. The biggest problem is that I don’t have a penny in my pocket. I still must depend on others to survive at this age. I should be able to take care of my mother, whereas she’s taking care of me even now. I have no justification for my actions, the only one being that I am selfish. Anyone else in my position would go out and get a job and be done with it. But I avoided getting a job all this while, and now this has turned into a phobia. Seems my entire life is predicated by phobias— sometimes it is of sharks, sometimes of jobs, my health, food addiction, and perhaps more than anything else, of being untrue to the image I have always aspired to be. And that is eating me away every day, every moment. My shoulders have stooped, and my chest doesn’t have the vascular pump it generally does, as if I had lost even before it all started. Maybe I should just give up.

When I sit to write, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be writing. But once again, I think it is about the image of myself that I so desperately cling to—one that of being a prolific writer. Most days what ends up happening is I spend most of my time figuring out what is the point of writing. What am I adding to the world? But I keep on writing…even if it is mostly gibberish much like this. And yet. these nightmares never seemed to stop, even when I tried reducing my sleep.

“I must do something… anything! Maybe I should go climb Mount Everest”.

“Why? What is the purpose? A million people do, what would you add to it, besides a feather on your ego?”

“I have heard there is an Arctic base, where people are allowed to live without a visa, maybe I should go live there”.

“And do what? Like people of the Philippines- be house attendants? That does not open doors for you to the rest of the world, that is like moving from one prison to another”.

“Maybe I should get a motorcycle and go visit the places where I was planning the documentary”.

"And who will give you the money, or the motorcycle? You tried Triumph motorcycles and even TVS, but no one was interested".

"What do I have in my control? What can I do? Can I go to the Sundarbans?"

"Well, it can't be too far, how expensive will it be? How long will it take you to go there? How will you know anything there?" The Sundarbans is infamous for the human-tiger conflict and regular tiger attacks. There are also incidents of crocodile attacks.

But Kamot is something entirely different: it is a mythical beast that hunts humans and other animals in the deep waters, and about which the general population of Kolkata, let alone the rest of the world, does not know about. As I was growing up, I had always heard stories about Kamot. It is said that their bite is so sharp that most do not even feel it when it happens. This knowledge alone had always made me fearful that there must be 'something' in our waters. However, based on the limited evidence I had, it did seem that Kamots could be sharks. I asked myself: I f I don' t investigate it… who will?

So, I went to my father and asked him about the story again. Upon making sure I remembered the story correctly, he advised me to go meet Khitish, one of his friends from college who lived in Sundarban. My father said that he might know about the Kamots. In the meanwhile, Sajan introduced me to Priankar, a young conservation scientist, who had been working with highly endangered sawfish in the Sundarbans. We were supposed to meet one fine November morning in Kolkata, back in 2019. When I enquired how I would spot him, Priankar had said, "I will be the guy with the largest mullet you have seen in a while." To this, I said, "I will be the guy with the largest shoulders you have seen in a while (albeit on a fat guy)." And so, we met one fine winter morning in Kolkata in November 2019. Needlessly to say, we immediately connected. Both passionate marine conservationists, it was

quite evident from our discussion that we agreed about wildlife conservation being problematic when it eliminates the human aspect of the environment. We were concerned about the lack of knowledge about the sharks of the Sundarbans, and of course, whether Kamots were indeed sharks. We were unconvinced by the anecdotal stories of people not feeling the bites when it happened. We decided to visit Sundarban for a recce expedition. I must confess here that I did not want anything to do with India to be my life's work. That is not because I don't care about India, but because working on anything related to this country meant that I was stuck here for now. Nevertheless, I suppose even if one does not have direction, it is still worth walking. If there is no flow of blood, gangrene sets in; so, the least I could do was to keep walking. Perhaps this was a way of getting back to my love, my sharks, my water, and my soil... and their malleable love child— the mud.

I was working on my second PhD document and my book (based on the PhD expedition) Iridescent Skin: A Multispecies Journey of White Sharks & Caged Humans, and my time was limited. But I did not want to wait till this was over to get to my next project. I think I was afraid that I would find myself directionless again. So, when Priankar and I left Kolkata in December 2019, we had three days to spend on the Sundarban recce. Even though I lived only 70 km away from the Sundarbans, I had never been there. The Sundarbans mangrove delta is situated on the eastern side of West Bengal, with a substantial part of it in Bangladesh. The Hooghly River (a distributary of the Ganga) passes through the region to meet the Bay of Bengal. It is located between 21° 27'30" N to 22° 30'00" N (latitude) and 89° 02'00"
E to 90°00'00" E (longitude) comprising about 2000 sq. km of pristine mangrove forest and is one of the most productive ecosystems globally. It includes waterlogged forested islands, and cultivable land covers a total area of around 400 square

kilometres. On the Indian side, it comprises 102 islands. The land area of the West Bengal (India) Sundarbans is approximately 9,630 square kilometres, with about half of it being uninhabited. The uninhabitable portions are mainly located on the islands to the south, which form the southernmost part of the Sundarbans. There are two types of inhabited islands in the region. The first group, located closer to the mainland, were deforested and cultivated mainly between 1765 and the early 1900s. The second group, on the fringes of the mangrove forest, were reclaimed between 1919 and 1980. These two types of island groups have distinct geographical characteristics. The northern and western islands are larger, have elevated ground levels, and are better protected from storms and tides. As part of a more stable delta, these islands have well-irrigated canals, which are narrower and less saline compared to those in the southern islands. Additionally, the northern islands benefit from better access to services and infrastructure offered by the nearby city of Kolkata. More than 40 species of cartilaginous fishes including 13 shark species have been recorded in the region (Chakraborty et al., 2020; Jalais, 2021).

Before heading into the Sundarbans, I first needed to identify and be sure that Kamots were indeed Sharks. Hence, our first stop was Khitish, my father's friend, who was a painter based in Canning. Canning is about 40 km from Kolkata. Priankar and I hopped from one auto rickshaw to another and after about 4 hours, reached Canning. From Naktala (Kolkata), we took an auto-rickshaw to Garia, then from Garia to Baruipur, and finally, from Baruipur to Canning. Like most people in Kolkata, Sundarban seemed like a far of land, only accessible by trains, and perhaps ships. Although, it is only 70 Km on paper, travelling through broken bumpy roads, squeezed between other auto passengers, chicken pens and vegetables, the journeys were long but interesting. The final auto dropped us in front of the Canning bazaar. Blue and

red plastic slippers and bags hanged from the storefronts, along with innumerable other daily goods from hundreds of shops across the market. Canning was the central hub of commerce and transport in the region, and these stores hoped to entice and provide for hundreds of thousands of people who travel to various locations from here. People have a beautiful ability to find colour in everything here.

We sat down with Khitish and a few cups of tea in his museum room, an impressive place that held hundreds of year-old artefacts. And so, our journey of unravelling the mystery called Kamot began. Our host described the animal in careful details— its teeth, skin, and movements. He talked about several incidents where he had witnessed Kamot bites across the Sundarbans region.

Khitish grew up very poor and left home at a very early age. Many a month he spent observing the river, its animals, and the forest of Sundarban. H is stories of the paranormal, the mundane,
and the dangerous came flowing out of this mouth unbound, emboldened by our curious ears and inquisitive gaze. As I sat there and took in every word like a diligent pupil, I felt as if I was listening to stories from a distant universe. Much like my father at one point in his life, he had to go into hiding because he got involved with the Naxalite movement. However, unlike my father who went to Bombay and stayed with his uncle to save himself from a shoot-at-sight order, Khitish hid with some fishers. Late at night, when there were no authorities around, he used to get out of the small hull of the boat and sit on the roof, looking into the inky darkness— a darkness that became one with the black mud, the black sky, the black forest, and the black waters. To imagine that darkness, even to contemplate it in the 21st century, and be completely aware of our species' vulnerability in the food chain, feels unfathomable.

As the night flowed from tea into beers, it became increasingly evident to Priankar and I, that the animal Khitish was talking about – this Kamot – were actually sharks. The shape of their teeth, body, and certain behaviours, including feeding and movement traits, indicated as such. But we were still not sure and needed to know more. We had to keep continuing the journey. So, with that knowledge, came the next part of our expedition: going to the Sundarban Tiger Reserve z one, which lay some 30 km away. The next morning, I woke up early as usual, walked up the terrace of our hotel, and welcomed the sun with my routine martial arts practice session. After the session, and a hearty breakfast of ' Petai porota' (torn pieces of parathas which are sold by weight and not as the usual individual pieces) we set off for Gosaba. Starting from Canning Bazar, we had to take an autorickshaw first to Sojnekhali, and then another one to Godhkhali. Godhkhali Ghat (ferry) connected us to Gosaba— our base in the Sundarbans. As we walked from the auto stand towards the ghat, I looked to my left up the brick road and a large signboard glimmered in the bright sun – 'Welcome to the Sundarban Tiger Reserve'. The sign was green and blue, almost reminding the liminal space that people live in here between the forest and the water— a place where both life and danger await, in the form of tigers, crocodiles, and sharks, as much does sweet honey and the smell of the Sundari Forest.

We waited for the 'special' boat to arrive, as it'd take us directly to Gosaba, without stopping at any other island. One of the most influential people who ever worked in the region was Mr. Tuser Kanjilal. As he wrote in his book: "The region known as the Sundarban forms the southern part of the Gangetic delta between the river Hooghly and the West in West Bengal and Meghna in the east of Bangladesh. The Sundarban of West Bengal is spread over both North and South 24 Pargana district…. The entire area is intersected by multiple rivers or estuaries from North to South and by

innumerable narrow tidal creeks from East to West. The principal rivers are Hooghly, Matla, Vidyadhari, Piyali and Jamuna… Records about the Sundarban of undivided India show that in 1885 the total area of Sundarban forest was about 20,000 square kilometres…. Of which 4264 square kilometres of forest (remains today) … In 1984, 1330 square kilometres area of the tiger project were declared as core area and given the status of National Park… There are 13 community development blocks of South 24 Pargana which are within the Sundarbans (along with 6 blocks of North 24 Pargana)" (Kanjilal, 2000, p.24-26). We were heading toward the most significant block in the region, the Gosaba block. As for the namesake, some believe it is because of the ' Sundari' trees in the region; alternatively, others believe it is because of the term 'Sundar' which means ' beautiful' in Bengali.

As the boat arrived, people rushed to get on. These motorboats are locally called ' Bhot-Bhoti,' because of the ' Bhot-Bhot' sound the old diesel engines make. The seven-minute ride was an equalizer: no matter what your socioeconomic status is, this is the only transport. People, goats, goods, and motorcycles all boarded and crossed the river for the cost of around 0.013 USD. As we crossed the river, I found myself touching the water, hoping to somehow feel their presence. These murky waters created a unique contact zone (Pratt, 1991) of this conflict, but at the same time, this water sustained both the Kamot and the humans. As Kanjilal further pointed: "Colonialization and human settlement in the forest area started in the early part of the last century, if not earlier. The colonial government's main objective was to encourage the clearing of the forest and the spread of agriculture so that it could secure revenue from the settlers. Protection of the forest was never on their agenda. After independence, it took us many years to give any thought to such issues. Even when policies started to be framed, they were inadequate or their implementation was half-hearted.

This puts man and nature in a situation of confrontation, which is not in the interest of either." (Kanjilal, 2000) .

As the ghat of Gosaba was getting clearer in our vision, a smile came across Priankar's face. He pointed to the shore and shouted,

'Ashim da! ' (' Da' is an abbreviated form of 'Dada', meaning ' Brother' in Bengali). Ashim— a lanky, dark, bright young man— welcomed us to Gosaba. Ashim had grown up in No.10. Chargheri, Lahiripur GP, opposite the infamous Marichjhapi jungles, which was the site of a refugee massacre in the 70s (H alder, 2019). I have never seen Ashim smoke, drink, or indulge in the luxuries of food. Neither have I ever seen him dozing off or shy away from work. When he starts walking, he can travel across miles on the arid ground, with just a smile on his face, and his umbrella hung on the back of his shirt collar. He is an incredible PR person, with acquaintances across the Sundarbans. Wherever he goes, people stop and speak to him. A single man, he worked for the Consumer

Affairs department in his vocational life. But Ashim is also the secretary of the Sundarban Tiger Widow Welfare Association, which became our host group in the region. Priankar had already worked with them in his Sawfish project. The Tiger Widow team are a group of dedicated locals, trying to help the women in the region who lost their husbands to or suffered from not only tiger attacks but also crocodile and shark bites. The Tiger Widow Welfare Society was initially created in 2013 by Mr. Jana, who was then based in Chicago. When he lived in India, he would go to Sundarban and give support to the women there primarily by himself. But when he decided to move back to the US, he realized that it would not be possible for him to continue with this gallant work.

Around the same time, he met Ashim and the others, and he offered to hand over the reign of the organization to them, to keep on with this important work. In 2019, Ashim took over

the responsibilities of the organization. The core body of the organization consisted of Ashim Gayan, the secretary, Jayita Mondal, the executive member, Rajashree Das, the cultural secretary, and Ujjwal Sardar, the managerial advisor. They create various social programs to support the women, including yoga seminars, meetings, and initiatives supporting sustainability solutions for women. I think Ashim felt that if he could make this organization a success, he could sustain himself as much as the women and do some real good for the community.

The organization opened the doors to the community and Ashim personally accompanied us to the Islands to collect the stories. From the ghat, the three of us walked along the Gosaba market to the Tiger Widow's clubhouse, where we were supposed to spend the night. Gosaba is a bright little town, with one long lane that crosses the main entrance. Shops and lenders inhabit this lane in dense clusters, selling anything and everything— from fruits and vegetables to phones and medicines. We passed through the fish market, a central attraction for us where innumerable species of fresh and saltwater fish are harvested every day. This is the last settlement of Sundarban where all the main infrastructure is available and hence, is the base of any Sundarban expedition.

I was broke and had no job. Whatever little money I had from my time in NZ had run out, and I was earning barely something by giving tuitions and teaching martial arts. I could not even get a job in schools as a sociology teacher, even though I had almost 2 PhDs and had travelled the world as an anthropologist. So when Ashim da mentioned that we could live for free in the clubhouse, I jumped at the invitation. As we entered the clubhouse, a huge poster of the organization greeted us. Interestingly, it had an image of a Great White Shark. To me, this was intriguing for a couple of reasons: firstly, people in the region seemed to know that Kamots are indeed ' sharks', even though most people in the major city

next to them, let alone the rest of the world, are not aware of this conflict. Secondly, the White Shark is the global symbol of sharks, and quite literally their poster child. Provided that this species has found a place in a remote West Bengal village shed, where people would have never encountered them, indicated confirmation.

The first night we stayed in the dark little room of the clubhouse, I did not put the customary mosquito net up as it made me feel claustrophobic. So bare beds were laid for our slumber. We found a shop in the market that made some cheap noodles. Priankar and I got two plates of egg noodles and brought them back to our temporary abode, hoping to enjoy our dinner on our bed. Suddenly, I heard a bump! As I turned to my left, I found a sizable cockroach right on my bed, and wrapped around him was a giant hairy spider who had just caught him in his death embrace. Y es, I have dived in the subantarctic waters with 18foot great white sharks, but I still cannot be in the same room as spiders (a psychologist once told me that the spider/ or its net may symbolize my fear of commitment) .I jumped out of the bed, and Priankar used a piece of wood to chase the duo out of the bed. Without wasting any time, I put up the mosquito net and got in. From that day, whenever I went to the Sundarbans, I made sure that I stayed in a hotel, brought an insect spray, and asked the hoteliers to spray the full can in my room and bathroom before I settled in.

Journal entry

15th December 2019, 4.15 AM

Gosaba

‘ I stumbled out of the hard wooden bed. I realised I couldn’t stop it anymore. As I was about to enter, 2 giant spiders looked back at me from the dimly lit bathroom. The next moment, I was pacing fast across the road. I had to take a step... any step. I realised with a start that only a few decades ago, these roads were patrolled by tigers for their early morning feast, and now,

here I was in the dark, waiting and thinking what to do. Suddenly, it dawned on me: It was no longer possible for me to stop myself any more… it needed to happen now! Caressed by the inky darkness on a ledge next to a pond, I had to let nature take its course and release myself. After I was done, I cleaned myself with a couple of leaves and some water. I sat down near the pond and saw the fish nibbling at something in the water—I could only wonder what it might have been. As I looked around me, the beautiful Sundarban was waking up. Birds chirped on the grand ancient trees around me, and yellow, red and pink hibiscus bushes embraced the houses. A sweet smell, almost like honey, was there in the air, and I could imagine why people are in love with the place. But I had to focus: today was the date I would meet the shark attack victims for the first time.'

Early in the morning, after some light breakfast of local bananas and semolina porridge, Priankar, Ashim, and I started our travels. The day that lay ahead was to be my first experience with the rain in the Sundarbans, soaking me to the bones. To protect ourselves, we put sliced-bread plastic wrappers over our heads. The hot unruly dust settled down and connected the river, the ground, sweat, and plastic sandals together. During my initial fieldwork years in New Zealand, I used to wear a lot of denim and carried lots of my stuff, including my expedition hat (for which my friend O liver used to say that I looked like Indiana Jones, and I used to correct him by saying, "More like Indian Jones"). I have come to accept the fact that no matter where I am, I will generally stick out of the crowd— even in Kolkata and other metropolitan cities. Hence, over the years, I have learned to tone my presence down. Now, just a black t-shirt, shorts, a black hip bag (with cameras, dictaphones, a pocketknife, torch, notebook, and pen) and comfortable sandals were good enough to get my job done while looking inconspicuous at the

same time. A lot of the distance we travelled to reach the edges of
the island and the Jetty ghats was on foot. We started visiting people who suffered shark bites. Most of these people lived in low, muddy huts under the shelter of the forest. In times of flood, everything goes away, either flown away by the harsh cyclonic winds or washed away by the raging river. Everywhere we went, with Ashim guiding us, we were offered tea and biscuits by the hosts. And with every cup of tea, it slowly started to dawn upon us how deep and long the history of human-shark interaction and conflict has been. We heard stories of fishermen, who were bitten while moving their boats out of the riverbanks in only waist-deep waters. We also heard of incidents that happened some 20 years ago. Due to the lack of proper medical support, these bites often got infected, and pain persevered for decades. Interestingly, shark bites could happen any time people got in the water, but most of the time, it happened when people went in to collect Meen (prawn larva) . And since women were the one who were usually taking part in this— as men generally went into the forest to collect honey or fish—they were the one who suffered most of the shark bites. However, it was one thing to hear the stories of horror and despair, and another thing altogether to witness the effect of those bites on soft human flesh, which often resembled only mangled bits of skin. Even though this was merely new information for us, for the women, this was a reality they lived
with for decades. The women asked us… "Why retell the stories? Why relive these experiences? No one will get to know, no one will support us, what is the point?"

Our first visit was to Kamola Mondol, who suffered a shark bite on her leg in 1996. As we crossed the river to Chotomollakhali and climbed up the muddy embankment onto the unpaved road, Ashim da showed me a pond where three years ago a large crocodile had taken refuge. For obvious

reasons, this was quite unacceptable to the locals, so for two days and nights straight, the villagers and the forest department emptied the small pond bucket by bucket, until they could see the large reptile hissing in the muddy shape of the pond. When they finally caught the animal, it took 20 people to lift him and transport him to the launch to be relocated.

We continued on the path by the river. After walking two miles in the Hetal Bari Gram (village) , there afar, underneath a stooped-over banyan tree surrounded by tall bamboo bushes, down the muddy lane from the main road stood a mud thatch. As is the custom here, you just walk into someone' s home and ask if they are home, and if they are, the host will ask you to sit down and speak with you. And so, we bowed our heads through the low Houglum leaf thatch and sat down to interview Kamola. Shy and very soft-spoken, she came and sat among us with her head covered in ghomta (the part of the saree used to put over a woman's head to symbolise modesty) . The way she spoke, the way the saree was draped over her head, the way her wrinkled skin held more stories than I could even fathom— all of it made me feel that I was sitting in front of my Dida (my maternal grandmother) who had passed away the year before.

In around 1996, when Kamola was about 25 or – 26 years old, she fell victim to shark bites. At 7 in the morning, Kamala was catching Meen in the river along with some of her friends. She was walking through the river with her net when it happened.

Suddenly, she felt a deep burning sensation in her legs. She did not see anything but knew something was wrong. She tried to get out of the water and realized something was holding her thigh and was dragging her in the water. As she pushed away the entity and staggered to the bank, the large Kamot came charging at her. The attack was so ferocious that the Kamot breached into the banks of the river after her. She pushed hard

the animal's face away with both her hands, and the animal turned away. This led to a cut on her hand, and before she could do anything else, she passed out on the riverbank. After she shared her story, her husband encouraged her to lift her saree and show us the bite mark. I was silent. Although it had occurred some 20 years ago and was then stitched, to me it felt like it had happened only a few days ago. As I looked at her bite mark, it was as if I could feel the bite myself, and still smell the clotted blood from her torn skin. Perhaps for the first time in my life, I felt my hands shake.

As our cup of tea and our interview ended, I was compelled to touch her mangled feet before leaving (a sign of respect in Indian tradition which symbolizes that I am less than the dirt under your feet) . This came as a bit of a surprise to me because I do not usually do this and pleasantries are seldom my forte. Moreover, I am always trying to break the traditional dictums of the infantilized Indian youth. This time, however, as I touched her feet with my shaking hands, it was as if I was touching the 100-year-old skin of my dida.

This was the beginning of all the stories we collected. After that, in the following two days, we travelled across several islands, both near and far from Gosaba. There, at different villages, we collected more than 7 incidents where men and women shared the waters with the Kamot, and had felt their presence only with their bite, and at times, when they came chasing after them straight to the banks of the river. After these two days, Priankar and I were both mentally so exhausted that we had to stop collecting data, even though we knew that more stories could have been collected. Our senses were not able to take the emotional charge of the stories anymore, even as apparent passive observers.

I remember standing there—dumbfounded, scared, and sad. This was unlike any other of my fieldwork experiences. It is one thing studying sharks for the better part of the last decade, it is another thing to document the disastrous bites of large

predatory sharks on the human body. On one hand, I could not control my despair about these humans who suffered shark bites and the consecutive effects on their entire lives. After all, this was less than 70 km away from the sprawling metropolis of Kolkata, where the mere idea that you might fall under an apex predator in the food chain is unimaginable. On the other hand, to me, the mucky waters seemed scarier than the transparent waters of New Zealand where I have spent years with Great White Sharks. There, at least, I could see the White Sharks, but in these waters, a large predatory shark is virtually invisible, their presence only to be felt through their bite. But at the same time, there was another fear and a certain form of anger brewing inside me: I feared about the group of enigmatic and ecologically significant animals that has potentially lost their habitat after calling these waters home for possibly thousands of years, and I felt angry because we are behind this and still we are doing nothing to remedy the situation. My senses could not handle the shock anymore. Even though we had booked the hotel for two more days, we decided to head home.

I reached home late that evening. I did not speak to anyone, I did not eat, or change; I just went to bed wearing whatever I had on. I don't know exactly when, but it was late at night when I had a clear vision. It was a day in New Zealand, and I was on the cage diving boat, setting off from Bluff. All the tourists who were there to see the sharks were in the cabin along with the ship crew. I was out on the deck. It was a clear morning, and the land of the long cloud was glimmering with light. The sea was clear and turquoise. Tiny waves danced around our boat, and sweet and salty winds played with my open hair and beard as we travelled to that faraway island where we would meet our Great White Sharks. That was the last time when I was truly happy. My tired eyes opened as if I had been asleep for years, but when I looked at my watch, it

was only 2.15 AM. I lay in the dark room. My New Zealand expedition made me the scholar I aspired to be.

I remember when I left India after my first PhD to work with elephants and art, I heard the term multi-species ethnography for the first time. The premise was simple and interesting: whenever we are investigating any human culture for study it is important to consider the effect and impact of other animals in shaping that culture. For ex ample, when my supervisor at the time was working with elephants, he acknowledged the impact of elephants in human cultures in his work. Even though my project was with elephants then, in my heart I knew that I wanted to work with sharks. I wanted to gather every bit of information and methodology I could recognise from multi-species ethnography with elephants, and use it on sharks. The idea really ex cited me as a scholar since at that time, there was no multi-species investigation on sharks. I remember when I spoke about it with my brother-in-law (a prolific natural scientist based in Australia), and he reminded me: "Remember, it takes at least a decade to learn a discipline or methodology. So it won't be a smart idea to try to think of sharks right now since you are just starting to learn about elephants in that context." He was right, of course. Funny enough, it is exactly a decade since I started my journey and now, I am finally starting to understand what this journey is about.

Even though I had planned to work with elephants, life had other plans for me. Through the stroke of mere luck that led me to my closest friend on the planet Soosan, and obviously a bit of hard work, I started working on an expedition of multi-species research on the White Sharks. For this first fieldwork of my academic life, I was based in Bluff, the southernmost town in the South Island of New Zealand, about 1600 kilometres from Antarctica. Bluff was a small town which had its heydays during the sealing and whaling operations a century ago. Now it is a timid little town with a few hundred

people, a few curious dogs, and one of the most turbulent stretches of water in the world— the Foveaux Straight. This stretch of water took the lives of hundreds over the last 200 years, the latest being my close friend John's father. In that research, I wanted to investigate the lives of the human beings on one hand— this including the tour operators, the tourists, and the people of Bluff— and the lives of sharks and other animals on the other hand— animals that are entangled ecologically, economically, politically, and even physically in the grand encounter that was the Great White Shark cage diving.

The basic argument that I made was: the sharks are as much active agents in the creation of these encounters as the people taking part in them, i.e., if the sharks do not want, the people will not have an encounter with them no matter how much tried. I also argued that the shark' s behaviour also shapes the experience of the cage diving encounter, which in effect shapes what people feels about not only White Sharks but sharks in general. This, in effect, has a significant impact on their positive or negative attitude towards them, and potentially wish to conserve them. All this is important because what we feel about these species plays an impactful role determining our efforts and agreements in saving and conserving them. White Sharks, and sharks in general, have been suffering for the last 40 years from the monstrous image the general population usually associate them with. This means that their numbers are drastically decreasing all over the planet because of the lack of motivation of the general population in conserving them. This simultaneously translated to fewer initiatives in policy working towards their protection at both local and global stage.

For this expedition, I spent about 3 years in the field learning from the local fishermen, operators, locals of Bluff, the tourists who came to see them, and of course, the sharks themselves. The entire project consumed 7 years of my life.

To say that this research was not going to be the easiest in the world was a gross understatement on my part. As I started carrying out my investigations, I realised why this has not been done before. As scientists argue, sharks are large, long-ranging species (Castro, 2016) . If you are working with a whale in a marine multidisciplinary perspective, you would know that they are going to show up to the surface every few hours and you can easily spot them. You can spot their movement as well as their behaviour, and if they are in a pod you can potentially identify their family members and their group interactions. This does not happen with sharks. If a shark does not want to show itself to you, and unless you have a satellite tag (which is very ex pensive and brings ethical challenges) , you wouldn't know where the shark is or whether it has left. On the other hand, a shark can be 10 feet away from you, and regardless of their size, if it chooses not to show itself, you will not be able to see it. Sharks often don' t have identifiable family groups (at least ones we humans can identify till now) , and it is much more complicated to understand or interpret their behaviour with each other. They can potentially be very dangerous to human beings, and you are going to be aware of that fact every second if you are working with species like the Great White Sharks. When you see an animal like that there is no way but to constantly remind yourself of the potential lethality of them.

Hence, the cage diving practice was a unique opportunity to observe multi-species interaction between the Great White Sharks and Human Beings. I feel that all other shark tourism activities can be great opportunities for conducting multi-species research with humans and sharks too, but as of now, those remain quite limited. While working on this, I created my interdisciplinary methodology taking a pragmatic worldview of knowledge and including methods from disciplines such as sociology, psychology, ecology, ethology, anthropology, and geography. Since no one had done this kind

of research before, I had no frame of reference. But this is where, my experience from my previous research in psychology helped. Where as much as doing observation, I was able to create hypotheses and predictions from them and tested them in real life.

However, the more I thought about it, the more I realised that my previous methodological approach of multispecies research in the context of human-shark interaction in New Zealand would not be enough to support the situation here in the Sundarbans. In New Zealand, while conducting cage diving ethnography, I could see the sharks around the cage, and their interactions with us, because of the visibility of the water, and indeed the size of the sharks. But in the Sundarbans, one could not see one inch below the surface. So my original method would be ineffective here. I kept looking for the framework that could shape this and other similar research projects.

A month or so went by in contemplating this fundamental question. I was still having disturbing dreams, and sleep was becoming sparse, coming only intermittently most of the nights. There was one particular dream with a banyan tree, somewhere in the grey fog. I could feel the wet grass underneath my footsteps. I could smell Shiuli flower and rotten seaweed. From the distance, I could see its shape, but the closer I tried to walk towards it, the distant it became. Sometimes, I had a child strapped to my chest, and I was trying to rescue her from what seemed to be my old house. Sometimes, I was petting a corpse of a kitten as she lay silent with her eyes closed and cold in my strong arms. I was wide awake. I knew now that my hunch has been right—that Kamots were indeed sharks(colloquial term of sharks in the Sundarban region) , and there are innumerable shark bite incidents. Now, I needed to answer a fundamental question: who were the Kamot? What species of sharks! Afterall, as a multispecies researcher, my job in any human-shark research

is not just understanding the lives of the humans but also the lives of the sharks involved in the interaction.

In February 2020, Priankar and I made our way back to the Sundarbans again. We had to keep on collecting data about the shark bites, but this time, I also wanted to know more about the lives of the sharks. When we sat down with Khitish, he explained to us that the Kamot is the regional term for all sharks. In Bengali, they are also called 'Hangor,' and the word Kamot came from ' Kamrano' or biting. He recalled that as a young boy, he and his friends used to see the large fins of Kamots breaking the water's surface and their sparkling skin (the shine of dermal denticles of shark skin) as they played in the sunlight. They believed that Kamots came up the creeks to give birth— they often saw smaller Kamots swimming with bigger ones and assumed that they were the pups with the mother. Khitish also observed that the Kamot always turned upside down while biting as its snout is long, and the mouth is underneath. H is friend Bimal mentioned that before the ban on catching them, they used to eat them, dry the flesh, and use them as bait for catching crab and fish. The local experts in all the interviews agreed to the fundamental premise: Kamots are indeed sharks. The locals had experience with them from time immemorial, but anthropogenic effects have decreased their numbers in the region.

We started visiting local fishermen in the Sundarbans. One of the most intriguing individuals we met was Mr Sonnasi Joddar, from Jotiram Pur, who has been fishing in the Sundarbans for more than half a century, often using "dong" (long line). I called him jatha Jatha (Uncle) . He mentioned that in all his years, he had seen many large sharks, but one was exceptionally big. The incident happened in the confluence of Matla and the Biddya River, around Neta Dhopani, some18 to 20 years ago. He was using a 33-foot long boat, and the tail of the fish was touching the row at the end, while its head was at the line at the front of the boat. From this,

he had estimated that the Kamot was at least about 20 to 22 feet long. There were also two small "baccha" (children) besides the large fish (they could have been Remoras which often travel with large sharks) . All shark scientists know that the alleged ' giants' of the sea measured in the context of the size of boats/ ships are often over-exaggeration (Aich, 2022a) , but even if it was 16-18 feet, it had to be a very big shark for the region (besides Whale Sharks, of course). According to Jatha, the Kamot was very thin but had giant fins. He also noted that like all other Kamots, and 'Sanker Mach' (Sting Rays) , its skin had 'bali' (sand) , and the body was grey-blue. The boat had large handheld hooks, with which they lifted the fish into the boat. But this shark was so big that if it thrashed around, the boat would have capsized. He was well aware of the lethality of this fish and did not know of any other fish that bit humans. Flying fish, however, scared him and the others, because of their unnaturalness. Unfortunately, from these descriptions alone it was not possible to identify the exact species of the sharks, and unphotographed details from 20 years ago from individuals who do not identify species by the globally accepted shark species system are unreliable.

Jatha further agreed with Khitish that they used to see more of them during the monsoon, and they recognized that Kamots do not lay eggs, something that Bull Sharks are known to do (Blassingame, 1989). The fisherman mentioned that the larger fish do not enter the small rivers, and usually remain in deep waters, such as the mouths of rivers, or deep rivers. The larger fish in such areas, however, are not more than 6-8 feet in length. Jatha also saw another fish which was about 5- 6 months old (about 240 kg) and got stuck in a net near the sea mouth, close to 15 odd feet.

Tiger Sharks generally exceed 15 feet in length (Schneider, 1990) , and they have been listed from the Sundarbans. So, it is possible that what Jatha recounted was a giant tiger shark. Furthermore, since he was fishing in the vicinity of the Bay of

Bengal (the mouth of the river Ganges) , the possibility that it could have been some other enormous shark also remains. However, when asked, Jatha mentioned that the shark did not have any markings on its skin.

We asked him about the shape and size of the teeth, and whether they noticed any difference in dentition among different Kamots. He mentioned that all Kamots have concentric rows of teeth, and they grow as the animal matures. He also said that some Kamots have almost needle-shaped, comb-like teeth. Jatha explained that when Kamots are small, they have needle like teeth and prey on small fishes, but as they grow, they have more prominent, serrated teeth for hunting bigger food, which is why the ones that injure humans are always ranging between 5-9 feet in length. Ecologically there might be two explanations of these observations. Firstly, many species like White Sharks actually change their teeth shape as they grow, with younger individuals having pointier tooth because they hunt fish, as they grow older because their diet changes into mammals, they get larger more serrated teeth, so they are observing the growth of a singular species. Alternatively, they could be observing separate species where smaller species had pointier teeth and the larger species had more prominent larger teeth. The fisherman were able to provide information on some Kamot species that never grow more than three feet in length, and he was sure that those species were not responsible for biting people. The fishermen of the Sundarbans often call them 'DudheKamot,' which translates into the Milky Shark. The Milk Shark (Rhiz oprionodon acutus) has been reported from the region, and the fishermen agreed to the similarities when presented with the photograph of this shark species.

Khitish explained there are different kinds of Kamot which are thinner and longer, and they are very fast. One kind of Kamot has a blue back and white stomach. Then there is another kind of Kamot that has a grey stomach, and is 'risto-

Pusto· (plump, and as I will later learn, 'petmota') . The body colour of this particular Kamot is like that of 'bholamach' (Johnius gangeticus). Khitish has seen the blue sharks mate here, flowing in the water. At the same time, he recognised that since the water in Ganga can vary between blue, deep violate, and muddy brown, the colours of the Kamots underwater can also look different. The young ones come as the monsoon starts. "Asher-Srabon" (June to August) is their mating time. They mentioned that Kamots generally stay alone. Sometimes, the smaller ones come in groups, but most of the time that they have seen the smaller ones, there is a large one with them as well. By "Choitro-Boisak" (March to May), they become larger. Although they can be seen throughout the year, previously they could be spotted more in all the waters. Now, however, they are mostly seen in the small forest reserves and near the ocean mouth. After we got to know Jathas experience, it was our time to leave. H ere, once again, I was compelled to touch his feet, reminding me of my Dadu (my grand-dad) .

That night, I sat amid the blooms by a pond lost in my thoughts.

Not far from me, rice and Begun Bhaja (aubergine fritters) were being prepared in an open stove underneath the stars—a treat that a local had kindly invited us to indulge in. The frog songs and constant noise of the mosquitoes kept me company as my mind played somersaults. I was perplexed by some fundamental issues upfront. Firstly, although thankfully incidents of people suffering from tiger bites in Sundarban got some national and global attention from media and scholars (Aiyadurai, 2016) , I could not understand why there was no scholastic investigation of the shark bites. Secondly, I was baffled as to why there were no artistic representation of sharks in the art or folklore of the region. But more than anything else, I kept thinking about what I could do to help this situation. Does the mere publishing of my articles, and recognition as a scientist investigating this conflict do

anything to support the situation? Can I be ‘ objective’ in my investigation if I am so emotionally entangled in this story? I saw my loved ones everywhere I looked— they were my grandmothers who had shark bites, my grandfathers who despaired at the lack of fish in the water, and my beloved sharks who had lost their homes. In such a space, where did I fit in? Rajashee came and sat beside me, and started telling me that the DolPurnima was coming. She was entrusted to make a play but was not sure exactly what she was going to be working on. I said, “ W hy don’ t you do something about the challenges of the locals, including attacks by tigers and Kamot?” As I was about to indulge in my dinner, I got a text from my mother: “ An unknown fever is coming, come home safe.” I shrugged it off like I often do in case of impending doom.

Little did I know...

Act 2 : Vine of the Banyan Tree

“We are eating the Kamots, and the Kamots are eating us.”
– Khitish, 2019

In March 2020, the world realized the depth of the dark cloud that united humanity in separation. In my mom's small apartment, she, her husband Upal, and I got sequestered. Upal always had problems connecting with the general population, but he was a brilliant artistic individual. With the spread of COVID, he lost his job. I, on the other hand, kept on applying. The environment in the house kept on getting tenser day by day. The only things that gave me reason to wake up were immersing myself in my New Zealand expedition book and exploring my curiosity about the human-shark conflict in Bengal. But soon, sleep became elusive to me. During the night, I used to wake up every two hours. Then, after some time, I started hearing someone calling my name. Sometimes, the voice called me ' Raj' sometimes it called me 'Bubai.' This voice would often call after me saying, 'Apni kamon achen? ' (How are you?) or ' Sunun…' (listen to me).

I would lay awake, contemplating the deep and sometimes troubling history of shark predation on humans. In a sense, I think shark researchers often want to downplay the number of negative interactions with sharks. It is as if someone is complaining about their beloved. It is statistically true that humans have more chance of being killed by a cow than a shark— but being eaten by a shark in an environment human beings are alien to is an entirely different experience altogether. Sharks are not monsters and human beings are not their primary food. However, sharks are opportunistic predators, and sometimes human beings do become their food. Some people argue that sharks bite people because of mistaken identity. Nonetheless, the more I learn, the more I feel that sharks do choose to hunt humans, at least sometimes.

In fact, the human-shark conflict (in this case, sharks biting and predating on humans) is a global issue. In 2023, there have been 69 unprovoked shark bites on humans, 22 provoked bites, and 10 documented fatalities. Once Barry Bruce explained to me that, considering the innumerable number of humans that

get in the water, the number of shark bite incidents is statistically infinitesimal. However, it is true that there are a lot of incidents which have not been documented. My colleagues, for ex ample, have noted a lot of shark attacks even in rivers of China, which have hardly been recorded.

Globally, shark attacks have remained relatively steady over the past decade, with fluctuations tied to various factors such as regional increases in shark populations, shifts in human activity, and environmental changes. According to the International Shark Attack File maintained by the Florida Museum of Natural History, the average number of shark attacks per year over the past decade has ranged between 60 and 100 incidents. This number includes both provoked and unprovoked attacks, with the latter being the focus of most media attention. Unprovoked attacks, where sharks bite humans without any apparent provocation, make up the majority of reported incidents. On average, the number of fatalities globally has remained low, with about 5 to 10 fatal shark attacks per year. However, the severity of individual attacks, especially involving well-known shark species like the Great White or Bull Shark, tends to elevate the public profile of these events, making them seem more frequent than they truly are in the larger context of human interaction with the oceans.

The United States has consistently reported the highest number of shark attacks in the world. Florida accounts for about half of the U.S.' s shark attacks each year. Notably, the number of attacks in Florida increased slightly between 2014 and 2019, driven by growing human activity in the state' s coastal waters, particularly among surfers and swimmers. Species like the Blacktip and Bull Sharks, which are more likely to be found in shallow waters, are responsible for many of these incidents. California, another frequent hotspot, saw a rise in shark attacks over the last decade. Great White Sharks, which are often associated with fatal attacks due to their siz e

and power, are found along the California coast, contributing to the frequency of attacks. However, like in Florida, these are rarely fatal.

Australia, known for its large shark populations and robust surfing culture, has also experienced a steady number of shark attacks over the past decade. Regions such as New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia are particularly notable for frequent interactions between sharks and humans. A spate of fatal attacks occurred in 2020 and 2021, sparking public debate over shark culling, shark nets, and the safety of water sports. South Africa is another region with a high incidence of shark attacks, particularly along the coasts of the Western and Eastern Cape. The area is home to large populations of Great White Sharks, which are responsible for a significant number of unprovoked attacks. Brazil has seen a significant increase in shark attacks over the last decade, particularly in the northeastern state of Pernambuco. From 2014 to 2023, the region experienced an alarming rise in shark attacks, some of which have been fatal. Indeed, shark attacks have been reported from across the globe besides these major countries, from the Indian Ocean to the Caribbean Sea— to the Maldives, Réunion Island, Egypt, Bahamas and Caicos Islands. A key factor influencing ocean shark behaviour and the frequency of attacks over the last decade is climate change. Rising ocean temperatures, shifting migratory patterns, and changes in prey availability have altered the distribution of shark populations. In some regions, warmer waters have led to sharks moving closer to shorelines in search of food, increasing the likelihood of human-shark encounters. As more people enter the water, more the chances of human-shark encounters increase. The information about shark attacks in India is quite unsteady. Some sources mention that there has been a total of 40 shark attacks, with 22 fatalities, one of the most recent ones being in Chennai in 2003. The latest incident was recorded in 2024 Mumbai, when A 7-ft bull shark,

attacked 32-year-old Vikya Gowari as he crossed the shallow Vaitarna river in Manor, almost severing his left leg at the ankle. Interestingly enough, most of the documentation of shark attacks globally is ocean-based, while in India, it seems to be freshwater-based. However, I am certain that in both cases, substantial data is missing. The earliest ones were in the 1600s in the Hooghly River. Some, however, trace back the earliest data to 1590, in Kerala. In fact, there have been a lot of shark bite incidents in southern India, especially in Kerala and Chennai. Such incidents have also occurred in Maharashtra, Gujrat, and Orissa. In Bengal, among the limited resources, data available is as murky as the waters of the Ganga. The International Shark Attack Files from the Florida Museum say there are only 14 shark attacks in India in total (Florida Museum, 2023). The Global Shark Attack Files offer a bit more detail and record some shark attack incidents in West Bengal and the Ganga River (primarily from British doctors and officers) (Shark Research Institute, 2015) . The information is very scarce, but they illustrate the following: The most recent documented attack was in 1938, in the Hooghly River near Budge-Budge, when three people were attacked. Two of them survived while one was fatal. Beyond that, in 1881, there was documentation of a large streek of attacks at Panihattu, Barrackpore, Dackhineshwar, Barahonagore, Kashipur, and Chitpur,down to Baug Baz ar ghats. It is alleged that more than 20 individuals were severely bitten, and almost all were fatal. In 1880, there was a violent attack in Panihati, some four miles south of Barrackpore on the Hooghly River. There, a 11-year-old boy was attacked while taking a bath in the river, and his right leg and femur were severed. On 15th May 1880, Sutto Kumar Mukherjee was bitten somewhere in the Ganjis river. O n 14th of May 1880, a 60-year-old widow was attacked in the Hooghly River while bathing. H er hands, forearm, and the left thigh were lacerated, and the radial artery was severed. O n May 2nd, 1880, Sast, M.

was bathing in Calcutta, when his left forearm and hand were bitten, and the brachial artery was severed. H e died of a secondary haemorrhage 11 days later. On an unspecified date before 1878-1877, in the Hooghly River, near Calcutta, a male was bitten severely on his thigh, and his femur was ex posed & grooved. In 1871, at Matla, Hooghly River (where my dad rushed out of the water) , a 30-year-old man named Deno was bathing. H is left thigh & buttock were bitten, and he passed away of pneumonia seven weeks later. In 1870, at one of the ghats in Calcutta, a 40-year-old male shopkeeper was taking a bath when a shark attacked him. H is left arm was bitten, and he eventually developed gangrene for which his arm had to be surgically amputated. The same year, a 40-year-old Oriah coolie too was attacked while bathing. His right foot and leg were bitten and had to be surgically amputated. Again, in 1870, at the Hatkolah Ghat in Calcutta, another attack was recorded when a 39-year-old Hindu trader was bathing. H e got four irregular lacerated wounds on his right arm. O ne more shark attack was documented in the same year near Sobha Bazar, Kolkata. A 40-year-old Hindu confectioner was bathing when he got three lacerated irregular wounds on his anterior left thigh. In 1868, in a Hooghly River Ghat, a 35-year-old male was standing, when suddenly his upper left thigh, groin & buttocks were severely bitten. Although his leg was surgically amputated at the hip, he passed away. Jumping to sixty years back, in 1808, a male was fatally attacked when taking a bath in the Hooghly River. The earliest documented shark attacks are from 1637 (when a Hindu pilgrim was attacked in the Hooghly River mouth) and 1617 (when local people were attacked in the Ganges delta of Bengal) .

A description of these kinds of very early attacks can be found in this archival documentation:

> “ Unknown CASE: GSAF 1877.00.00 DATE: Prior to 1877 LO CATIO N: The incident took place in the Hooghly River at Calcutta, India. NAME: Unknown

DESCRIPTIO N: He was a male, a native of the area. NARRATIVE: No details.
INJURY: “Sir Joseph Fayrer informs me that in a case brought to his hospital at Calcutta the shark not only divided the soft parts down to the thigh bone in a native but even made a deep
groove in the neck of the femur.” SPECIES INVOLVED: “This is one of the most ferocious of Indian sharks,” wrote Day, “and frequently attacks bathers even in Hooghly at Calcutta, where it is so dreaded that a reward is offered for each that is captured. I have taken it at Cuttack.” Day identifies the shark as “Carcharias prionodon”. SOURCE: Day, Francis (1878) , The Fishes of India. London, page 715 NO TE: In an article titled ‘ Indian’s Deadly Animals’ (ex cerpt nex t page) , which appeared in the New Y ork Times on August 18, 1889, the author makes reference to Dr. Fayrer and describes environmental conditions in the proximity of the ghats which were conducive to shark accidents”(Shark Research Institute, 2015) .

I know my beloved sharks are predators, and they do at times deliberately predate on humans, leaving devastating effects on individuals and families. But I also know that they play a crucial role in maintaining the health and balance of marine ecosystems. Often, as apex predators, they help regulate populations of other marine species, ensuring that no single species becomes overly dominant and disrupts the food chain. By preying on the sick, weak, or ageing individuals within prey populations, sharks also promote the overall health and genetic strength of these species. Furthermore, their presence helps maintain the balance of ecosystems such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, and open ocean environments. Without sharks, these delicate ecosystems could suffer from the unchecked growth of certain species, leading to imbalances that affect biodiversity and the stability of marine habitats. In essence,

sharks are essential for preserving the resilience and functionality of ocean ecosystems.

More than anything else, in my personal journey, they have been beauty-incarnated for me. I remember when we were on a night dive somewhere in the South Pacific. Under a clear sky, the ocean was clear as a mirror. Being a shallow dive, light from the moon and the stars made the water sparkle. After settling down at the seabed, I looked at the corals around us with my torch. Then, all of a sudden, I could feel a tap on my shoulder. It was from the soft hand of my friend. She drew my attention to something far in the vertical depths of the cerulean shallows. My eyes were mesmerized as I beheld the heaving body of a 30-foot Colossus. It had appeared suddenly and moved slowly in front of us. Perhaps it was the reflection of the diffused light of the stars, or the white polka dots on her skin, or it could have been the violin of the bioluminescent algae awakened by her touch— I did not know what made it so magical. I knew that it was the first time—and probably also the last—of witnessing an adult Whale Shark dancing in the great beyond, with the stars and the algae. There was no one to capture this enchanting visual but the millions of inhabitants of the ocean and us— two dumfounded humans. Sharks have unimaginable beauty, even though the intensity of their beauty can at times be fatal! When I think of the vast ocean from hundreds of meters up from the sky, they are just fish feeding normally as any other fish does. Just because the scale is different from our context, and yes, at times we fall below them in the food chain, we find them all so dramatic. However, as the history of their conflict remains vivid in my eyes, it is as if I feel guilty for them.

Amid this contemplation, on the 13th of May 2020, I was informed that my Ph.D. thesis had to be reworked and resubmitted. It came as a violent shock to my system, and I no longer knew what to do. For the first time in my life, I had done something with all my heart, with every bit of my body,

mind, spirit— and spit. For three days I stayed in bed. My life seemed to have come to a halt, and it felt like an end. I felt I could not do it anymore. I questioned myself: Why do I need to do it anymore? What is left at all? After all the effort, I was stranded here, what was the point? My mind echoed with self-doubt: I was directionless... again, and everything I loved was slipping away from my hand.

On the 20th of May, the storm Amphan lashed down on Odissa and West Bengal out of nowhere. As someone who grew up in Kolkata and lived there for 37 years, I do not remember witnessing a cyclone or anything like that, although I had experiences with saviour storms while living in New Zealand. As the cyclone made landfall, I found a small corner in my mother's house away from the glass windows and ceiling fans and made a bed for Upal and my momma. The wind passed through the glass and concrete buildings like sharp knives, reminding us of her power and brutality. Suddenly I heard an electric transformer bursting with shards of light flashing like an Allied grenade, and an umbrella blackout across the neighbourhood. As the storm grew more violent, the glass of the windows started dancing louder and louder— like the nupur of classical dancers palpitating with the rhythm of the mridangam. Upal and Mom lay huddled in the corner, and I lay on the other side of the house, drinking my pot of coffee, and reading a new book on the behaviour of rabbits I had found recently. I was dozing off occasionally. The candles fought with the howling winds. As the rains slashed on the concrete, the voice started calling me once again, and it was as if I was trying to dive into my subconscious with every breath of sleep to look for this person. But every time I dived deeper, I had to come up for breath and back into reality. No matter how deep I dove… I was never able to see this person.

As the morning came, we got to see on our phones how thousands of trees had been uprooted across the state. Glass windows lay shattered, and to make things worse, there was a

power shortage across the affected areas. This was the height of CO VID, which meant everyone was stuck at home. In the small apartments around our neighbourhood, one could hear the audible discomfort. The lack of electricity meant, most importantly, there was no ceiling fan, which was a curse in the hot humid city of Kolkata. It also meant a scarcity of water. As there was no electricity, refrigerators had stopped working, and food and critical medicine could not be properly stored. Work— and life— virtually halted. The broken branches on the main streets meant that basic services and goods could not make it across too.

After the end of the first day, when nothing was done, I did not have the privilege of wallowing in my misfortune. I had to get out of the house and start calling all the neighbours out in a bid to unite everyone. Because of COVID, however, everyone was understandably hesitant. This was the biggest curse of COVID-19. In a country like India, and especially in a state like Bengal, people survive through very hard times knowing that their family and neighbours will be there to help them in times of need. But COVID-19 severed that helping hand. Nevertheless, staying home was no longer an option. Many of the neighbours answered my call and we went out into the streets together, wearing masks. We banged at the doors of the local leaders as well as the electricity department. In many vital places, because of the roads being closed, the electricity vans could not pass. Many of us took up axes and cleared 60 to 70-year-old trees which lay fallen on the ground. We shared each other's sweat— and cigarettes— with the COVID masks being nothing more than our face diapers. Water was scarce, so I hatched a plan to hijack electricity from the electric posts that were still standing to run the water generators. This helped our two neighbouring apartment buildings for a day. A sudden gush of energy recharged me in this apparent darkness. I decided that unless I finish this bloody PhD, I wouldn't die in peace. The first thing I did was

recharge my laptop. So, I used to walk up to my father's house a few kilometres away and made sure that I kept on with my work.

As the roads started clearing up, and our connection with other neighbourhoods started to be properly established again, we realised the scale of the destruction as well as the effect of the lack of electricity on people, especially the ones who had terminal patients at home. But things were much dire in the Sundarbans— people remained under water for days, living in makeshift tents. We and hundreds more collected food, clothes, and plastic sheets for the people in Sundarbans. Amphan caused more devastation than any other storm in the Sundarbans in the last 35 years. The devastation was immeasurable for the environment and the humans affected by it (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2020). Winds went up to 170 kph, and gusts of up to 190 kph. The mud and bamboo houses were devastated. The locals had some savings which could have got them through the pandemic, but now the storm created an unfathomable dire situation.

All the options for making a living were destroyed. As the embankments broke, salt water poured into the land. This meant freshwater fish in the ponds were killed, land became uncultivable for five years, and worst, most sources of drinking water disappeared. "Although farmers in Gosaba could cultivate their land, the yield has not been as it used to be. …Similarly, people couldn't get adequate economic benefits from the other sectors as well. For instance, fishing at present has stopped as it is time for hatching and fishermen will not be allowed to access the water for the next three months. But the irony here is that, fishermen with small boats are not allowed while trawlers are allowed. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) , which provides rural Indians with an opportunity to work for guaranteed income was affected last year due to the lockdown" (Prasad et al., 2020).

The impact of climate change was starkly visible, "...furious storms and coastal erosion from rising oceans, has forced many to migrate to the cities in recent years. But now with the coronavirus pandemic shutting down businesses and limiting mobility, villagers don' t have the option of moving to other places in search of work"(Biswas & Islary, 2021). This meant, such calamities also increased the chance of more human-animal conflict. Cyclone Amphan also damaged almost the entire length of the 100-kilometre nylon fence that had been erected to prevent tigers from straying into human habitations, said Krishnendu Basak of the private Wildlife Trust of India. The fence is key in reducing the number of tiger attacks on people… (Sengupta, 2020). Women were especially affected as often is the case for natural disasters. "In last one year alone, Kultali block has seen a total of 350 cases of domestic violence… 186 attempts to die by suicide and 72 deaths... (in) Gosaba block, 10 girls are reported to be missing due to trafficking…" (Biswas & Islary, 2021) .

What human beings create inch by inch over the years is taken away in a blink. Perhaps that is why we try to find meaning in everything… where there is none. What we fight for, what we dream, what we sow, what we hold close to our heart and hope to grow, is taken away in a blink. Is the meaning of everything beautiful… tragedy?

I started losing control over my reality somewhere on this path. I got startled very easily, lost my appetite, stopped shaving, and kind of stopped sleeping. Every time I tried to sleep, a woman's face would emerge in my vision. I did not know who this woman was, but I think… she scared me. I could not sleep in silence, so I had to keep a radio on by my bedside. It helped me get distracted, so that I could sleep for a few minutes.

On 25th of May, a grand old banyan tree— someone who kept us all rooted, my uncle Prabir Aich— passed away in the second wave of COVID. My beautiful Somma (My uncle's

wife) was not immediately informed of his passing away since we could not visit her at that time. Somma was also my mom's elder sister. Yet even though my mom knew about the incident, she spoke to her sister every day like nothing had happened. This went on for about a month. During this time, Somma would go up to my uncle's room and clean it, awaiting his return. We never got to even see his body properly and could only see it from afar. My brothers and I saw something being wrapped in a white cloth, brought out of the hospital, thrown in the back of the van, and driven away. Funny how a human being is denoted as a "body" after being forsaken by the life force. In the end, we are merely lumps of food awaiting to be eaten.

I went deeper and deeper in despair. Sometimes, late at night, when no one was around, I used to walk down to the ruins of my old house, which now lay naked and scarred like images of the allied trenches of the First World War. Next to these trenches, a patch of land still survived, and some flowering plants grew in the darkness, and next to this patch of land was my uncle' s house. On the first floor, my aunt and cousin and his family lived, and on the ground floor, my Mumma (Grandmother) lived with her care unit, suffering from Alzheimer's. On the third floor, there was a window that always remained open, and through which I could see my uncle watching TV every evening, wearing his blue lungi and white vest. I heard that Somma's maid had apparently seen someone watering the flower bush the last few nights, just before the morning. At 3.48 AM, as I look at that bush from my trenches, I see no one there watering the bush. I could still smell the aroma though from my bed beneath the surface. There, I took off my clothing and now lay naked, looking up at the stars. My skin merged with the centipedes and roots of the grass, and the osmosis of the wet soil soaked my heart and chest hair. I know the reality of the stars; I know that there remains nothing beyond this body of mine... till it does not.

The only reality is possibly those stars in the sky, be it in their absence. But I also knew something more fundamental and real than those illuminating beacons: my uncle was gone—from me, my family, and most importantly from Somma. Perhaps, I had only one thing to be content about: my grandma, who had Alzheimer's, at least did not realise that her son was no more. As I lay there in the shade of the sweaty night, I heard her laughing to herself from her room, there in the shade of the sweaty night.

Over the contour of the stooped over buildings in the neighbourhood, light started to gush onto the muddy sky. I had to get back home before the zombies who were the few who dared or were compelled to walk in the COVID-ridden roads would be out. Part of me was more scared of my little room than this mud, for today was the date I had set myself to get back to my Dictaphone recordings and start transcribing all the stories I had collected of shark bite incidents in the Sundarbans. I knew this could not be healthy for my mental state, but this was my purpose. And as such, I had to face them, come what may. To dissect these bite incidents, the first question I had to address was simple: Have there not been any shark attacks in the Sundarbans since 1938? As I found out, that was certainly not the case. But no one had documented these later incidents in any detail (at least openly available to the public) . However, there seemed to have certainly been references to shark attacks in Sundarban, even though it scarce (e.g., Chowdhury et al. 2013; Banerjee 2013) . From a preliminary ex amination of the incidents, it seems that the bites could have happened during any water-based activities, such as swimming, bathing, fishing, or boating. However, most of the bites happened during the harvesting of Meen. The incidents varied from small nips and cuts that people did not even realize before they were out of the water, to incidents of sharks charging people even to the riverbanks.

Gobinda recalled a story when he was crossing the Matla River on a steamboat 30 years ago. He could see a young woman wearing a pink sari standing knee-deep in the river water and fishing. Suddenly, she fell over into the water, and blood-curdling cries shattered the peace of the early morning as the murky water around her turned red fast. People rushed to help, and as they lifted her out of the water, they realized that a Kamot had bitten off her entire right foot. Another older gentleman recalled how a young boatman pushing a boat out of the jetty was pulled under when he went into waist-deep water. His friends went to help, but he had already lost too much flesh from the hips and calves due to the bite. People used the local remedy of sitting him down on a sack of sugar till help arrived.

Khitish also recalled an incident from some 30 years ago when he saw a man being dragged into the water by a Kamot. However, this large man was so strong that he hauled the fish out into the banks, even though chunks of his hamstrings were bitten off. Describing another instance, Krishna Kali Mandal, an expert on the region, mentioned that he remembered watching many times men crossing their cattle across the Matla River. Two men would be on each side of the cattle as they waded across the river. At least three times, he saw that in the middle of the crossing, the river would turn red. And when the cows got out of the water, some of them would have lost a leg.

These incidents were not uncommon in the region and went back to more than a hundred years. Sir Daniel Mackinnon Hamilton, often called the 'Father of Gosaba,' offered rewards to people for catching and killing tigers and sharks in the Sundarbans in the late 1800s (Mandal, 2018). However, the bites seemed to drastically increase when the Meen industry was introduced about 40 years ago, especially for women. Because of the limited scope for agriculture and other means to make a living, men worked in the jungles to gather fish,

crab, wood, and the prized Sundarban honey. That is where the 'accidents' happened. The first time I heard someone mention that "my brother had gone to the jungle and an accident happened," I was not sure what he meant. Did his brother fall off the boat? It turns out that tiger bites were so much a fact of life that they were locally called ' accidents.' So, considering the reality of life (and death) in the jungle, the women's job was to tend to their families, children, and homes. However, extreme poverty pushed them to wade into the murky waters of the nearby rivers to collect fish, crustaceans, and Meen, which earned them as little as 50 cents to $ 2 for an entire day's work. They waded in close rows in waist-deep waters and walked along the length of the river, which is where they encountered the Kamot. In my opinion, during the Meen harvesting practice, the duration of time the people spent in the water combined with the number of people creating commotion in the said water increased the chances of the Kamot attacks. In contrast, other activities did not require being in the water for such long stretches.

Krishna Kali Mandal told me stories that he had heard from the Panchayat Samiti Pradhan (President) Sudhagami Mridha. It appears that there have been a lot of incidents in the Rajatjubili Village, in or around the Patharnadi River. All these incidents are around 20 to 25 years old. In one incident, Kalimati was catching Meen in the water, when she lost her leg in a Kamot bite. She was only 15 or 16 at the time. Another incident happened to Mallik Sarkar while he was fishing. At the time, he was in standard nine or ten. There was another incident which happened to Bera Mandal, when he was 20 or 25 years old. Unfortunately, he died on the spot. The grandmother of Sudhagami, Mrs. Draupadi Mridha, also died from a Kamot bite. In 1993, Haru was attacked by a Kamot: "I had gone to collect Meen. The Kamot must have bit my leg in deep water, but I did not feel it. I felt as if something had hit me. I jumped to the shore, and I saw it had bitten off my calves.

I think it made a growling sound, but after that I passed out, and the others helped me. I don't know what happened after that." This "I don't know what happened after that" seems to be repeated time and time again in different incidents, when people will pass out due to shock, or lack of blood, only because of close knit communities where the peoples lives saved. The Jelepara village under the Satjelia Village Panchayat, had another devastating story. Nirmala Gyan (name changed) had gone down to collect Meen. The year was 2000, and she was around 35 at that time. There were three people in a row; she was in the middle. Something bumped her from behind (a usual strategy for sharks to assess potential prey is to bump with their snout). She turned around and saw a large dorsal fin in the water. By the time she could ask the person nex t to her to grab her, the shark had already begun biting down on her hip. The Kamot dragged her underwater. After a while, she managed to surface and push the shark away with her left hand. She swam to the riverbank, but the shark had already bitten off her hand. She could see the trail of her blood flowing downstream from the riverbank and the shark following it towards her with her hand in its mouth. She lost consciousness, only to regain her senses a few days later in the middle of the night at the Gosaba hospital. She received around 100 stitches from her calves to her buttocks. It took her six months to get over her physical injury but a year to get over the associated pains. However, even after 20 years, she can barely forget the trauma.

Shama recalled a shark attack she saw about 35 years ago. The incident took place at Sath Kaura, in Mitekhali. A young woman was in the water catching Meen around 1 PM. She was 23 and was about to be married the next day. Shama was just about to get in the water when suddenly, she heard the girl shouting. There was blood everywhere as she was being pulled by something, deeper and deeper into the water. She was crying that she could not feel her leg anymore. Shama's father

jumped in the water after her and rescued her. In those few seconds, she had lost huge chunks of flesh from her right hips and her entire right leg. They took her to the banks, there was a small shop there from where they got 5 kgs of sugar and put it on her wounds, while others went to get a doctor from the town. But by the time they were back, she was no more. They knew it was a Kamot, so they caught a kitten, tied it with a rope and threw it in the water. The waves were constantly taking the kitten out in the middle of the river, and the little creature struggled. The splashing and cries of the kitten seemed to have attracted the sharks. I have heard these strategies used in other instances in the region, sometimes in retaliation. Similar strategies of using water splashing have been utilized for generations in shark-catching communities (Ségur, 2020) . As the people waited patiently in front of the water closely observing their bait, they saw the Kamot come up in a sudden movement and grab the kitten. The rope had a big hook on it which stuck inside the Kamot's mouth. They knew that they wouldn't be able to hold it longer, and so, started letting go of the line gradually and tied the rope around the trees. The men of the village struggled with the Kamot the entire day. The next morning, it was finally caught and brought to the Ampur market. Shama recalled how they all went to see it in the evening. The Kamot wasn' t very large, but it was very thick (Petmota) . Shama never got in the water after that.

Jatha told a story of an incident that happened in Shai mari-Pancha Mukh. One of his friends, Bishwanath, had gone into waist-deep water to catch fish with his hand when the Kamot grabbed him and dragged him down in the water. "There were four-five of us, 20-21 years back. We were on the boat, and Bishwanath's brother jumped into the water and pulled him out. We could see the fin of the Kamot, but after he was brought out, the Kamot disappeared".

Mahima's sister was caught by a Kamot in the same area. "Her body was being "chupacche-tulche" (being submerged

and raised again) ... and “khabla- khabla kore khaccilo” (eating by biting in chunks). The Kamot was coming and taking pieces of the flesh off her. At one point, the Kamot had let go of her, and my father-in-law jumped in the water and dragged her out of the water. As he was bringing her to the riverbanks, the Kamot came back and took another bite, and we could see the spray of blood coming out of her. She was 13 or 14 years old at that time but died from the trauma.” Jatha recalled another incident when a young boy was in the water near Jayrampur. He was barely 13 or 14 years old. The incident took place about 14 years ago. As the boy stood in the water catching Meen, the shark came, took a bite, and moved away. It repeated this a few times in a matter of a minute. They told the boy to hold onto the net and pulled him out, but by the time they were able to bring him back to the shore, he was gone. They were angry at the government: people didn’t have anything to eat on one hand and were not protected from the wild animals on the other. The government seemed to not care about them at all. Ironically, however. if one touched even the fur of the tiger, they ended up in jail for life.

Another lady shared her incident which took place about 15 years ago, near the river of Kochukhali in Rangabalia. She was about 35 then. It happened around 2-2.30 PM, in boishakmash (month of April-May). She was catching Meen and was bhangan nadi (deep crevasses in the riverbed). There were two people in front of her. She had put her left leg in the water and held her net in her left hand. With her right hand, she was holding on to the muddy ground in the water. She felt something bump against her knees. She never used to go in the water when she was married, but after her husband died, she had no other way and was compelled to. Everyone used to say, ‘kamot jano nonapokar moto khai’ (Sharks bite like insets in the river, and the bites create a tingling sensation on the skin) . “ When it came back and struck my leg, I lost the net from my left hand, and I touched its body. I felt as if I was touching

something huge underwater. I understood something was happening, and I jumped and came back to the riverbank. The people in front of me shouted at me asking what happened. But I was speechless. When I was getting out of the water, I was still not feeling any pain. But as I was out, the itching began in my left leg. It left 3 bites in my inner thigh, and the leg was split open. I shouted out to others that something had bitten me, come and help me. I was taken home. A local doctor came and gave me tetanus injection and had to cut off some of the flesh and stitch me. Every five years, I used to take an injection. Now, after my father has died, I no longer get that injection, so I am having more trouble with the leg. I remember the skin was very smelly, and I had that smell in my hand for more than a week. For more than a year, I dreamt of them, and felt that something was getting hold of me. I never went back into the water. I am still afraid. But now, I have no one to take care of me."

Rima Gayan had a traumatic experience from an incident that happened 16– 17 years ago, when she was about 20 years old. Her husband had been taken by a tiger, and she suffered a terrifying incident with a Kamot in the river at Santjelia. While half-submerged in the water, the Kamot bit her on the neck. Fortunately, others nearby quickly lifted her out of the water and rushed her to the hospital. The incident occurred around 2– 3 P.M. At that time, she was catching fish when she was swept away by a wave. She did not see the shark but found herself submerged, with only her hand visible above the water. Overwhelmed with fear, she recalls shivering uncontrollably, "like a storm." Since then, she has been afraid of going into the water. However, after the deaths of her husband and son, she occasionally has no choice but to face her fears. The incident left her traumatised, rendering her speechless and causing psychological difficulties for several months. A traditional healer, or gunin, had visited her for a few months, which gradually helped her recover. After about 15 years, she

finally mustered the courage to enter the water again. The spot where the incident occurred is very deep and constantly wet, and its true depth remains unknown. On that particular day of the accident, the weather had been overcast, adding to the ominous atmosphere.

The shark bite incident of Rekha Mondol happened in the Vidyadhari River in 2002. She was a young child of about seven when she went into the water to catch Meen for the first time. The Kamot got hold of her and dragged her to the middle of the river. She was submerged in the water, but her father was able to drag her out. She was then admitted to Nil Ratan Sarkar Hospital for 3 months. The local parties have now instructed to stop harvesting Meen in her region as the constant walking in the mud is causing the river sides to collapse. After the accident, she could not do any heavy work, not even carry a pitcher of water. She used to have nightmares of being attacked by sharks, which a gunin finally helped resolve. However, even facing the intense fear, she had to get in the water to catch Meen after 3 years. She wanted to get rid of the creatures. She didn't want others to get hurt as she had. So, she had talked with the Panchayat Pradhan (head of the local community) , who told her that until they got help from the government, they could not do anything. She finally said, "Among the two women who were in front of me when it happened, the older lady was later bitten by a Kamot, after a month of my incident. She got medicine, but her pain did not decrease. She lost her husband, and in that pain, and poverty, she consumed poison and died."

The latest confirmed case of Kamot bite we could document was from 2013. It happened during the Ganga Puja when a young boy of 12 was reportedly bitten and taken away by two sharks simultaneously, while swimming in the river. H is corpse was never recovered. There are a few versions of this story that I encountered, and the best information I could gather was something like this: It happened in the Gabindapur

jetty ghat. Everyone was bathing, but the shark started biting one of the two brothers. Everyone could see the squirts of blood and the water turning red. All got out of the water, but the big brother jumped in to save the younger one when the shark took a bite of him too. By that time, the shark had eaten the younger kid, and nothing was left from the waist down. A witness of the incident thinks that there were more than one Kamot, or how else the older brother was bitten at the same time as the younger brother was being eaten? The younger brother died, but the older one survived. I must admit, although I have been trying to avoid using this name in this book, this incident has eery similarities with one of the famous scenes from Jaws.

"Bagh dekhli chare na, Kumir Dhorli Thoie Na, Arr Kamot Akk Khabla Na ne jabe na" (If a tiger sees you, it does not let you go, if a crocodile catches you, it drowns you, and if a Kamot catches you, it does not let you go without a bite) : a local woman shared with me in despair.

As I finished typing the last sentence, I had to run to the bathroom and throw up. As I turned on the shower to wash myself, I closed my eyes, trembling as if I could feel bite marks on my skin and flesh. I kept on telling myself: "I t' s ok, it' s ok, it's over… it's all over." My eyes caught a glance of the fogged-up mirror— an old naked man with lines in his dark sunken eyes was looking back at me. H is salt and pepper hair was now a wet, matted, full-grown white mess— a development which took less than a year. His hairy fat belly, once filled with love perhaps, is now only filled with disgust and self-pity. I did not know this man. More than anything else, I think I started going into a spiral of guilt as I thought: this man here is indulging in the sadness about his petty Ph.D., book, and shark adventures, while a few kilometres away, there are human beings being eaten alive in the waters next to their home. Here, he is a grieving, international traveller, while

there, people does not have a roof over their heads and at times, ground underneath their feet.

In that following month, like slashes of knives, life made me aware of six deaths following my uncle's. Someone's young as a soft sapling brother was gone, someone' s tall, imposing like a mountain father was gone, and someone who left no one behind to cry for was gone too… all in an instance. I stayed quiet, I lived on. I decided to finish and resubmit my Ph.D. thesis as a distraction from the insanity. And finally, I did it. All that I needed to finish was now Iridescent Skin, the book. I could not stop; my mortal duty was to finish this book. Like an automated robot, I used to stay awake and work on my book. I was convinced I was going to die, so I kept on looking for someone with whom I could bestow the responsibility of making sure my book was finished before death found me.

One day, amid working on the last phase of this book, I started asking myself: What happened to the women after they survived these shark attacks? What kind of help did they get? I talked to people who have suffered shark bites in the US, Australia and New Zealand, where the situation is generally a bit different. If nothing, the initial medical support that people get is much more sophisticated. Incidents often happened close to beaches, and people were airlifted. But here in the dark Sundarbans, the stories are different. The pandemic was still raging, but Ashim da informed me there was a Doctor in Sonarpur, Kolkata, who had spent a long time in the Sundarbans and might have some information about Kamot bite incidents. I connected with him immediately, and on a Saturday morning, Dr Girendranath Mondol granted me an appointment over a cup of tea at his home in Sonarpur. Dr. Mondal has spent 28 years at the Gosaba Block Primary Health Centre, from 1984 to 2012. He treated more than 50 shark bite victims and never lost a patient. Dr. Mondol opened up a dimension of the interaction I had no idea about.

24th February 2021

Interview at Doctor Mondal's home, Sonarpur Raj: "Dr. Mondal. can you tell me a little bit about your stay in Sundarban and treating Kamot victims?"

Dr. Mondal: "I have stayed in Gosaba Block Primary Health Centre for 26 years. In the beginning, my posting was in Cooch Behar. After that, I came back to Namkhana, and then to Gosaba. I was transferred, but no one wanted to come and stay there. So incidentally, I had to spend all those years there. In all those years, I have treated anything from 50 to 60 shark attack victims. None of the patients that I have treated have, from what I remember, lost their lives. Communication was really bad in those days. In 1981, the health centre was established, and I went there in 1984. I stayed there till the January of 2012. We had access to all the medicines, but at that time, the medicines did not go directly and had to be transferred by boat. And the medicines had to be stored for six months."

Raj: "Do you think the bites have decreased over the years?"

Dr Mandal: "This all happened from 1985 to 2012 and, I did not feel that it decreased over time. Every year, incidents happened. I don't know how much it has decreased now, but people catch less Meen nowadays. People need to go to the jungle less, and the new generation now leave the villages and go to cities to work. Especially in the last 10 years, the jungle is much more restricted. But still, I'm not convinced that the biting has decreased."

Raj: "Did the locals use to have any remedies?"

Dr. Mondal: "We were invited to various fisheries camps and panchayet programs. I told them that when they go in the water, they should carry sugar with them, because sugar works in haemostasis. [This traditional knowledge needs further positivistic investigation; however, it should not be annulled

merely because of its source. Indeed, some evidence backing such treatment strategies can be found in modern research (Mphande et al., 2007a; Wiggins, 2018)] .

Raj: “Did they use to tell you how the Kamot looked?”

Dr. Mondal: “I am sure they had weapons like knives with them, but then animals would escape, and they could not get it out of the water, so they could not see what it looked like, also in the stressful situation looking at the fish was the least of their concern. I have treated incidents when the shark had bit a person’s leg, he got hold of the mouth, but because of the sharp teeth, it cut off his arms, and escaped leaving the bone in a clean cut, like cut by a hacksaw.”

Raj: “So when the bites happened, how did you treat them?” Dr. Mondal: “I have treated patients with so much injury that it took 3-4 months to recover. They used to take old lungees, put the sugar in and tightly tie it to the injury, till they reached me. The infection rate was quite low, I think because of the high salinity in the water. Because when the bites happen on land, we use saline water to clean it, so in the river with very high salinity they were safe. Only in the last 10 years, had I seen electricity there, for 20 years it was just a lantern. Sometimes, they needed intravenous fluid for 5-10 days, along with antibiotics and ointments.”

Raj: “ What was the worst case you saw of a shark bite incident?” Dr Mandal: “The worst cases I saw were when the sharks caught the victims by the side of the stomach, as sometimes the intestines would come out. But as long as there were no injuries on the intestines, I could take care of it. Because there was no other medical help, I did all I needed to, even pushing the intestines in with my fingers, and pulling the skin to stitch it up. There was simply no other way. Even if there was a bit of bleeding or soil, it was naturally washed out.

Sometimes it took me as much as seven hours to do the stitching."

Raj: "Some of the patients complain that they have long-term pain from their bites. Why do you think that happened, sir?"
Dr. Mondal: "If the larger nerves were severed, there was no regeneration there, so they had some ongoing issues. Often, the patients did not come to me initially and just had the local practitioners patch them up which caused infections."
As the meeting ended, I thanked him for his time. While finishing my cup of tea and orange cream biscuit, I was sharing my frustration with him that I still had not figured out why there was no artistic representation of sharks in the region. Dr. Mondal just said: "Out of sight, out of mind. What we don't see in our eyes, does not affect our imagination." I knew, then, that I had to go back to the Sundarbans, this time to know more about the sharks themselves, and if I could bring more attention to their plight as much as the humans.

My father had a small farmhouse on the outskirts of Kolkata, at Arapanch in Sonarpur. No one lived there, so he was gracious enough to allow me to live there a few days a week. I would get some space to breathe and finish my New Zealand book. I am sure my mom also got a bit of breathing space from his unemployed man, deep in depression. I had taken an electric kettle and an electric stove with me. At the centre of the room, I put a long rope to hang a punching bag I was planning to purchase. I must confess here that I am a bit hazy on the timeline during this period, so I am not sure if I stayed there for a couple of months or a year. Everything, from this time, seems jumbled up. I was getting the subliminal feeling that I had lost something deep, something which I knew all throughout my life and beyond. I did not know what it was... but I knew I had lost it. The year went ahead in a blur, with unprecedented heat, COVID-19, lack of money, and frequent electric shutdowns due to the heavy use of AC around

the neighbourhood. Each unending day somehow rolled into another. I was awarded my PhD, but a week after that, I received the news that New Zealand had closed its doors for me. The globetrotting, adventurer-academic image I had created bit by bit in the last seven years since leaving my old dwellings in India shattered in front of my eyes. Still, the work had to be done, and to be honest, I do not know why I felt compelled to keep on going at it. Perhaps, it was in my veins, or perhaps I knew that I had to learn about the perils of the predatory species— and how this human-animal conflict has shaped their lives. Deep down, I knew that I had to learn more about the sharks themselves.

As I was planning to head back to Sundarban again, Cyclone Y ash made landfall at the border of Odisha and West Bengal on 26th May 2021, almost exactly a year from Amphan. But about 200 km further east of the Sundarbans, around 2 crore people were affected, and 3,00,000 homes were damaged, as were the fish stock, and cultivable land. Then came the second wave of COVID. The breaking of the embarkments was causing grave problems as well, whatever people tried to build the last year was gone. Just gone…again. The Wire wrote an extensive report on the matter:

> "People didn't die this time in the cyclone [because of quick evacuations], but they might die of poverty... Amphan last year damaged everything, and within a year Y ash came to damage us even more... hundreds of houses are still underwater. The base of many houses got washed away as the remaining structure stands on bamboo."

The report wrote about the devastation of fish and land:

> "We were welcomed by the stinking smell of dead fish, floating on inundated ponds and farmlands. As we went forward, we saw villages underwater. The colour of stagnant water also changed from green to dark brown.

In their interviews, the locals explained, “ Tell me what is the point of living a life like this? We will have to live this way until we die. I wish we better die than living like this” (Ghosh, 2021) .

Jayanta Basu wrote an amazing piece on climate change and the Sundarban cyclone:

“ Cyclones have been common in the Bay of Bengal for centuries, but they are getting more severe because the sea surface is now warmer, leading to more evaporation and stronger winds. A recent World Bank report pointed out that the long-term trend of cyclone landfalls, between 1877 and 2016, shows northern Odisha and the Sundarbans are the highest-impact zones…an increase in the frequency of post-monsoon cyclonic disturbances in the Bay of Bengal by 50% by the period 2041-2060 as a result of increased greenhouse gas emissions…Cyclones are working in tandem with other climate change-triggered phenomena like intense rainfall and sea-level rise…the Council on Energy, Environment and Water – a think tank – identified the areas in and around the Sundarbans as an “ extreme climate hotspot” due to cyclone impacts…Mangroves are being continually mauled mercilessly to build illegal hotels and resorts in the Sundarbans, and hardly any action is taken” (Basu, 2021) .

He brought up another important factor “prawn farmers who need brackish water damage embankments in the dead of night”(Basu, 2021). This meant that catching Meen was harming the environment and hence, was stopped recently in many places… which means that the shark bites may stop too. But why did the Kamot bites decrease in the last 20 years? Is it just because people go less in the water? Or are there truly less sharks in the water?

Sharks are migratory animals that often traverse vast distances across international waters, making them

particularly vulnerable to threats such as overfishing and illegal trade. Sharks in India face severe threats primarily due to human activities. Overfishing, driven by high demand for shark fins, meat, and other products, continues despite a ban on finning, with illegal fishing and bycatch further depleting populations. Habitat loss from coastal development and pollution, particularly in mangroves and coral reefs, disrupt critical breeding and feeding areas. Additionally, climate change ex acerbates these challenges by altering ocean conditions, such as rising temperatures, acidification, and shifting currents, which affect sharks' migratory patterns, breeding cycles, and prey availability. These combined pressures have placed significant stress on shark populations, endangering their ecological role in marine ecosystems.

In the murky Sundarbans, not only the sharks sometimes eat humans, but the humans eat the sharks as well and even compete with them for food. And both suffer from the degradation of the environment and lack of fish. I needed to talk to the scientist who had worked in the region with sharks. When I visited the ZSI centre in Canning, I noticed, that there were some formaldehyde specimens of sharks stored in their archives, I was curious about the scientist who had collected those samples. After pursuing her for a year, I was finally able to get an interview. At the end of the interview, I realized that she was primarily an archaeologist and had no interest in shark research, and the specimens she had collected were from Kakdwip, because honestly, she did not have any other project at hand. However, I was able to identify the only scientist who did considerable work on sharks in the region, Dr. Mishra. I diligently tried to contact Dr. Mishra for years, but he did not get back to me for an interview. At the same time, I knew it was of much value to juxtapose knowledge from science experts with that of the fishermen and other local experts of the region to have a deeper understanding about the lives of the sharks.

As I was speaking to the locals about the lives of the sharks, a Kamot bite victim felt that she came in the way of the shark. She said, “What was the fish supposed to do? Besides, the Kamots must have been running out of food due to overfishing, so they were biting humans.” Shamol, a fisherman from the region, felt that now there are fewer sharks in the water due to the dramatic degradation of habitat. He said that there had been a tourism boom in the region, causing significant environmental strains. The increase of motorized boats using cheap kerosene instead of petrol, food wrappers, and other plastic waste causes water pollution, which is harming the lives of the sharks and other fish, creating pressure on the fishing community. Furthermore, he pointed out that the river’s depth has also decreased over the decades, and trawlers near the ocean mouth catch many fish, especially the bigger ones, which may mean that the lives of the animals have been jeopardized. The milk sharks, for instance, were available a lot, but now, they are much less in the water.

Kaji, a boatsman, explained to me, “ In the 70s, the number of motorised boats was quite low; they were generally long distance boats. In the 80s, the Bhot-bhotis were introduced in the region. Those machines, at the time, had much louder sound than now, and it was harder to control their speed too. So, these boats started to be used all across the Sundarbans, even near the forests. Because of all these boats, people formed different unions, and these were used for fishing and transport. Many of the sharks were mutilated by the propellors, and the sound pollution was harmful to them. So, in the rivers like Vidyadhari, Ishamati, and Piyali, where the sharks used to come from, their numbers decreased slowly. Here, they come in groups when they are young, but as they get bigger, about 5-6 feet, they travel alone. The fishermen would catch about 8 to 10 or more younger Kamots at the same time in their nets, but not the bigger ones. There were rumours that the oil of these Kamots was very expensive, and the skin could be used

for different things [The only problem here is, they were not rumours]. We used to see the smaller Kamots being hung and sold in all the markets back then—in Canning, Kakdwip, Diamond Harbour, Sagar Island, Mousimi Island, and Jingira Island. The islands where there are forests, we used to observe drastic changes after storms. Places that were usually shallow, would suddenly get very deep, and the other way around. So, the sharks that used to come close to the human settlements might have changed their course too. We think there are two kinds of Kamot here. The ones in Ganga, which could have been spotted till Nadia. And then the ones that could be seen in the different forest reveries. They used to come here because, near the river mouth, the currents and whirlpools would bring a lot of different kinds of fish that the Kamots hunted. The sharks who used to be in the Ganga had strange characteristics. Even the normal nets that were used to catch fish could not hold them because of their sharp bites. Even now, they are sometimes caught, but because of our government's rules, people generally burn their body or get rid of them, to avoid getting into legal troubles."

Mr. Mondol from Pahirala, who had been fishing in the rivers for 35 years, recently retired from it after his brother had an accident three years ago. " The largest Kamot I have caught that eats people was about 60-70 kg(Here, the size of a fish is measured not in length, but in weight) . They have very thin, double-layered teeth. I killed that Kamot, and I kept the jaw for a while. Whenever we had fish on the side of our boat, we would see the Kamots come, turn on their side, and take the fish off our line. Most of the time, we wouldn't even realise that it had come and bitten off the entire catch from the side of our boat because of its extremely sharp teeth. The Kamots here usually have a lip like Sankar Mach (stingrays), and the mouth moves. They would turn to their side while taking the fish off our line. The Kamots were there a lot, and we could get them just with a fishing rod. Now, because of the trawlers and the

special nets we can't even see them. Even the dolphins are caught in the nets, and they cannot be seen any more. Near the Mohona, Kendo, Talpatti and in Kajikhali 10-15 years ago, there were a lot more sharks to be seen, and the river was very deep. Where there are more fish, there are more Kamot, the same was in Kaji Khali."

People don't usually use many Kamot products, and the ones who eat them locally are seen as lower class. Jatha said, "Sometimes we used to eat them, and they tasted nice. When we used to cut them up, we saw the layers of teeth. If your finger touched them, you would start to bleed." Before, Jatha and his mates would go out to the sea in the early mornings, stay there for a couple of hours, and catch Kamot and other fish. They would use the latter to make baits for the Kamots and bigger fish that they wanted to get for the market. They would come back, around 4 and 5 P.M. or even in the evenings, and catch fish in the large jungle riverine. They would then use saws to cut them into smaller pieces and dry them to be used as bait the next day. I met two other fishermen—Bolai Mistry and Sujoy Mondol—and listened to their stories while smoking a couple of cigarettes together. Bolai has been catching fish for 15 to 16 years, and Sujoi for about 30 to 35 years. They used to see Kamots before, but not so much now. The largest one they had seen was about 10-12 feet. They never caught the big ones, but used to catch the 'dudhe' Kamot, and made bait for crabbing. The trawlers at the mouth of the rivers get them the most, and the volume has increased drastically in the last 20 years too. Now, ' mono-phil' nets are also used in catching the sharks. Not only is it bad for the Kamot, but also for all the other animals. All the animals get tangled and cannot get out. These nets have more elasticity, which prevent them from tearing away. Even birds get caught in these nets. Before, there used to nylon nets, which were comparatively less harmful. Now, they worry that all the animals are vanishing.

I had an interview with Haren Mondol in the Jahar colony. He had been catching fish for more than 60 years. With a cigarette in hand, he shared many a story with me. “When I was 14 days old, I lost my father. But my first experience with the Kamots came when an uncle took me to the jungle for the first time after I had turned six. I saw very large ones, and the largest one I saw was probably 5-6 feet in length. The uncle and his mates had large hand hooks, and they used to catch the large fishes with long lines.”

I encountered a problem while interviewing them. Since these people had so much dense knowledge about the water, it was always tricky to keep the discussions centred and focused towards the Kamot.

Raj: “How did they look?”

Haren: “ The back looked like sand, and the stomach was white.” Raj: “Have these bites decreased in the last decades?” Haren: “ Yes, because there is not much Kamot in the water now. Even in the last 6 to 7 years, I have not seen any Kamot. Like the others, we too used to catch Meen in this river, which we call the “Dutta Nadi.” It lies close to Pachol and Garal.”

Raj: “Why are there no more Kamots?”

Haren: “ They have caught them all—the bigger and smaller ones, all of them. But before, around the ‘ aghran mash’ (November-December), we used to go close to the ocean for about 5 to 6 days, catch Kamot, and chakul (rays), and use them for bait for fish and crab. We used to catch the Kamot on hooks only.”

Raj: “Were you ever afraid of them?”

Haren: “ Yes of course. We were of the land, and they were of the water. It is their world, and so we were afraid of them, and used to be very careful around them.”

Raj: “Did you ever see any Kamot bite people?”

Haren: “ I have seen a few incidents of the Kamot bites. We had a local boy, for example, who was in the jungle with us and was catching fish in waist-deep water. The Kamot came and bit his thigh off. This happened about 18-20 years back.”

Raj: “Did you eat them?”

Haren: “ I never ate their flesh, but others used to. I have broken my hand, so can not go to the jungle anymore.”

The tea came, and we stopped for a break. I used the time to listen back at the Dictaphone. As I was listening to the recording, I could hear the drag of the cigarette puff. The interview continued, and I once again found myself remembering my Dadu, and wondered how happy he would have been to see that I was working with fish now.

Raj: “Why did the Kamot decrease in the water?”

Haren: “ The big trawlers now go to the sea to catch fish. They remain there for 10-12 days, and their activities extend from the mohona [river mouth] to deep oceans. In the last few years, everything is gone.‘Akhon oder pakhna gulo lakh takai bikri hoi’ [Now their fins are sold for lakhs of rupees].”

Raj: “Does anyone sell them now?”

Haren: “All of this has happened in the last 2 decades. Before that, no one bothered much with these Kamots. They used to cut the fins off, take out the liver and the oil, and throw the body in the water. The dead bodies used to float in the water. The ships mostly came from Kolkata and other places. They used to put large nets and machines to understand where the Kamots were. The big nets used to bring up everything, and along with them the Kamot. The few that are found now, are still sold in the local markets of Kolkata, and are used for fish fry. In 2004, there was a seminar in Canning organised by

Jadavpur University. Dr. Mahua Ghosh and Suhsash Ghosh were present there. They talked about how the oceanic fish from these regions are great for fast food. They admitted how a lot of them go to Kolkata, where they are not only cheap but also healthy to eat. Now, it is illegal, but still available in the black market. Even now, people come from Kolkata and Canning come and bargain for the fins. They offer around 500-600 rupees for each kg. But I tell them that I can't. That I do not know where they are. We used to catch so much in a few hours, but now even after spending an entire day in the water, you may not catch a single one. They are long gone."

I came back to Kolkata and stayed in my father' s house again. In isolation, all the shapes and sounds around me started taking unfamiliar forms. A hooting of the owl would wake me up, and I would distinctly hear that someone was calling me. Scattered fireflies in the field looked like men returning late at night with lit bidi (a type of indigenously rolled cigarette) . A sudden touch of the edge of the blanket I was sleeping in would make me feel like a big hairy spider was crawling over my body. Perhaps, in its more immediate form, the rope hanging in the centre of the room started manifesting itself as a singular banyan vine rooting through the terrace and swaying in front of my eyes.

COVID was slowly calming her muscles and nerves down; perhaps she was ready for a slumber after the havoc she had wrecked. India never really accepted the loss it went through during the COVID-19 pandemic. Deep in my heart, I felt that if and when it is over, we will one day all fall on our knees and weep for the ones who passed away. My friend Sayantan's younger brother Bittu chose to drown himself one beautiful morning in a pond close to our house. The authorities and his friends looked for him all through the day after they had found a note in his bedroom— a note that said he had gone to kill himself. Only in the late evening was his body found, plump with sweet water of the pond. He had emerged unhurt and

silent in the middle of the water body. Nikhil, one of my father's friend, chose to hang himself. He was a kind soul and a brilliant artist, who had lost everything after his wife passed away the year before. My beautiful friend and brother Sudip, a talented painter and a longtime martial artist, passed away in a COVID-related heart attack. I was more angry at him than sad about him— angry that he did not even let me know he was going away forever.

3.33 AM

Arapanch, Sonarpur

Staying in that isolated house, I constantly had night terrors. Locals said that the area was haunted, and even the caretakers of the house never slept in it. They claimed that they had heard footsteps of someone walking on the second floor. I used to get up at 3.33 AM. My logic was simple: if I was up, then it was already the morning. Ghosts and goblins only live in the night, so there was nothing to be afraid in the morning. In the middle of the winter, out on the terrace, it was a deep ocean of night.

As I stepped out with a menthol cigarette and some black coffee, the dense foggy night in front of me reminded me of deep dives in the Pacific. The distant passing train was like mournful whale songs and the intermittent stars were like bioluminescent algae. I was startled every once in a while, as if a shark was stalking me in the ocean of mist afront. After a couple of hours of sitting in the darkness, a mournful azan woke up the neighbourhood, as it did to my blind eyes. Far across the cold field, the sky would turn purple, and geese in the ponds nearby would wake up the neighbourhood with their playful splashing of the water.

Last night, when I was in my Mom's house, there was a sudden clang of the doorbell. A large brown box was delivered in the courier. After disinfecting the box , I opened it, and in it were five copies of my book 'Iridescent Skin: A Multispecies

Journey of White Sharks & Caged Humans'. I handed it to my mom and looked at her smiling face. H er dumb boy had published a book about his global shark adventure. I gave Upal and Mom a copy, and I opened one for myself before I headed to Sonarpur. Now, I am sitting on the foggy blue terrace of my father's house on the outskirts of the city. I can hear fox es by that old shrine where a tiger was hunted a 100 years ago. The full moon in the starry sky creates abstract figures of shadow and light, who look at me as silent souls. These souls and spirits haunt and co-exist with the living in the jungles of the Sundarbans, and they travel through my body, and my dream, and manifest in tears and shivers. "I remember the time I saw one some 30 years ago. It was late afternoon; we were close to the banks of a forest. As we were sailing by, I could see a woman sitting on top of a coconut tree. Her grey hair was open and flowing in the river breeze. We knew one of them also used to sit atop a banana tree, just on the opposite bank from where we are sitting right now. All the people knew she stayed in that tree, but did not bother any humans, and the humans did not bother them... They were just there, just part of our life." Such were the stories of the spirits in the Sundarbans, as shared by an old fisherman.

I was told a similar story by another fisherman who had been fishing in the water for half a century. One evening, some 20 years ago, they had gone to catch crab in the jungle. Shambhu, the fisherman, was on the boat when another one of his friends was just about to enter the jungle. All of a sudden, he stopped on his path. He was much more experienced than Shambhu, so Shambhu gathered that if he had stopped then something was not right. His friend slowly indicated Shambhu to come towards him. As he did, he turned his head towards the jungle. Shambhu could see in the distant tree, someone's long hair cascading down the forest. They could not figure out what it was, but as they started to step towards it, came a heavy gust, and in a blink of an eye, it vanished out of existence. To

this day, he could not explain what it was, but the only explanation he could think of was perhaps a demon.

One day, back in the 70s, Khitish had come to the jungle with a tiger research launch. One late evening, at around 8 PM, he was sitting on top of the launch near a place called Kalash. Suddenly, he heard a loud cry of a woman coming from the jungle. He knew he did not hallucinate it as he saw all the birds fly out after that and heard the deer shouting. It was as if the loud cry had vibrated across the jungle. The crew and a forest officer from the deck below came running up, enquiring if he was ok. When he had asked what it was, they simply replied, 'Begomori.'

The officer returned with a big recorder, and stood there, alert. He said that he had heard this sound often but had no evidence, so this time, he had brought this recorder to document it. But they never heard it again. Begomori, or "Baghe jake mare" (the one who is killed by a tiger) is the spirit of the ones who are taken away by the maneaters (usually voice of a woman) . They are known to make this sound in the jungle and is usually heard in places where tiger attack incidents happen. Khitish told them,

"This must be a joke." Of course, he was using his rational mind. In the morning, one of the crew called him out on the deck and asked him to look at the riverbank. The boat was in deeper water, but Khitish saw way up in the bank where there was a Garang wood stump staked in the mud. In that stump, a torn piece of weathered red cloth was dancing in the morning wind. Khitish asked what it was, and the man replied, "When someone is taken by a tiger, they put a piece of wood in the mud, and tie a piece of red cloth on it, so that people become alert."

Similar accounts have been heard of, such as the 'Begho-Bhoot' The word Begho comes from the Bengali word Baagh, meaning 'tiger'. Begho-Bhoot are ghosts of people who were killed or eaten by the tigers in the Sundarbans. Local folktale

suggests that these apparitions frighten people who enter the jungle and lead them to tigers. They are also said to make the noise of a tiger roar to scare villagers. Another folklore creature is the Banshis, or forest musicians. These are believed to be mythical creatures that dwell in the depths of the Sundarbans. It is said that their haunting melodies can enchant anyone who hears them, luring them deeper into the forest. Netidhopani, an ancient temple in the Sundarbans, is believed to be haunted by restless spirits. Legends speak of a group of 16th-century sailors who sought shelter in the temple during a storm and mysteriously vanished. There are also stories of ghosts in Marichjhapi.

Many years ago, when Khitish was hiding from the authorities and lived with the fishermen for nine and a half months, he came across many such folktales. “I was most wanted then: the police wanted to shoot me at sight, Congress wanted to kill me, and since I did not follow the rules of my party, they wanted to kill me too. I had seen many things in the jungle. All I had was some pastels to do my drawing and a little flute I used to play. One night, when all were asleep, I had come up from my little space in the gally where I used to hide. I was sitting on the top of the boat when I heard someone call me “Khitish”. When I heard it the third time, I felt it was someone I knew. I remembered that when I was young, I stayed in a neighbouring village. There was a grandma who used to take care of me. She had passed away many years ago due to cholera, and—I realised—it was her voice that called me by my name. We were close to the riverbank, and after the voice stopped, I started looking around everywhere. In the jungles, the moon lit up the trees, and I suddenly could see some of the bushes rustling. And I felt I could see someone in white standing there. Deep down, I thought it resembled her. I saw the apparition for a minute or so. But then suddenly there was nothing. I wanted to see or hear her again, and stayed awake the rest of the night. But nothing happened. And I never

got any explanation for it." There were stories of forbidden temples, where he had heard the sound of conch shells and symbols. The locals used to say that only good people could hear that, to which Khitish snickered because he was running for his life at that time. "When the boat was anchored during the night, it used to change its direction. Sometimes, the moon would be to my right, and sometimes to my back. And I used to see someone floating mid-air in the jungle. Beautiful nights, especially after the rain, followed by the slippery moonlight on top of the wild trees, gave me particular delight." I asked him whether he thought that the stories of ghosts too were decreasing in the region. He said, " Yes, ' Manus barche, bhoot komche' (People are increasing, and the ghosts are decreasing)."

I do not claim to know the objective validity of these experiences. However, they reveal something deeper about the culture and lives of the people in the region. The Begomori, for instance, I think was the symbol of the loss of our loved ones due to the unforgiving jungle, and all I could feel from the stories and cultural manifestations was a deep sorrow about the land and the women. The women who were lost in the earthly realm, the same way they had lost their husbands or their legs. In their death, they did not even get an eternity of rest, but their spirit hauled aimlessly across the dark forest.

Lost in my thoughts, I could feel the sun coming up in Arapanch. My book was in my hand, and unknowingly, I opened it to the last page of the text.

"The taxi is here, a freshly bathed yellow Ambassador with blue stripes. A Bihari gentleman, ready for his first trip to the Kolkata Netaji International Airport. Why am I going again? Near the end of 'Limelight' before his final show, when Terry asks Calvero, why he insists on going on with the show when he said he hated the theatre, Calvero replies, 'I do, I also hate the sight of blood, but it is in my veins,' maybe it is in 'my veins' too, but no matter how many times you do it, you still

get a churning in your stomach, although you get better at distracting yourself from it. To some 'home' is a land; some, the people in it; others, the buildings, and the unfortunate lot-anywhere but here. My home is now my work, and these two and a half bags, and I put them in the car. You are standing there, quiet, my love, my shelter, oh my shackles, the trammel of your fragrance still held on to me, beyond the liberation of miles and dreams. The terrace walls have been broken and removed, as if peeling off the saree leaving the bare skin before cremation, and maybe my final liberation is with you set aflame and the ambers being one with the dust, or maybe somewhere beyond. I sit in the car, it smells of rubbed leather, the man smiles and twists the ignition…"

Even though in the book our protagonist (Me) leaves India… I never did. To celebrate I lit the last cigars I had saved from New Zealand. In the last year or so, it has become a bit soggy, but the smell of the Cuban oozed out of my leather cigar case… But no matter what happens, I had finished it. My task on this planet was done.

This book was based on a PhD at the last point of South Island, New Zealand—Bluff—where I explored the effects of humans and White Sharks encountering each other through cage diving. The book investigated the sharks, the people, the local community, and the environment, and how they were all connected. In the book, I was still grieving my house, which was being demolished back in Kolkata, the walls of which gave me my identity until I left at 31. So, the book became a letter of love not only to my sharks, but also to my old house. I could see the old Tree of Sorrow in my yard. I could hear the voices of my grandad calling me, and the songs of my grandma singing beyond the reaches of the deepest sky. Now, as I look at this book, the sharks are more than sharks; they are, perhaps, the symbol of eternal love, and maybe that is why there was this emptiness burning within me. When I found my love, I felt complete; ultimately, it meant that all that I was and

all my modes of existence were made meaningful. The book is a love story: love for people, art, knowledge, the land, water, and individuals who came in various forms— with fins, glasses, and everything in between—and it tries to express love in all its guises.

It is 4 AM now. My old house is gone, as are the songs of my grandma, my White Sharks, and perhaps my perceived identity. I stand here on this terrace that I have no connection with. All this place resonates with me is the shadows of love that was never here. I can smell the dew on the pink flowers in the garden, can see the crows are starting their journey for their day, and witness the transient beauty of a fog that has been ignited in vermilion light.

The work is finished now—the book, the website for this book, and the expedition have bloomed with words, a documentary, photographs, poetry, and video recitation. Maybe, they together can express sensations and knowledge that cannot be shared otherwise, be it with others or with oneself. Maybe, they can inspire others to take their journey and encourage their artistic and intellectual side into a unified source of creation. Maybe, they will help demystify the experience of cage diving and White Sharks… I am not sure. But here I stand, a single entity, heartbroken and in mourning again. All I know is that now, wherever I look, there is emptiness. In the end, all knowledge and ex pressions are incomplete, the thoughts only travelling between images of things that exist, things that we wish existed, and things that we fear don't. Out there, in the vastness of time and the ocean, our lovers swim further and further away; we create images of them in various forms and modes in the hope that others know, and remember. I looked at the vine of the banyan tree in my living room. I kept on asking myself, why don't I use this vine and hang myself into a peaceful slumber? No one will come looking for me till late afternoon. I have nothing else to give

to the world, I have completed my work… why don't I do it now?

Act 3 : The Puja

‘ I was somewhere in the vast marine wilderness, no land in sight, the ocean dark. Suddenly, the water lit up with golden sparkles. I was afraid but, out of the crimson darkness, a beautiful mermaid appeared. She came close to me her deep brown eyes meeting mine. She kissed me softly and took my hand. In her thousand-year-old language, she told me she loved me, and together we swam towards the light.’

My eyes blinked into the morning light and the beauty of Arapanch village, Sonarpur. It was 26th of August 2021. The noose of the vine hung 5 feet away from where I lay, and the stool underneath it stooped in slumber…

I am still here, and I am awake. And even the wakeful hour of the morning, I knew that the mermaid I had met in the dream was too familiar. I knew her; she was the love of my life, awaiting me beyond the ocean. But... who was she?

On 23rd September 2021, I got an email. position I had applied for months ago had opened, and I was being offered a professorship of psychology at the Sister Nivedita University in Kolkata. Honestly, I did not want to get back to psychology. In my mind it meant, I was back in Kolkata doing psychology, and all my work with sharks- wiped out of my life, and I am exactly where I started from a decade back. This was like a self-fulfilling prophecy of what I had once told Soosan would happen if I came back to India. But I did not have any money in my pocket. And so, I had no choice. I gratefully accepted the kind offer. To commute to my job – which was about 20 km away – I brought home the smallest motorcycle I could find. The logic behind this decision was indeed strange: in my head, I believed that since I have had the experience of driving the most powerful motorcycle in the world (Triumph Rocket III, New Zealand) , and I could no longer compete with that in

my current situation, I would get the smallest and least powerful motorcycle I could find. A 100CC TVS moped thus found its way into my life. She was baby blue, and my beast-like shoulders made her look even smaller. I named her TipTip.

I started my work at the university. But I was a reluctant professor; in my heart, I was still with my waves and sharks. The teaching seemed to help me keep some form of sanity, even though in reality, I was barely holding on. I kept on having constant visions while sleeping or awake. Usually, it would involve a dog or a cat in distress; sometimes, there was a fire in a building, and I was running out of it with a cat or a baby in my hand. I kept the lights on in the living room before I went to sleep, and every time I left home for work. I was constantly worried that the cat might get scared. These visions turned more alive and vivid by day, and I would get them at any random time throughout the day – while walking, working, or teaching. They were so all-encompassing that the distress they brought swallowed my entire ex istence. Whenever the thoughts appeared, I would feel chills run across my body. My eyes would swell up randomly, my tears coming dangerously close to the edge but never committing hara-kiri. Sometimes, because of these images, I would take resort to funny jokes, or lift heavy things to distract myself. There were several times, however, when I would constantly sing to myself – two sentences of a song on repeat for hours. I am not sure if that is where chanting in Kirtan (Bengali ritualistic chanting) comes from – just a path to let your brain find its path. The words of the songs became vehicles of my breath. When I ran out of breath, the song would stop for a brief moment too, and I would get respite from my being for the moment as well. I started to get a twitch in my left eye, and a very deep phase of depression consumed me. Perhaps the only good thing is that now, I can recognise it coming.

My creative impulses started flowing again, and I began to write (Aich, 2020c, 2020b, 2020a, 2021d, 2021b, 2021a,

2021f, 2021c, 2021e, 2022a, 2022b, 2024; Aich & Chakraborty, 2022; Aich & Weber, 2023) . I always had a pen and writing pad with me. Even while I was riding my moped, I had to stop by the road and take notes. Many a night my eyes would open from deep sleep, and I would scribble on the pad next to my pillow. Sometimes, I could feel the depression as a black wave heaving with my breath. On the other side, the giant red wave of inspiration would swell up at the same time. Often times, when these giant waves clashed with each other, fire sparked in the waves, and golden light erupted. That is where I had to lay my line to fish. It was like fishing in the high seas. And, as it often happens, my gregariousness would fool most around me into thinking I was doing great.

People of the city were slowly trying to get back to some form of normality and socialisation. I kept distracting myself with the university work at hand, but I kept on thinking of the women and sharks of the Sundarbans. I found myself in a dilemma: what should be the vision through which they should be seen? Furthermore, I found myself increasingly curious about the absence of the Kamot in local art, folklore, and religious practices, especially given the prominence of other major predators like tigers and crocodiles. This omission was puz z ling, as most cultures living alongside large predators tend to incorporate them into artistic, spiritual, and architectural representations, which then find a place in academic discourse (Aiyadurai, 2016; BaynesRock & Thomas, 2015; Pooley, 2016) . These depictions often evoke reverence, fear, awe, or beauty, and the motivations behind them vary— ranging from artistic ex pression to the formation of cultural identity, or even the transmission of knowledge to future generations. In India too, large predators that occasionally prey on humans are usually represented in some form. For instance, the lion of Goddess Durga, the crocodile of Khodiyar Maa, and the tigers of Bonodebi in the Sundarbans all hold cultural and spiritual significance. Why

then, is the Kamot excluded from this tradition? However, I was not sure I was mentally in the space to go back again to the Sundarbans. In the meantime, almost after two years of having presented the idea, Rajasee had written to me, that they were organising the play "Udayasta Sundorbon" in Dol Purnima, February 2022 (the full moon night celebration of the festival of colours in Bengal) . I was asked to be the special invitee… perhaps that was the excuse to allow myself to go back.

On the X mas Eve 2021, I was invited to my sister's house to hear her perform. My sister was a brilliant singer, and this was her first public performance in years. During the break, I went out onto her terrace. I desperately needed a smoke. Standing a bit distant from everyone, I thought of the person in my dream. A moment later, a figure approached and stood a few feet away from me. As she took out a pack of menthol cigarettes, she asked me, "May I offer you one?" I smiled and graciously accepted. I was fat and had a full face of beard back then (I might have been trying to hide my face in plain sight) . All the students at the university seemed to be afraid of me, so I suppose I looked a bit intimidating. Hence, such sudden kindness and frank approach were strange to me.

She said, "You look like Santa Claus. I bet you keep a lot of presents in your pockets for the kids". The reality is, as nice and cute as they are, I do not relate a lot with human-babies, and at this comment, I would have probably growled. But since it was a pretty girl, I chuckled instead, "No!" I was looking at her from the corner of my eyes. She was wearing a single gold necklace, with an amethyst pendant. And a long red dress, with a low cut back.

She asked me, "So what are you interested in?"

I ex claimed, "Now that is interesting! Most people ask, what do I do."

“Well, most of us do not get to do what we love. That is why, I have stopped asking people, what do they do. So, what do you love?”

“I am a human-shark researcher. That is what I love. That is all I am.”

“That is all you are? You are nothing else?”

“Lately, I do not seem to be even that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I had been travelling the world, doing human-shark research. That work is done, and now I am stuck here. So, everything I created is gone.”

“So, there is nothing here that interests you?”

“Well, I had been working with the shark attacks of the Sundarbans.”

“Shark attacks of Sundarbans? Does not seem like something that most people know.”

“No, I gather they don’t. So many lives of the women and the sharks of the region have been destroyed because of this human-shark conflict, but most do not know about it. But it does not matter, what is the point of me doing this? I am stuck here, I will never be able to stand in front of the world and work on a global scale That identity of mine is gone now… why do it?”

“But isn’t that what you love?”

“Perhaps, but I do not know if I can do this anymore… I think just knowing what I know about it now almost ended my life. I have pushed on too hard, my body, soul and mind I think I am finished, running after this obsession of creating a human shark discipline all through the planet. I now have a nice, new secured job, and I am about to get a new apartment on the plot of land where my old house used to be. I will purchase a nice car. I think I should just calm down, do this job, and settle in.

Stop this manic search for even what… I don't know."

She started humming.

"গুরু ভোজ্‌লী না রে মন আমার, একক দিন ভবে দেখবি অন্ধকার. কথা রবে তোর এ ঘোর বাড়ি, কথা রবে সুন্দরী নারী, কথা রবে সুন্দরের বাহার, একক দিন ভবে দেখবি অন্ধকার. মো(র গালে কেউ ছ(বে না মন, পাঁচ জানা রে লুটে নেবে সিন্দুকের ধোন. তখন কে বলবে জমিদার, কে বলবে তালুকদার, কথা রবে সুন্দরের বাহার."

(Sing the name of the lord, for one day it shall all be dark. Where will be all this beautiful house or women, where will be all this beauty around you, for one day it shall be all dark. When you die, no one will touch you. Everyone around you will distribute your jewellery. Who will ask what is your status in the society? for one day it shall be all dark) (Bengali Folk song).

I asked... "Guru? What guru? I do not believe in a god?"

She replied, "Isn't your work your god? And isn't God love?

Isn't your love your purpose? Well, it seems to me, that this is the story of the woman of Sundarban. Your sense of identity is less relevant than the work at hand, and this endeavour is too important a task not to support. All the riches and normality you earn with anormal life – all these are 'chewing gum' happiness – they will not save you. I think, there can be five kinds of purpose in contribution one can engage with. Firstly, one whose purpose is to only contribute to oneself; second, one whose purpose is to contribute to one's family; third, the purpose to contribute to one's community; fourth, to one's discipline; and fifth, contribute to the planet. Perhaps, this work is your purpose for the community, discipline and the planet, and you better do it soon because one day you will actually be dead. So now, you might as well do your lord's

work.” “You want to come with me to the Sundarbans?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Why not!” She beamed.

“You won’t mind going with me on the back of my little moped?”

“Can it hold me and you?”

“I gather she will be ok.”

“Then sure.”

“Ok, I will see you on the 23rd of February at 5 AM.” “Ok.”

And with that, she started walking off…

I called after her, “What is your name?”

“Tara.”

I run lick clockwork, 23rd of February 2022, 5 in the morning, I got down from my apartment, and as I was getting Tip-Tip ready for the trip- Tara was standing in front of the gate. It was a short 69 km ride, which should not have taken me more than 3 hours to complete, but I took it slow, worried for my back and bum injury. What' s more, my moped had a little bit of an unknown sniffle in the last few days, so I was not sure if she would develop anything serious while travelling a comparatively longer distance than usual. This was the least I had packed for any expedition. I had two T-shirts, two pairs of shorts, one pair of sandals, one dictaphone, two phones to capture photographs, and of course two knives, one a tool and another self-defence. For my bum pain, I stuffed the bottom of my backpack with my mom’s unicorn soft toy. Using my GPS, we started following the long relatively well-paved road km by km. I was trying to be decent while riding so that I did not cause any discomfort to this beautifully endowed woman sitting behind me on this small moped. There was a beguiling winding stretch of road, shaded by tall Eucalyptus trees which brought serine-scented winds on our faces. A little after that, we stopped at a small tea stall at Chakraborty Abad. Young

and old, Hindu and Muslim men sat down for their morning tea, bidi, and the essential morning chat. The region was mostly inhabited by farmers, so when I started discussing about Kamot, they were not certain exactly what I was speaking about. It was here that I started to realise the significance of expensive cigarettes in creating rapport with men in rural Bengal. I presented them cigarettes, and in exchange asked for a bidi, which they gladly shared with me. The shared smoke under the same hot sun, and on the same wet soil created a unique microcosm of interaction.

As we reached the Godkhali ghat, we waited for the boat. The boat arrived, and I carefully lifted TipTip onto the boat with the help of the boatsmen. Tara told me that when she was young, her boat had turned over in the Chilka Lake in Odissa, and since then, she has been afraid of water. I held her tight in my arms. For some reason, the petrol pumps near Godkhali were closed, and so, after we crossed the river, I had to fill TipTip's little four-litre fuel tank with what seemed like a crude mixture of petrol and kerosene (because there is no petrol pump/ gas station in the Sundarban) .

Once TipTip's little tummy was full, we set off to Rajashee's house in Pakhiralay, about 20 minutes from Gosaba. The night was lit by our headlamps as the heavy trees loomed over us. As we crossed the dark paddy fields, I wondered when was the last time a tiger was seen in these parts. Once in a while, we would come across little lights from the houses, followed by complete darkness. One such light was lit in the cremation ghat, where Tushar Kanjilal, the famous Sundarban ex pert, was cremated recently. Somewhere, there was a Kirtan session in full swing, and men wearing heavy makeup and gaudy synthetic costumes were reciting emotional stories of Krishna and his mother. After a while, the darkness led to some green fluorescent tube lights hanging on the trees, and I knew we were there.

This Dol Purnima fair has been taking place here for more than 30 years now. A large pandal was erected on the field, and colourful saree-draped women were sitting underneath. Rajashee and her team were waiting for us to arrive to start the show. Celebrations were in full swing; the music of the harmonium and the smell of fried fish filled the air. The colours of the bright sarees and dresses cut through the darkness as the villagers enjoyed the song, dance, and laughter. Some men in the corner were indulging in large puffs, and upon seeing me, invited me to join them. And so I did, but after a couple of puffs, I heard the loudspeakers suddenly announcing: "Dr. Raj Sekhar Aich… Dr. Raj Sekhar Aich, please make your way up to the stage to present prizes to the winner of the Yoga seminar." I stood up with the puff in my hand, and found people staring at me. I put out the light on my shorts in a hurry and put it in my pocket. As I rushed to the stage, I could see Tara laughing and falling over on the ground, watching my antics.

After the prize distribution ceremony, I sat down on the ground to watch the 'Nritya-natto' (dance-drama) . While sitting on the wet soil, looking at the Kamot bite the women on stage, the thought resurfaced in my mind with greater intensity: Why isn't Kamot represented in local religious practices? Traditionally, Ganga Devi is depicted with the Makar (a mythical creature often described as part elephant and part fish), or sometimes even dolphins as her Vahan(animal totem). While the Makar's form remains mythical, I can't help but envision it as influenced by an ichthyosaurus in my imagination. I realised if there's no iconic representation of Ganga's sharks in art and culture, why not create an idol that features the Kamot instead? Culture is, after all, a dynamic and evolving process. The Kamot holds far greater socio-ecological relevance for the community than the Makar. Such a depiction could serve multiple purposes: it could honour the Kamot victims—primarily women from my fieldwork—

while also drawing attention to the plight of these sharks. More importantly, this could serve as an educational tool for the next generation. An idol featuring the Kamot could remind children that these sharks still inhabit these waters. By associating the creature with a deity, we could teach kids to respect and protect them rather than fear them irrationally.

I stood up and called Ashim aside, as the music played in the background. I explained my idea to Ashim, and he was delighted. We called a couple of the other Tiger Widow team members, and they liked the idea too. Tara was playing with some of the kids sitting on the ground, her hand and pants were covered in dust like the rest of the village kids, but she was stealing glances with me with a sparkle in her eyes.

It was getting late, and now, we had to get to the hotel for the night. There was only one room booked, and so I requested Tara to rest. I went out to the veranda, took out the smudged-up bit of the puff from my pocket and sat down on the wooden chair. The starless night and the forest looked back at me. There was no sound, only the ripples of the river upfront. My heart wanted to go in and get into the same bed with Tara, but I was trying to be polite, and part of me did not want to startle her from all my night terrors. Most importantly, for many years, I could not sleep with anyone in the same bed. I was never comfortable, and I didn't think I could let my guard down with anyone. Even if I was physically close to someone, I never slept with them.

Sometime during the night, I must have dosed off and was having a night terror. I had a kitten in my hand, and a big grey wolflike monster was trying to bite the kitten, and in a flair of anger bit her ear off, letting blood and puss run from her ear. I put my hand on the monster's face, and the monster bit my fingers, and blood started flowing furiously. I think I was mumbling in terror… suddenly, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Half awake, I felt Tara near me. She held my hand and took me to bed. As I lay embraced in her bosom, she stroked my

hair and was saying, “It's ok, it's ok… it's just a dream.” Her voice brought me back to sanity, and then to peaceful slumber.

When the morning arrived, I did not have any aches or pains. I looked at the other side of the bed, and I could not believe this pulchritudinous woman was sleeping beside me. The pulpous sunlight fell on her toes and slowly climbed the curves of her hips and waist, drawn like soft strokes of charcoal on handmade paper. Her slender fingers lay on my bushy chest. I kept on looking at her. I do not know for how long. Then, I gently put her fingers aside and walked out to the veranda again. The bosom of Sundarban was opening up in all her glory. My experience last night had created a storm of intellectual and artistic sensations in my brain about how the negative image that sharks have gained globally can be altered, an image that is extremely detrimental to their conservation efforts.

I picked up the crumpled-up newsprint sheet from last night’s dinner, pulled up the other chair besides me, and started furiously penning down the basic concepts of what later will be my concept of shark image eras (Aich, 2023) . The basic argument I wanted to make was that the global image of sharks – symbolised by the image of the White Shark – can be dissected into four eras: the Pre-Jaws, Jaws, Post-Jaws and Post-Post Jaws. It is vital to understand these images for shark conservation on a global scale. In the "Pre-Jaws" era, sharks were not typically viewed as villains. Instead, they were associated with unpredictability, adventure, and even reverence among ocean-going cultures, symbolising virility and the mystery of the sea. However, as audiovisual technology advanced, sharks began to be framed within the context of danger, with their mystique tied to the potential threat they posed, even though they were not yet viewed as outright monsters. The early 20th century, especially through media like underwater explorations and films, helped solidify this idea of sharks as creatures of mystery. The release of Jaws

marked the beginning of the "Jaws" era, where sharks became entrenched as monstrous figures. The film used suspense and a haunting musical score to craft an image of sharks as terrifying, tapping into deep-seated fears about the ocean. This era shaped the public's perception of sharks as hyperreal monsters, a fear intensified by the movie's success and timing. Following this, the "Post-Jaws" era saw a shift towards conservation efforts, inspired in part by the same scientists who were once influenced by the film. While there were attempts to promote shark conservation, sharks were still often depicted as dangerous creatures in media, particularly in shark-focused shows that continued to portray them as aggressive threats. Despite this, there were efforts to restore a more nuanced image of sharks through conservation and education.

A potential 'Post-Post Jaws' era is not a Jaws era at all, with the emotion this term elicits lost in the ash heap of time. I think such an era will be symbolised by ' beauty', and ' cultural identity' more than any other facets of shark symbolism. Only the hands of dialectics shall shape what will be the true name of such an era, perhaps something like the ' Beautiful shark' era.

There are two popular ways of shark demystification and image alteration. Firstly, direct encounters with them in their natural environment bring their challenges to light (Aich, 2024) . Then, there is the spreading of proper information: while it is essential to spread factual knowledge, I question whether mere information can undo the entrenched fear and negative perception. As I was contemplating this conundrum, Dostoevsky's thoughts came to me – " Beauty will save the world" (Dostoyevsky & Arad, 2004). If this image of sharks wasn't created solely by misinformation, can we expect it to be transformed by information alone? The argument is that people protect what they love. But is love solely rooted in data and facts? Or does it arise from emotional connections that

often transcend reason? As Sousa reminded us: “ Love does not derive from reason, virtue, or Kantian core rationality” (Sousa, 2015, p. 191–192). Love is deeply intertwined with beauty and our personal, often irrational, connections to it. Furthermore, research suggests that emotions have a stronger influence on decision-making than cognition (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999a). I ask you, have there been concerted global efforts to focus on the beauty of sharks and our cultural connections with them? Consider other marine megafauna, such as whales, which are frequently depicted in positive lights—symbols of beauty and protectors of ecosystems. Films like Free Willy (Wincer, 1993) and Whale Rider (Caro, 2003) have successfully evoked global conservation sentiment. In contrast, when has a major motion picture portrayed sharks as protectors, symbols of beauty, or creatures tied to human ancestry? The beautiful era will thus be created and shared through the work of visual and literary artists, and tour operators, as well as scientists and policy experts. Even narratives which delve into the lives of sharks have to imbibe our personal stories, so we can connect to these animals at an emotional sensory level.

It may be contended that there is another alternative to the ‘ Beautiful Shark’ era. Perhaps the opposite of deadly shark imagery is the absence of shark imagery (as opposed to a new type of shark imagery) . Is there a scenario in which the best outcome for sharks and people is for a space to be maintained between them? That is, allowing sharks to swim off into the depths of the ocean where our minds don’t often go? That may be true under certain contexts, but unfortunately in the Anthropocene, anything we/the general population are ignorant about, as humans we feel we have an intrinsic right to exploit. This was apparent to me again in the Sundarbans, where I found there was a disastrous decimation of the shark population, and very little initiative for practical conservation particularly because the public was not aware of their

existence. Hence, for sharks to be protected and valued, people need to be aware of their existence and importance, just like whales, and advocate for their conservation.

After I finished penning these arguments, I looked up. There was sweet nectar in the air, mix ed with the salt of the water and subtle songs of the dears in the forest. From somewhere far, remnants of kirtan flowed towards me riding the ripples of the river upfront. It was time to go back and build the Idol. I packed up TipTip again and left Sundarban for Kolkata early morning with Tara behind me. Tara held on to my fat tummy tightly and rested her head on my shoulder all the way. As she rested, I could feel her peaceful breath on my neck, and her peace brought a smile to my face. After returning to Kolkata, I requested my brother, Raj Kamal Aich, to draw the idol for me. I told him that there should be a girl child on the goddess' s lap. The Tiger Widow team suggested that it would be best to have a Makar around the idol too, because people of the region are acquainted with the Makar with Ganga Debi, and the sudden absence of the Makar will be too much of a culture shock. And so, the Ganga Pujo with the Kamot was set to take place on the 14th of March (Saturday) at 11 AM, at the Swatsangha Ashram Kheyaghat, Gosaba. I invited some press, a few representatives of the Zoological Survey of India, and some of my friends to join us at the ceremony. Ashim was entrusted to arrange all the things in Gosaba, and a local artisan was entrusted to make the idol. My friends and family chipped in for the puja, along with whatever I had in my pocket and an advance for a new book.

On the evening of March 12, 2022, I reached Gosaba to help out in the final phase of building the idol. The boat crossed to Gosaba as my heartbeat in anticipation, accompanied by my leather expedition bag along my chest, my rucksack on my back, and my knife in my holster.
Ashim da met me on the other side and we walked through the

muddy field and dried up husk of the concrete road to Jayeta's house. I was breathless, excited for my first meeting with Her. From afar, I could see the leaves in the courtyard waltzing with little bursts of wind from all the tall trees. Her skin was made out of clay, and she sat on a plinth with her child on Her left, and beneath Her was Her shark. As I got closer, I was taken aback. To my horror, the shark looked more like a hybrid of a dolphin and a Hilsa fish. I had to take immediate action. So, I sat down in the mud and started reshaping her, showing the artisan how we needed her to look. The night passed in Her service. As the daylight broke the next morning, the Goddess glowed in amber light: Her skin radiated the smoothness of clay as she sat gracefully on a plinth, her child on her left and her beautiful shark, the Kamot, beneath her. Even though I had to leave early morning for some pre-set interviews, her shringar (ornamentation) continued in Jayeta's house. The Goddess was then dressed in lairs of base coat, her saree arranged, and other details worked on.

For the interview, I met Dr. Amal Krishna Mondal, who has served as the medical officer of Chotmollakhali since 1997. Over his long career, he has encountered only one case involving a Kamot attack, which occurred in the early years of his service. The victim was a 14-year-old girl from Kumirmari, who had accompanied her mother to catch Meen when the Kamot attacked her. They brought the girl to Dr. Mondal one evening, after her wounds had been hastily treated with sugar and wrapped in a gamcha (thin cotton towel) to stop the bleeding. The injuries were severe, and Dr. Mondal quickly realized that her right hand needed to be amputated to save her life. Unfortunately, the clinic lacked proper surgical equipment, forcing him to use a tree saw for the procedure. Despite the gravity of the situation, Dr. Mondal remained composed, approaching the task with the precision and resolve of a seasoned professional. Reflecting on the incident, Dr. Mondal admitted to feeling deep concern about the

implications of the amputation on the young girl's future. As a teenager, she would face societal and personal challenges, particularly regarding marriage. However, the local community proved supportive. The girl recovered gradually, pursued a bachelor's degree, and received consistent encouragement from both her school and the medical staff. During her exams, for example, she was provided with a writer to assist her. One hospital staff member even referred to her mother as his "Dharma Meya" (a spiritual or moral daughter) , symbolising the close bond between the family and the hospital. Dr. Mondal also shared a broader observation about the aftermath of natural disasters, particularly following Cyclone Aila. He noted that the storm had contaminated inland water with Vibrio cholerae, emphasizing that the assumption that saltwater prevents infections was unfounded.

As the evening fell, I came back, but I still had a lot of painting on the idol left to be finished. We worked through the night, only surviving thankfully for the cups of hot water Jayeta gave me for my coffee, while Jayeta's father-in-law recited stories of tigers across the forest and ones that visited their village a few years back. Before I left Kolkata, Tara had asked me to pick a palash bloom for her. I did find one, and I kept it safe in a pink jewellery box that I had bought for her from the local market. I kept the box in my pocket, as I put one stroke of paint after another on the cold clay, underneath the vast starry night above me. Initially, I had thought I would keep the sharks grey as they often are, but I realised the waters of the river here are mucky and green, and the sharks represented that water, and they needed to be a layer of green too. That's what I coloured her. As the paint slowly dried, a little bit more oxidised powder was used to bring some shades. The child in Her arms was still quite pale, hence I requested to make the Goddess's skin more bronze, reflecting the bronze skin of the women of Sundarban tanned in the harsh sun and water. I kept on painting past

midnight, and walked back to my hotel in the night, my path illuminated by the ambers of my bidi and fireflies.

The morning sun lit the grounds, with the pungent smell of the blooms blowing through my face. It was finally the day of the puja. Early in the morning, as I was walking to Jayeta's house, some local women giggled to each other at the sight of the strange hermaphrodite (with my long hair, thick beard, and alarmingly short shorts). I giggled back, finding their reaction amusing. As an ethnographer, knowledge here is shaped by the sensory experience as much as empirical data. As I turn to their lane, I could hear a lady on the first floor of a house singing to herself, her hand swinging out of the thin grilled windows, "Ramo Narayana, Ramo Narayana." When I walked into the courtyard, I stood still for a moment in the light, letting the smell of the muddy soil and leaves and flowers wash over me. It reminded me of the ponds along my path. Each pond I came across my way smelled and looked different, imbued with the fragrance of all the flowers and leaves that swim in it. As I stood there, just inside the threshold of the courtyard, water swelled-up in my eyes. She was ready.

I went and sat by my shark made out of clay – an image born out of our imagination, swimming beneath the waves of her mother, the Ganga. She was not a monster; she preceded us by millions of years, and she symbolised the power and balance of the natural world around us. To me personally, she and her iridescent skin – here moulded in clay – meant beauty and the reason for my journeys.

There was a little bit of finishing touches which needed to be put on the shark, but time was running out, and we had to get the idol to the pandal (makeshift tents for programs) erected near the ghat. An autorickshaw was summoned, on which we lifted the heavy, still-damp idol and gently secured her. Ashim stood on the autorickshaw by the idol, and I sat on the corner holding onto her carefully but delicately. A few representatives from the press were supposed to join us, but no

one from the Zoological Survey of India turned up. Tara was supposed to come as well. The autorickshaw lazily travelled from Jayeta's house to the ghat. With each little bump, we had to be careful that the idol did not break or fall over. As we reached the pandal on the Satsang Ghat, we say life continuing as usual – people crossed the river with a one-rupee toll per head, and two if they had a motorcycle. The pandal stood with three empty walls with no roof, next to the big Ganga Debi mandir. We unloaded the idol from the autorickshaw. I put up a big blue tarpaulin where the ceiling was supposed to be, fixing it securely with bricks. On the ground, a few more bricks and newspapers were laid, and on top of that, the heavy idol was finally placed.

The purohit (priest) came, and so did the women who suffered from Kamot bites, as well as those who had lost their husbands to similar incidents. Slowly, the little pandal started filling up. One of my gurus, Mr Krishna Priaya Dasgupta, had conversed with the purohit and asked him if there was some special mantra that he could recite for the puja. The purohit had agreed.

The kind purohit asked me, "Sir, who is this other female on the lap of Ganga? " I said, "She is the woman of Sundarban, and the sharks and the women are both children of Sundarban, and we are worshipping and celebrating both." He replied, " Sir, if people ask you this question, please tell them that it is a water fairy on her lap, because how can we worship a woman?"

Even though I did not agree to this personally, I decided to adhere to his sentiment as a local. So, I simply smiled and nodded, letting him continue with his duties and do what he thought was best for the occasion. Some details of what happened after that can be found in a witty and insightful post on social media by Krishnapriya Dasgupta... on the same day.

ব্যাটম্যানের গঙ্গাপূজা

হরিচরণ বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় বঙ্গীয় শব্দকোষ-এ মকরবাহিনী বলেছেন গঙ্গাকে। মকর শব্দের অর্থ করেছেন 'সামুদ্রিক জলচরবিশেষ; গ্রাহভেদ, হাঙ্গর(?)' আরও অনেক কিছু আছে শব্দকোষ-এ। তবে শুধু এইটুকুই ব্যাটম্যানের গঙ্গাপূজার জন্য হরিচরণ থেকে নিলাম। কেন? সেই প্রসঙ্গে আসি। ডঃরাজশেখর আইচ কলকাতা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় থেকে সাইকোলজিতে এবং নিউজিল্যান্ডের ক্যান্টারবেরি থেকে মেরিন অ্যানথ্রোপলজিতে পিএইচডি করে এখন সুন্দরবনের গোসবার সৎসঙ্গ ঘাটে গঙ্গাপূজায় ব্যস্ত। কারণ কী? ব্যাটম্যান পরশুদিন দুপুরে একটা ছবি পাঠিয়ে বলল, 'কৃষ্ণকাকু চলে এসো।' 'কোথায়?' 'গোসবায়।' 'কেন?''গঙ্গাপূজা হবে। ঠাকুরের ছবিটা দেখ।' 'দেখেছি। দুপাশে তো মকর। পায়ের তলায় হাঙর কেন?' 'কামোট।' 'কে বলল?'

এইবার শুরু হলো আসল গল্প. তার আগে বলি, ছোটবেলায় বাদুড় পুষত বলে ওকে আমি আজও ব্যাটম্যান বলেই ডাকি। আর ঘরের দেওয়ালে হাঙর এঁকে রাখত। খুব ভালো ছবি আঁকে। পিতা চিত্রশিল্পী সমীর আইচ। বড় বড় ক্যানভাসে আঁকা ব্যাটম্যানের হাঙর অনেক প্রদর্শনীতেও গেছে. অর্থাৎ, হাঙরপ্রীতি ব্যাটম্যানের ছোটবেলা থেকেই। এই কারণে সমুদ্রের তলায় হাঙর দেখতে ও নিউজিল্যান্ড পর্যন্ত ছুটে গেছে। তারপর গবেষণা করে দেশে ফিরে সুন্দরবনে গেছে কামোট দেখতে। কামোট দেখা নাকি মুখের কথা নয়। তখন ও হাঙরের ছবি দেখিয়েছে নদীর জলের মানুষদের। তাঁরা দেখেই বলে উঠেছেন, ওই তো আমাদের কামোট। ব্যস! মকরবাহিনীর পদপ্রান্তে হাজির হয়েছে হাঙর (ব্যাটম্যানের দেখানো ছবির মতো) বা কামোট(ছবি দেখে জলের লোকেরা যা বলেছেন). এরপর ব্যাটম্যানের গঙ্গাপূজার আয়োজন। প্রতিমাশিল্পী হাঙর বা কামোট বানিয়ে দিয়েছেন। আজ, ১৪ মার্চ সকাল সকাল আবার ব্যাটম্যানের ফোন...'কৃষ্ণকাকু কথা বলো।' 'কার সঙ্গে?' 'পুরুতঠাকুর...' 'কেন?' 'বলো না!' 'দে।' 'নমস্কার! আমিই পুজো করছি...' 'আচ্ছা। বলুন...' 'বলছি যে, গঙ্গাপূজার ধ্যানমন্ত্রে তো কামোট বা হাঙরের কথা নেই..' 'মকরের কথা আছে?' 'দাঁড়ান, পড়ে দেখি... না, তাও দেখছি না।' 'তবে আর কি, আপনি

নতুন ধ্যানমন্ত্র তৈরি করুন।' 'থাক না। কী দরকার? আপনি ওনাকে বলে দিন।' এরপর পুজো হয়েছে। যজ্ঞ হয়েছে। গ্রামের মানুষজন ভিড় করেছেন। ২০২০ সালের ১৪ মার্চ নতুন রূপে হাজির হলেন মা গঙ্গা গোসবার সৎসঙ্গ ঘাটে।

এভাবেই মর্ত্যে নতুন নতুন ভাবে দেব দেবীর আগমন ঘটে. শোনা যায়, মহারাজা কৃষ্ণচন্দ্র রাসের সময় একবার নির্দেশ দেন, কাল নবদ্বীপে কালীর রাস হবে. রাতারাতি ব্রাহ্মণ পণ্ডিতদের ডেকে তিনি নতুন নতুন চেহারার কালী কল্পনা করতে বলেন এবং ধ্যানমন্ত্র লিখতে বলেন। মূল দায়িত্ব পড়ে পণ্ডিত সিতিকণ্ঠ বাচস্পতির উপর। সেই থেকে চলে আসছে নবদ্বীপের কালীর রাস। গোসবাতেও এবার মকরবাহিনী মা গঙ্গা এলেন হাঙর বা কামোটকে সঙ্গে নিয়ে। এখন তিনি বয়ে চলবেন সামনে নতুন কাহিনি নিয়ে। আর মানুষজন চলবেন বিশ্বাস নিয়ে.

A loose translation in English is as follows:

‘Batman's Ganga Puja.

In the Bengali dictionary of Haricharan Bandyopadhyay, he called the Ganga Debi riding the Capricorn. The word Capricorn here means 'marine amphibian; Grahaveda, shark?' There is much more in the dictionary. But I just took this bit from Haricharan for Batman's Ganga Puja. Why? Let us come to that context. Dr. Raj Sekhar Aich, who holds a PhD in Psychology from Calcutta University and a PhD in Marine Anthropology from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, is now in the Sundarbans and arranging a Ganga puja in Gosaba Satsanga Ghat. But why? Batman sent me a picture the day before yesterday afternoon and said, “Come on Krishna Kaku”- “Where?”- “Gosaba”- “Why?”- “Ganga Debi will be worshipped. Look at the picture” “I saw Makar on both sides. But why is there a shark underfoot?’ To this, he replied, “Kamot.” “But why?”

The real story begins from here. But before that, let me explain why I called Raj Batman. While he was a child, he

would raise bats and had walls full of paintings of sharks. His Father is the renowned painter, Samir Aich. He is a very talented painter, and Batman's shark paintings on large canvases have also been exhibited globally. In other words, the love for sharks has been with Batman since his childhood. That is why he was with them underwater; he has travelled all the oceans across New Zealand. After completing his research, he came back to India, and travelled to the Sundarbans to learn about the Kamot. Seeing a Kamot is not a matter of joke. So, he has shown pictures of sharks to the fishers, to which the fishers have replied, "Yes! that is our Kamot." That's it! Thus appears the Kamot underneath the foot of the Ganga Debi. Today, on the morning of March 14, Batman called me again ... "Speak Krishna kaku" – "With whom?" – "The purohit" – "Why?" – "Just speak to him please!" – "Alright, give him the phone." – "Hello! I am performing the puja..." – "Yes..." – "Well, tell me, in the meditation mantra of Ganga Puja, is there mention of Kamot or Shark? Or any mention of Makar?" – "Wait, let's see... no, I don't see anything like that." – "Well then make a new meditation mantra." – "Really?" – "Why not!" Then, the worship started. The holy fire was lit for the ritual. The people of the village had crowded all around. Mother Ganga appeared in a new form on March 14, 2020, at Satsanga Ghat. This is how in all new forms gods and goddesses materialise on earth. It is heard that Maharaja Krishnachandra once instructed during the Rash festival that Kali Rash would be organised in Navadwip the next day. Overnight, he called Brahmanical scholars and asked them to imagine a new look of Kali and to write a mantra. The main responsibility fell on Pandit Sitikantha Bachaspati. Kali Rash of Navadwip has been celebrated ever since. This time in Gosaba too, the mother Ganga has arrived with Kamot as her totem. Now she shall carry on with the new story ahead. And people will walk with faith.'

The puja was about to start at 11, and I was calling Tara every 20 minutes to check and provide very specific step-by-step instructions because she wanted to travel in an auto rickshaw all the way. At 10:50, she called me to say, “I am here in Godkhali.” I ran to the ghat and jumped onto the boat leaving for Godkhali. After 7 minutes of wading on the river, I could see the ghat of Godkhali, and there among everyone, cladded in the white saree I had given her from head to toe, stood this thin, fair woman with brunette hair and brown streaks, holding two bags full of sarees for the women. My hands picked her up from the ghat onto the boat and held her tight. We got off the boat and rushed to the pandal. There was still a lot of work to be done, fruits to be cut, and sweets to be purchased. All of us were working
together in a rush…. But suddenly, everything came to a halt when the purohit lit the Yagna (ritual fire).

We were all transfixed – the women who came from far-off villages just to spend a couple of hours with the Goddess, the few people from the press, and all the team members of Tiger Widow. The flames burned at her own rhythm, the ghee enraging the flame as if trying to wash away the misery with the auspicious eternal fire. The blue light was coming through the tarpaulin of the ceiling. The slokas (chants) were being read, and some of the women sat with their eyes closed, others with their eyes wet.

And Ma Ganga sat there in all her glory, with her waters flowing just a few feet away from her feet. Tara found a place in the corner, sitting with the saree draped over her head like all the other women. H er eyes were closed and her face silent, as tears rolled down her eyes – at despair… I didn’t know. A cat brushed up next to her, and she opened her eyes. I will never forget the delight on her face, as her cheeks lightened up. Tears continued to roll down her eyes as she sang softly to the cat, “Bilai amar bilai, Tare ami kilaai, Bilaai kore meow, Ektu kole neo, Bilaai'r bondhu Tiya Kobe korba biya?” (…The

translation of this does not make much sense in English, so I will leave it to you Bengali folks to enjoy and hope that it brings a smile to your face) .

Some of us were preparing bhog (food offering). In a corner, we quietly chopped fruits and mixed them with milk and semolina. The women were given the saree that Tara had brought, and the sweets that were bought in the name of all my friends and family were also distributed among them and passing locals. I gave a special puja in the name of Soosan, and another one for Minion. As Kamala, who is about 65 now, was leaving, I bent down and touched her feet in respect before her long journey back home, and she blessed me by placing her palms over my head. Truth be told, I am not a religious person (to say the least) . However, I don't call myself an atheist as well, much like what Hitchin had said: what can you call a person who does not believe in Fairies? Then there was also the fact that I have been taught that an anthropologist must be as objective as they can, and in a sense distant from the people they observe, even if they live among them. So, why did I do this puja? Does anyone actually care? I don't know.

The family lives of men and women living in the Sundarbans follows a ritualistic pattern. Jalais in her profound ethnography about the Sundarbans had expressed that in the Sundarbans, marriage customs and livelihoods are deeply intertwined. Education is common among children, but many drop out of secondary school to work as prawn seed collectors or in agriculture. Marriages typically occur between the ages of 16-23 for women and 18-30 for men, with a preference for partners from different villages to avoid the perception of incest. Before and after marriage, young women often collect prawn seeds, while young men work in forests, on farms, or migrate to cities like Kolkata and beyond for labour work. These migrations last several months annually and may continue for years. Upon returning, men usually marry, invest in prawn fishing, and establish homes on family or in-law

property. However, access to parental land requires contributing to farming. Consequently, prawn collection and related activities remain key income sources for young couples (Jalais, 2021).

As I was deep in contemplation about the lives of the women in the region, Rajashee came and stood by me. I asked her, "Rajashee, what is that these women have to face in society after the Kamot bite? Is it disgust? Shame?"

"Worse… its pity!" she replied. "Once someone loses their limbs, it means, they are losing their ability to work, which in this case means they are losing the position of a productive member of the family. In the harsh Sundarbans, every member of the family must pull their weight. A woman who loses their ability to work, cannot control the children, and cannot even do the chores of the house efficiently. Even the husband looks at her with a sense of pity."

As such, the sense of pity will be ex aggerated for a young woman who is of a marriageable age. The women expressed that they often felt sad – their lives have always been predestined as soon as they were born as women, and no matter what they want to do when they turn 16 or 18, they have to get married. hat is the only certainty. They felt that the women from the city (Kolkata) at least don't have to do that, and can choose to do what they want to do with their lives.

Incidentally, a few days later when I had gone back to Kolkata, I was invited to someone's house for dinner. As the evening progressed, their young daughter – who was in her early 20s was studying psychology, was eager to learn from me how she could take her life forward. As we were talking, her father said, " Well, I am not bothered what she does the next 5-6 years. I just want her to have fun. And after that, she has to get married, and that will be it." I reacted abruptly, to which he replied, "Well, we are middle class, and that is what happens with us." Unfortunately, I was not able to keep calm, and the argument got quite heated. Ultimately, I had to excuse

myself. Upon contemplating my reaction to the situation, I realised that just a couple of days ago, I heard the women in the Sundarbans feeling sad about their predicament, and hopeful for the women in the city. In the city, however, I was observing the same thing, and that must have triggered me.

That is when it hit me what wisdom Tara was trying to impart in me. This story is about women, but not women who are to be pitied – for they do not need our sympathy. They are Dasabhuja (Goddess Durga with 10 hands) , taking care of the children, the home, and even getting in the water with sharks and crocodiles to collect fish and crustaceans. And here are women, of different socioeconomic strata, ages, and geography, all celebrating each other as the beautiful warriors that they are. Women connected beyond age, continents, and skin tone, all vessels of the new – just like Ma Ganga. Ma Ganga, even in her idol form, loves and protects her daughters in every form – humans and my beloved sharks. Both the species are simply trying to survive in the beautiful mucky water. And even if this puja did nothing much, maybe it just allowed a handful of women to feel that they were being heard. The fire of the yajna thus united the stories of the idol, the humans, and the sharks.

As the puja concluded, everyone went to the ghat to get some water. I sat down by my shark made of cold clay, her cold skin still moist to the touch. When they all returned, we hoisted the idol, took her to the ghat, and slowly put her in the water. All the flowers and garlands were submerged in the water too, and the rest of the things that were left were distributed among the locals. Our hotel awaited us, calling to our tired bodies. Before leaving for the hotel, I found a bottle of Alta (an ancient red die Indian women use for decorating their feet) and put it in my pocket. When we reached the hotel, I asked Tara to freshen up and rest. She refused and asked me to sit in front of her.

She asked, “Where is my flower?” My muddy, bruised-up fingers reached into my pocket and retrieved the small pink jewellery box . She opened it and scolded me. “Why did you put it in the box? It is all mushed up.” I immediately realised my fault. It might have reflected on my face, for she said softly, “Thank you for the flower. And the box is very pretty too! Is it for me?” I nodded. She said, “I saw what you stole from the pandal, I want it too.” Her eyes beamed with a smile. So, I took the bottle of Alta out of my pocket and handed it to her. “I want you to paint my feet,” she said, lifting the saree over her folded legs. I took one of the brushes out of my bag – which I had used to paint the idol – and slowly started drawing ornamental flowers on her feet in vermilion. After I finished the designs on both of her feet, I started painting her calves, and then her thigh. I stopped, but Tara said, “Don’t stop, I want you to paint flowers and vines, and your sharks, all over me. Paint all your secrets onto mine.” And I did, for the rest of the night. Her pale skin turned pink and blue and red as my brush stretched, created deep grooves, and fluttered over the minute hair on her skin.

Later at night, in our slumber, I could hear people singing and playing flute in the street. I thought I was hallucinating, but the sound was so distinct that it had woken up Tara too. On the cold night, Tara and I walked out onto the veranda. The winds played shiver on our bodies, she was only clothed in a thousand-year-old red calligraphy and pink spectacles. It was a marriage party walking through the village road to welcome Ganga to a marriage. Beautiful purple and pink sarees walked bare feet with smiles and chatter in the dark silent night. I felt the shiver on her skin, so I got a bed sheet and covered Tara. I sat down on the chair and pulled her onto my lap.

The light of the Hajak (Kerosene lantern) was slowly fading away from her cheeks as the marriage party walked further and further away. I looked at her rosy bud lips and her dark hair weaving down her little nose. I think I murmured to her, “I n

scuba diving, with every 10 feet of depth, the spectrum of visible colours begins to fade, gradually losing hues one by one. At greater depths, all the vibrant colours of the world disappear, leaving only shades of blue and grey in their place. It's as if the very essence of colour vanishes into the depths, swallowed by the vast, dark ocean. I don't know why it is, but over the years, all the colour in my own life has been drained away too. I used to search desperately, my eyes constantly scanning the world around me, hoping to find something or someone that could reignite that spark of beauty, but I never seemed to find it. Now, after all these years, I look at you, and everything changes. Suddenly, there's a warm richness to the world again. For the first time in so long, I see beauty again. It's as if all the shades that had been lost to me for so long have come rushing back, and I can see the world in full colour once more. But I am tired love, I don't know if I can walk anymore…I think I just want peace, can I rest in you?" She replied, "Peace is not for the warrior. Here, I will show you something." Saying that, she got off my lap and took me to bed. She walked to the wardrobe, and I saw the soft light shaping her deep curves and shadow and sweat. She brought out three manjira (Indian percussion instrument) from her purse. One was on the 'C' scale, another one in ' B', and the last in ' A'. Underneath the bed sheet, she first took the 'C' scale manjira in her fingers, clanged them together, and started singing:

"আজ জ্যোৎস্নারাতে সবাই গেছে বনে,
বসন্তের এই মাতাল সমীরণে .
যাব না গো যাব না যে, রইনু পড়ে ঘরের মাঝে--
এই নিরালায় রব আপন কোণে.
যাব না এই মাতাল সমীরণে.
আমার এ ঘর বহু যতন ক'রে
ধুতে হবে মুছতে হবে মোরে.

আমারে যে জাগতে হবে, কী জানি সে আসবে কবে
যদি আমায় পড়ে তাহার মনে
বসন্তের এই মাতাল সমীরণে. ”

She explained, “ Here my scale is higher, imagined through the phases of life – this is the vibrance of youth, perhaps when we are 18 or 20, when our consciousness and awareness to the eternal loss is just starting to shape. On the other hand, imagined through the phases of night, this is late night, perhaps 12 AM.” She stopped for a moment, then continued, “Now, think you are in your forties, perhaps the night is getting darker, it is 3 AM.” he sang the same two lines then, but now a scale lower, the rhythm slowing down:

“আমার এ ঘর বহু যতন ক'র, ধুতে হবে মুছতে হবে মোরে. আমারে যে জাগতে হবে, কী জানি সে আসবে কবে, যদি আমায় পড়ে তাহার মনে.”

The sensation was deeper. Finally, she said, “Now you are 70-80, at the last phase of your life, and it is 5 AM, the night is ending.” She sang the song again now in ‘A’ scale. As her lips uttered those lines and her voice echoed the music, my soul seemed to leave my body. She further ex plained, “ In the dance that is life, most will go to enjoy that is living, but you, you my love, the warrior, the writer, you cannot go with them. You my love, the creator, the protector, you will have to stay back, you must cleanse your soul, for the ‘Inspiration’ may come at any moment. And you my love, the lover, the worshiper will have to be ready when ‘he’ does, and the older you get, your awaiting has to be deeper and more focused. You do not get to have peace.” With that, Tara kissed me. I held her hair in my fingers and went to sleep. The next morning, we headed back to Kolkata.

The duties of my university started again. I apparently came to be known as the professor who used to teach the students in the open grass field, often wearing pink scrunchies, and infamously overscoring their ex am copies. But I knew, I had important work to do. There is a vitally important part of the story which I had not deciphered – identifying the sharks who predated on the humans in the Sundarbans. These animals that have ceased to exist, and more than that, symbolically never existed. Two months later, in May of 2022, and every month after that, I headed back to the Sundarbans. Priankar always supported me in the project with the data collection and interpretation, and lend me his expert eyes as an ecologist and conservation scientist. Each time I was about to head off to the Sundarbans, Tara would always be waiting on my doorsteps. She used to stay up all night making sure I was not afraid of night terrors, and I used to read stories to her all through the night about Jim Corbett – how his faithful companion Robin stood by him in front of man-eating tigers, and how he passed away. I told her, “I would like to spread your fables and tell your stories, and travel with you from village to village singing your songs. I would like to cry at your achievements and dance at your happiness. Maybe collect the sand from the paths you have crossed and wash your hair at the end of the day.” But as always, when the morning came, I knew I had to focus, I had to get as much information about the sharks as possible. But this time, it was extremely hot and the peak of summer. As soon as I reached, I started walking with Ashim da to meet various fishers to get as much information as possible. In the heat, I started getting rashes all over my body. The arid winds and salts of the dry soil created layers on my face like a recently unearthed Sumerian sculpture. However, I needed to bring together the information about the sharks who bit the humans both from the scientific experts and from ‘ Fishers' ecological knowledge’.

Firstly, I had to know about the relationship of the fishers with the local ecosystem, and how their knowledge was shaped from generations of fishing in the region. The Sundarbans is characterised by tidal waterways, mangrove forests, and mudflats, and the area is renowned for its rich marine biodiversity. The region's estuarine environment, shaped by fluctuating salinity from the Bay of Bengal and freshwater influxes from the rivers, creates a dynamic habitat for many species, including over 300 fish species and a variety of invertebrates. So now as you can imagine, these mangrove forests of the Sundarbans serve as essential nursery habitats for juvenile fish, while the region's mudflats and river channels act as feeding grounds and migration corridors for various marine species. The intricate waterways, shaped by the dance of freshwater and saline tides, nurture a diverse marine world that sustains local fishing practices—an ancient tradition that binds communities to the land and sea.

Fisher people in the Sundarbans rely on methods like net fishing, traps, and hook-and-line techniques, each tailored to the region's shifting tides and varied habitats. These methods not only ensure a sustainable harvest but also reflect the intimate knowledge of the environment passed down through generations. Now, through the practice of this generational harvesting, the fishers have gathered deep ecological knowledge of the land, water and the fishes, which is vital for me – or any other scientist interested in the ecology of the region – to acknowledge and explore. There has been some interesting research on this, including that of Chacraverti, who created an ex tensive database of fishers' knowledge in the Sundarbans for the International Collective in Support of Fish workers (2014) . He categorised it into three types of knowledge: inborn instincts, acquired skills, and knowledge that can be codified and analysed through language. He noted that historically, while many Bengalis – particularly men – engaged in fishing, the professional fishermen, known as

Jeliya or Jaliya, were viewed as belonging to the lowest social class. Despite the widespread consumption of fish, the fisherman was stigmatised and socially marginalised. This social disdain led to a lack of representation and historical recognition of the fishing community. Consequently, historians have largely overlooked their history, especially in the context of the Sundarbans. Fishing in the region is both ex pensive and indeed dangerous. However, communities have developed a deep understanding of the environment and the area's culture, while the relatively young (with most settlers arriving in the past 100 years) has adapted to the harsh conditions. The artisanal fishers of the Sundarbans possess specialised knowledge based on their type of fishing (sea or estuarine) , with varying skills depending on the water conditions and dangers like tigers and crocodiles, and of course, Kamot. Chacraverti mentioned that one key skill is navigating through mud and slush, which locals learn from a young age. Fishermen monitor the lunar cycle, as tidal strength, influenced by the moon's phases, plays a critical role in fishing success.

Timing tides is crucial for fishing and navigation, as rising tides can threaten embankments. Fishers rely on tide tables and local observations to predict tidal movements, using flood (inland) and ebb (out-to-sea) currents to optimise net placement. Wind and weather changes also affect sea currents, requiring fishers to adapt. In rivers, they use landmarks for navigation, while at sea, they rely on celestial bodies and natural signs, such as the behaviour of birds and waves, to guide them.

Chacraverti also made a brief note about the dangers associated with the animals of the region, such as tigers, crocodiles and sharks. He observed:

"The fisher is most helpless against the Kamot, which is not aiming for the whole body, but only for a limb, which it bites off and is away in an instant. The best that the fisher can do is

trust his feelings and experience in avoiding waters where the possibility of attack could be greater. However, usually, it is not the boat-based fisher, but rather the river-wading bagda Meen collector, who is most susceptible to Kamot attacks. Fishers say that, nowadays, the Kamot population seems to have declined considerably" (Chacraverti, 2014, p.88)."

Based on these forms of scientific and fishers' knowledge, I delved deeper into the lives of the Sundarban sharks who might have bitten the humans. The sharks we are speaking of here fall under the category popularly known as river sharks. River sharks are a group of sharks that are capable of surviving in freshwater environments, such as rivers, lakes, and estuaries. The term " river shark" is often used to refer to several species, and their behaviour is shaped by the availability of prey and their adaptability to different aquatic habitats. While they are often associated with freshwater, many species of river sharks are not strictly confined to rivers or lakes. They typically inhabit brackish estuaries where freshwater from rivers meets the ocean's salty waters, much like in the case of the Sundarbans. Many attacks attributed to " river sharks" are cases involving coastal sharks that have ventured into brackish estuaries, which are not strictly freshwater but have a mix of salt and freshwater, that is why identification of the sharks associated with the bites are not always easy many times. As such, attacks attributed to river sharks often involve species like the Bull Shark (Carcharhinus leucas) that are not necessarily confined to truly freshwater rivers or lakes. Bull Sharks are particularly famous for their ability to travel long distances in freshwater rivers, and they have been recorded as far up the Amazon and Mississippi Rivers. Most sharks require saltwater to maintain their body's osmotic balance. In the ocean, the saline concentration in seawater is similar to that of the sharks' bodily fluids, allowing them to maintain equilibrium. Hence, the key to their survival in freshwater lies in their physiological adaptations,

particularly in their osmoregulatory systems— the mechanisms that help them balance salts and water in their bodies. Bull sharks, in particular, are equipped with highly efficient kidneys and a specialised rectal gland that enable them to regulate their salt and water balance. In freshwater environments, this rectal gland reduces its salt excretion, allowing the shark to adjust to the lower salinity. These sharks are smaller and show regressive changes compared to those of sharks in marine habitats. It is speculated that this evolutionary advantage emerged during the last ice age. During that period, gridlocked populations of ancestral bull sharks likely faced environmental bottlenecks or " do-or-die" situations that isolated them from other species in their subclass. In such conditions, survival favoured individuals capable of thriving in environments with decreased salinity, driving the adaptation that ultimately distinguished Bull Sharks.

Although we can postulate a majority of the bites in the region are from Bull Sharks, the stories of the people affected by the shark bites did not prove helpful in pinpointing the Kamot species associated with the bites. The reason was that no photographs were taken after the bites, and the people bitten could only provide crude descriptions of the animals that bit them. The shortage of information is because the visibility of the river is limited, even in shallow waters, especially during the monsoons. Furthermore, the Kamots that bit was not caught. Sometimes, the realisation that they were bitten happened much later than the actual time of the bite, which meant the victims seldom saw the Kamot. Also, during the incidents, the people nearby were more concerned with saving the person's life, so they paid no attention to the Kamot. As such, identifying the Kamot species responsible for biting from the victims' accounts was virtually impossible. In the Sundarbans, shark fishing is prohibited, and consequently, they are never seen in wet markets. Therefore, examining a specimen to determine whether it is capable of causing injuries

to humans is not possible. But the fishermen and locals always opined about the sharpness of the cut. Mr. Krishna Kali Mondol, for ex ample, explained that when he saw the cows crossing, the cows would not be thrashing when the bite happened. It was as if the cow that got bit did not feel anything. However, the moment it was out of the water, its leg would be missing, like being cut off with a saw.

From the Indian Sundarbans, 13 shark species have been listed (Mishra et al., 2019) . Among the reported sharks, some are considered to pose a potential threat to humans (traumatogenic) . For ex ample, the astonishing Bull Shark have the highest ratio of testosterone in any animal on the planet, but there are also other sharks such as Black-Tip Sharks and Tiger Sharks. In comparison, others are considered harmless to humans, such as the Winghead Shark, Pondicherry hark, and Grey Bamboo Shark (Froese & Pauly 2021). Some fishers mention a Kamot which they call the 'Gung Kamot,' named after its habit of travelling up to the freshwater reaches of the Ganges (locally called ' Gung') . They said that the species is ferocious and will readily strike, sometimes even jumping out of the water trying to bite. They described the shark to be about 6-9 feet in length, bronze-coloured dorsum and with very pointed and sharp teeth. Khitish had also mentioned that the Gung Kamot would come to the surface and turn upside down, remaining completely motionless. It would be so still that even birds would come and sit on it. However, when people swam near it, the Kamot would turn around to bite them. I could not find any repetition of this information in other interviews, nor could I find any reference to such behaviour in sharks.

There can be a few reasons sharks bite, be it for enquiry, territoriality, mistaken identity, and of course, predation. However, human beings are still not regular food for sharks. The reason for shark bites in Sundarban is more complicated. Even the shark bite victims mentioned, "That was the path of

the shark, and the people encroached upon its territory." Hence, firstly, there might be a significant amount of inquisitive bites. Also, particularly for larger fish, a human leg feels like a good meal. One of the fundamental issues with rivers, particularly Ganga, is their lack of visibility, and sharks often use vision as an avenue of prey detection, which is virtually not available in these waters. When I asked what the locals felt, some did mention, before there used to be a lot of fish in the water, but now there was less and less every year. This lack of food was possibly a big reason for this.

I asked a fisher if he thought that Kamots specifically target the people? He replied, " No, they are moving around looking for fish, and if someone's leg falls in the way, they might bite it." The attacks generally happen in "bhangan nadi" (rivers with deep breaks) because the Kamots prefer to stay in " Khobla Khobla Jaigai" (areas with deep crevasses in the mud) as there's seldom much sun and bother from other elements. There are also fewer currents and less sound of boats in these areas because they are deeper and isolated. The women mentioned this area can be so deep that they cannot even touch the ground. There are also different species of fish in them for the Kamots to feed on. As Dr. Mondal put it, "I don't know what kind of sharks bite people, but I have seen them in the market. The snouts are very long and they have dense teeth. I wish I had taken photographs of the bites, but I did not. I wish I could tell you what species they were. I did not even know there were so many different species of sharks."

An important question was what time did the shark bites happen? Dr Mondal mentioned, " I remember, the bites usually started in the middle of 'Fulgun Mash' after the 'Dol Utsav' and would be biting people still in May-June, or during the monsoon season. That could have been because of a lot of waves. During the Dol Purnima, there's a lot of high tides, and that was also the season of bites. Treatment in the Sundarbans

was always easier from September to March. But from March to August, it was always very tough."

Raj: "What can you tell me about the kinds of bites they were?"

Dr. Mondal: "The bites generally used to happen from the fleshy parts [he stood up, and indicated the bites being generally around the glutes and thighs] . The victims did not even understand that the bite had taken place. The bites were sharper than knives. They would feel a little tingling on their behind, and the water will turn red."

Raj: "So, how did these people get help when the bites happened?"

Dr. Mandal: "Generally, these people used to work in groups, so they were rescued. There are three health centres in my block - the Gosaba Block Primary Health Center, the Choto Mollakhali Primary Health Center, and the Dakkhin Radha Nagar Primary Health Center. Usually, the two centres closest to the jungles, the Gosaba and Chotomollakhali (about 4-8 km from the jungle), where the majority of the attacks happened."

It seemed the most common Kamot species responsible is the 'Pet-Mota-Kamot', which translates to ' Fat-bellied shark.' They were usually 5 to 9 feet in length, sometimes larger; grey to grey-brown and bronze in colour with a white belly; no spots or reticulations on the body; large teeth. Based on the fisher's knowledge and the existing literature on sharks of the Sundarbans, there could be six species that are likely to bite humans (Ebert et al. 2021, Froese & Pauly, 2021) .

Characters provided by the fishers	**Length**	**General body colour**	**Body without spots and reticulations**	**Conspicuous teeth**

Blacktip shark (Carcharhinus limbatus)	+	+	+	+
Bull shark (Carcharhinus leucas)	+	+	+	+
Blacktip reef shark (Carcharhinus melanopterus)	+	+	+	+
Ganges shark (Glyphis gangeticus)	+	+	+	+
Spottail shark (Carcharius sorrah)	+	+	+	+
Broadfin shark (Lamiopsis temmincki)	+	+	+	+

A list of Kamots (sharks) from the Sundarbans possibly responsible for bites based on existing literature and fishere's ecological knowledge. Presence of character indicated by (+) . (Aich and Chakraborty, 2021) .In the Sundarbans, there are different types of sharks, including the Tiger Shark (Galeocerdo cuvier), which can grow over five feet long and is known to cause serious injuries in other places.

However, the fishers said they had never seen the tiger shark's typical features, like bars or patterns on its body, so it was not included in the list. Similarly, no fishermen mentioned seeing a Kamot with a hammer-shaped head, so the Winghead Shark

(Eusphyra blochii) was also excluded. Other sharks, like the Spadenose Shark (Scoliodon laticaudus) , Grey Bamboo hark (Chiloscyllium griseum) , and Pondicherry Shark (Carcharhinus hemiodon) grow to sizes that don' t match the Pet-Mota-Kamot categories, so they were left out. The Zebra Shark (Stegostoma fasciatum) was also excluded because it has dark spots and stripes on its body, which interviewees said they had never noticed. It is essential to note that the list of sharks provided is not complete because the Sundarbans is an open-water area affected by tides and other environmental factors that impact where fish species are found (Chakraborty et al. 2021) . This means it' s possible that some shark species which have not been previously recorded in the area could be there and might cause human bites. On the other hand, some species that were once present might have disappeared due to human activities.

The most iconic and perhaps mythic shark of the region is the Gangetic Shark. The original scientific name was Carcharias gangeticus, but it was reassigned to Carcharhinus gangeticus, and finally to Glyphis gangeticus. Archival documentation indicates that " Charcharinus gangeticus is a very aggressive Indian shark, and has been known to attack bathers of the Ganges. Very rarely the shark is known to have carried away its victims which is credited owing to the proximity of other bathers and their attempt to ' rescue the attacked victim.' Some scientists believe that the
shark (Charcharinus gangeticus) may have acquired the habit of eating the flesh of corpses thrown into the Ganges after partial burning. The sharks acquiring a taste for, human flesh turn into man-eaters" (Hubbs & Munro, 1956). This shark was previously thought to be a freshwater species confined to the Hooghly River system (Burton, 2021) . However, recent sightings in the Arabian Sea (Jabado et al., 2018) have revealed that, like other euryhaline sharks, this species is not limited to freshwater environments. As WWF India notes:

“ It inhabits the River Hooghly in West Bengal, as well as the rivers Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Mahanadi in the states of Bihar, Assam and Orissa. While some of the other river sharks are also known to inhabit saltwater, the Ganges Shark is only found in rivers and possibly estuaries, with no confirmed records from oceans or seas [Although this is debatable] . Belonging to the family of requiem sharks in the order Carcharhiniformes, it has a stocky greyish-brown body, with a broadly rounded snout and small eyes. Unlike other members of this family, the eyes of the Ganges shark are tilted dorsally, instead of laterally or ventrally, indicating that it may swim along the riverbed scanning the waters above for prey. Though its feeding habits are unknown, its sharp and slender teeth suggest that it is primarily a fish-eater. Adults grow to about 178 cm in length and give birth to live ones. It is often confused with the Bull Shark, which is known to attack humans. Its population has been steadily decreasing due to overfishing, habitat degradation, increasing river utilisation, and the building of dams. Its fin and jaws are in high demand in international trade and is also fished by locals for its meat and oil. Recognising the dangers faced by this species, it is protected under Schedule I, Part II A of the Wildlife (Protection) Act of India, 1972 (WWF, n.d.).”

Many researchers believe that bites attributed to the Gangetic sharks are possible cases of mistaken identity because the teeth (especially those on the lower jaw) prevent them from biting into human flesh (Burton, 2021a). There is often confusion among them and the Bull Sharks. In 2021, the magazine ‘Sudu Sundarban Charcha’ (Lahiri, 2020) , a Bengali publication that writes about the Sundarbans, released an edition investigating the story of Kamot. Knowing that I was working on Kamots at that time, one of my interviews was also included in this publication. In our communication, Lahiri and his team provided an archival image of a shark jaw that was discovered in the Bangladesh territory of Sundarban, and

which seems to be a Gangetic Shark jaw. On July of 2022, at around 5:15 AM, I welcomed the sun like every time at the ghat of Bagh More, Pakhiralay. As I was about to light my Bidi, Tara took my hand and started singing:

"ফুলে ফুলে ঢ'লে ঢ'লে বহে কিবা মৃদু বায়,
তটিনী হিল্লোল তুলে কল্লোলে চলিয়া যায়,
পিক কিবা কুঞ্জে কুঞ্জে, কুহূ কুহূ কুহূ গায়,
কি জানি কিসের লাগি প্রাণ করে হায় হায়"

(The Tagore song essentially means: although there are flowers, and birds and the sun, and the beautiful wind, the lord knows for what my soul is still in mourning) .

As if in the rhythm of the song, Tara moved towards me, made me stand up, put me in her embrace, and started dancing. As the wind blew over her soft raven hair, she moved our bodies in the rhyme of the flowing river. Her laugh, in the gaiety of the rising sun, travelled across the peaceful valley and woke up the birds and the fish. As we finished our dance, I noticed a man smiling at us, beaming with joy for the morning. I greeted him, 'Good morning,' and Tara went to get him some coffee. The gentleman introduced himself.

Life has a funny way of finding a path… For this gentleman we met by sheer chance was none other than Dr. Mishra. Y es, the Dr. Mishra – the single most influential shark researcher of the region. For three years I had been trying to get in touch with him, and here he was visiting the Sundarbans after many years... and we chanced upon him on his morning walk.

Without wasting time, I got into an impromptu interview about the sharks of the region. Dr. Mishra had joined the Z SI in 1990. His specialisation was fish and fisheries. His first paper was on the fishes of the Andamans. He was initially posted there. From 1990 to 1997, he was stationed at Chennai, where he worked on the east coast of India at the Marine Biological Centre. Then he was transferred to Odissa to

investigate estuarine fishes, and in 2002, he was transferred to the headquarters in Kolkata. From 2002 to 2020, he worked with marine fish and was the officer in-charge of the marine fish section. The entire marine fauna was under his custodian, so he got acquainted with all different kinds of fish including sharks, and identified about eight to ten species of sharks in the region.

Here's an excerpt of what Dr. Mishra told me about the region and the sharks:

"This was an estuarine region. Most of the sharks here are marine and they stray here. Regarding the Gangetic Sharks, we're not getting any more specimens now, but ZSI had two specimens in the museum. There was a specimen mistakenly displayed as a Bull Shark. Once I got into the glass cage where the specimen was kept, I realised it was a Gangetic Shark, and once I checked all the old documents, I confirmed it. Then when I was checking old specimens during verification at ZSI, I found another small specimen of a Gangetic Shark. There are also two more specimens in the UK and Europe. There was also one more jaw that was identified, probably from Bangladesh. Earlier there was a Sumatran Glifis that was reported through DNA sampling, and it was confirmed to be a Gangetic Shark. These sharks are distributed from the Ganges River mouth to Sumatra. It was also reported from the mouth of the Andamans. Thus, it is found on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal. Earlier, we thought it was endemic to that region, but now we know they're not. But the interesting thing is, we can find these shark teeth still in trade. But we have not been able to identify where they came from. We have not seen a alive shark for almost the last hundred years. The documentation of the one caught in Bombay in 2003 was false reporting.

H remember many years ago, at around 8 PM right here in Pakhiralay, he officers informed me of a shark that was caught by accident. At 10, I identified the specimen for them,

and they went back on the launch after that. So, all of the information was coming from the forest department people, and we had no direct access to data. It is all second-hand information, but a hundred per cent correct information. Now, all we know is from IUCN, but the problem is, it was us who were collecting the data, and we're not in the field to do that anymore.

Regarding fin trading, yes, we were aware that it was going on. About 2015-16, customs caught a big shipment of fins. However, we were not able to identify what species they were. Unless we go for DNA analysis, it is very hard to say. When customs used to catch something like this, they used to come to us for identification. At that time, fin trading was not banned. It was banned in India in 2015 (in 2015, a blanket ban on shark fin trade was declared in India; under the EXIM (Export-Import) policy of the Foreign Trade (Development and Regulation) Act, 1992. The Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) banned shark finning at sea in 2013. This policy, called "Fins Naturally Attached," prevents the separation of shark fins from the carcass on board a ship). But I don't think they were the targeted species on the West Bengal coast and Odissa coast. I think they were primarily bycatch. I know that in the Andamans, however, they were targeted. But yes, this destruction of their habitat has risen drastically for the last fifteen, or twenty years.

The large individuals were the ones that were part of the majority of the bites. But they cannot be found here anymore. I think the increase in pollution and decrease in the depth of the river has caused the larger sharks who used to bite people to come less into these waters. Because sharks require deep waters. At one time, we used to get them regularly, but now, even after working for years, we can't find a specimen there. Since this was an estuary, and there were a lot of different kinds of fish, the sharks came here to feed. So now, the larger

ones are not coming. The smaller ones are coming, but they cannot bite. These sharks could have been coming here for thousands of years."

Dr. Mishra mentioned the largest specimen he ever saw was about five feet. He saw Bull Sharks as well as Tiger Sharks in the region, but the latter were very rare. I mentioned to him that I documented a twenty-foot shark near the river mouth. He said, "Yeah, that will be near the river mouth, but the larger ones do not come inside the river because there is not enough depth for them. Near Kakdweep and the Ocean at different places, it is so shallow that even boats can't pass. Before there were even shaw fishes in the region, but now even after years of working you won't get a shark." I asked why the sharks decreased in the region. He explained that there are different reasons for their absence. These include water pollution, the sewage from Calcutta and Haldia, sound pollution from the boats, and the decrease of depth. "In Bhitorkanika, in the Brahmani River, occasionally, we used to get larger specimens, and we wondered how it happened. We then found out that they used to remain inside the creeks and grew larger. But larger specimens are not available in the river itself. Even in the core areas, I've seen Bangladeshis come and spread nets. The monofilament gillnets are causing a lot of destruction. If the net size is large, then they can only catch larger fish. But since they keep it very small, even the small ones get caught. So, the animals can't grow or can't reproduce. Many times, what's also happening is that these nets are getting torn and are falling into the river and are becoming ghost nets. So, we're getting a screenshot of the destruction that's happening in the open ocean in these small rivers too."

"Sir, how can we change the situation?" I asked.

"We have to create awareness; we must learn that these are the top predators and top predators should not be killed. Remember all sharks are not dangerous, only a few are. People

involved with fin trading must be highly prosecuted and imprisoned for several years. Customs and forest department does not have any information about the fin trading, I am sure. I had contact with the Namkhana forest office, even Kakdwip, also the customs office in Nizam Palace, I had contact with everyone, but no one had information. I also knew that in Digha, there was some kind of shark trading going on, but it has now almost stopped. If you ask any fisher, they will say that 50 years ago, the size of fish was much larger. We are not allowing fishes to grow to that size. Remember what Gandhiji said about nature – there is enough for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed."

It was time for Dr. Mishra to return, so I thanked him wholeheartedly before he was on his way. I sat down on the ghat. H earing how we had destroyed everything from such a person who was considered a top authority in this matter really broke my heart. I don't know how long I sat there in complete silence. Tara sat next to me, holding my hands. I looked at the river, and the loss of my beloved sharks passed through my soul like unending ripples. I don't know why but since the last two years, every small thing used to get me misty eyed, as if something was missing, and a giant boulder sat on my chest. That evening, we went to the town. Tara had a hankering for Phuchka (a Bengali snack) . Although the phuchka in Gosaba was not to her liking as in the cities, she made do with a smile on her face I stood by her, and she fed me a couple. For dinner, we went to the noodle shop. I always ordered egg noodles from the shop which I had found when I came for the first time. But I liked my eggs cooked a certain way. We sat down on the wooden benches for our dinner and awaited our food. I decided to take charge, and asked the man at the counter, "May I cook my eggs for my noodles?" He was taken aback, but I assured him that I won' t make a mess. And so, I cooked my noodles, as the other patrons watched laughing at each other. We took the food from the ghat and ate it right from the packet

with the help of some rose-printed plastic forks. Ashim da had arranged some H aria for me. As we sat on the jetty, with some 'Mocha chops' (banana flower fritters), a lady got us some freshly fermented rice water. There was a large pot on a wooden stove, and Komola's face kept coming back to me every time I looked at the fire. The crimson sky across the Vidyadhari slowly got darker, and lights from boats flickered in the distance like lost souls. The rain could be heard coming from afar, and slowly the river started dancing with her touch. People became ex cited to get some cool rain after a scorching summer. We got up from the jetty, and we rode my TipTip back to the hotel in Pakhiralay, with Tara's hands in my pocket. On our way, we found a stage near a big field where groups of locals were singing Krishna kirtan. I stopped TipTip, took Tara's delicate hands in mine, and sat down on the wet field to listen to the songs. When I was young, I used to see my Mumma sing for hours, and couldn't help but think how craz y these older folks must be for singing a single phrase over and over again: "Rama narayana, Rama narayana, Rama Narayana nam." If only I had a chance now to sit with her and be a part of that ecstasy! Now, wherever I find Kirtan, I get glued to it. It got very late, I do not know for how long I stayed there on the side of the road, but the rain had bloomed in its glory, and I realised I had to go and take shelter if not for me but for Tara.

We got back to the hotel. Something came over me. I put my arms over my head and started saying, "I can't do this anymore, I can't do this anymore, why am I doing this? They are all gone, they are all dead, I am dead." I was enveloped in a cocoon of sweat, rainwater, snot and self-pity. The corner of my left eye was twitching, and I kept on murmuring, "What is the point? What is the point?" I paced the room, murmuring to myself, "I can't do this anymore, I want to go home, I want to go home, I can't do this anymore." Tara was sitting in the corner of the room, calmly uttering, "It's ok, it's ok. you are

ok. I am here." I kept on saying, " I have to go home, I have to…"

I went to get TipTip's keys but Tara stopped me. She pulled tightly at my T-shirt, and started banging my chest. "Stoppp… Stop this now!" She screamed. "Enough of this! Enough of wasting your time in this self-indulgence. You have to stop now! If you cannot do anything for yourself, go do something for others. Go tell their stories, do something for the ones that are still living." I fell on her lap, and put my head deep in her embrace. "It's ok, it's ok… this is your purpose," she whispered. "Come with me... it's ok."

Tara started up TipTip, and we rode along the dark road of the Sundarbans in the middle of the night. The rain had stopped, and there were no road lights, ex cept for the timid light of TipTip. Tara stopped the moped on a desolate stretch of road, we got off and she held me tight. The deep elemental feeling that I had lost something was drowning me again. Because of this loss, I had become like a wounded tiger, and every time someone tried to get close to me, I ended up destroying all the beauty around me more and more. I felt Tara's warm hands deep around me. I looked up. The moon had started to show, and unbeknownst to me, the beauty of Sundarban was looking back at me with her animals, her water, her forests and the flowery air.

The next morning, I found myself again at the ghat and awaiting the sunrise. The first bhot-bhoti carrying people from Godkhali to Gosaba got larger and larger in my peripheral vision. Life does not stop at the convergence of the river; the sun never stops rising, no matter how much rain sweeps over the horiz n the previous night. I was about to get on the boat and head back home when a teen working as a boat hand slipped on a puddle while transporting a motorcycle to the top of the jetty. With the sudden movement on the wet and slippery ghat, the boy's hands fell on the accelerator, and the motorcycle screeched forward. Instinctually, I shielded Tara.

The scooter skidded by us and fell on the river bank some 20 feet below the jetty and buried itself in the deep mud. I was told that it had hit my back and veered down the thin jetty path. I looked at the motorcycle engulfed in the mud. As I looked on, I realised what the answer for creating a sustainable living solution for the women was – the mud. Now the question was… What to do with the mud?

Act 4 : The Nataraja

‘ I was walking in the forest. There was a grey banyan tree somewhere in the grey fog. I could feel the wet grass underneath my footsteps. I could smell the Shiuli flower and rotten seaweed. I could hear the soft murmurs of Tara humming somewhere, but I could not see her. I started walking around the tree. A few dia were burning in a small shrine, and there in the dusty mud, I could see Tara sitting and playing. I called out to her ‘Tara…Oh Tara,’ but she did not answer. I called out again, ‘Tara-a-a-a.’ Like before, there was no answer. I saw her wearing the white saree I had given her, now one with the soil, and her butterfly fingers playing with the heap of clay. I bent down, and reached for her … ‘Tara…’ She turned around, a smile warming her face. She radiated calm but did not speak. From the clay, she had made a small terracotta figure of a jungle cat, painted with pretty white dots and flowers. She handed it over to me, and I held this delicate little figure in my veined, thick-knuckled hands.’

I woke up, and as I looked at the ceiling fan of my apartment, I knew. I had the answer now… terracotta figures. That is the way to sustainable living for the women of the Sundarbans. The clay was renewable in the region. So, all that was needed was fire, and someone to train the women to sculpt life into them. After all, the Sundarbans did not have any indigenous handicraft signature to the region, at least that which is currently available. This is the way those stories can be told, and this is how the skill can be shared. If I can make

this a reality, and if at least some of them do not have to take part in the overfishing, or get in the water facing sharks and crocodiles, it will be worth it. This was a great idea and all, but now, how do I make this a reality?

A few nights after I came back, I was invited to the Government Art College in Kolkata. My father' s friend Gupinath Roy was one of the most prolific sculptors I knew. He had passed away recently, and I felt like visiting his department and seeing what the students were up to. Perhaps this would also give me some inspiration for the terracotta figures I was conceptualising. Standing in front of a decent effort at greatness out of clay, it occurred to me that perhaps these students can help me in training the women to make the terracotta figures. As it turns out a few of the young students were fans of my work, and when they heard about my plan, they were ecstatic and wanted to help me train the women to make the sculptures. So, it was decided that Subham and Dipu would come with me to Gosaba in August. The plan now was to take the young sculptors from Kolkata, hold a day' s art workshop, and provide the women with the skills to create clay figures, which would be sold in a shop at Pakhiralay. We needed to build a kiln to bake the figures and also needed to rent a shop space where all the figures would be sold. Most importantly, I could not figure out where can I get the funds for the project. From my years of experience of being invited to art camps, I knew I had to keep the boys happy, with good food, alcohol and cigarettes, and lodging. The local women who would participate in the workshop were also to be treated well, for they too were artists in collaboration, no less than us. But this meant that it was my plan, and the Tiger Widow could not do anything other than helping with the logistics. Tara, always a voice of reason, assured me, “I know your problem has always been your body, and reality keeping up with your manic ideas, but then again, your brain has not failed you yet when coming up with and executing ideas relating to your

human-shark research. I know you will figure something out. Don't worry, you always do."

As I was trying to make sense of it, I got a message on Facebook from one of my brother's old friends. Bullet da (Chirajeet) is currently a well-established dentist in the US. We had connected over the years. He had messaged me that he was in Kolkata for a visit and invited me out for a coffee. It was raining profusely in Kolkata that day. I rode my TipTip from university, and when I reached the mall, I was wet to my toes. Every time I come back to the city from a field trip, I get a reverse culture shock with all the lights, pointless waste, and cacophony around. As we sat down at a cafe, we caught up like old friends so many years later. We shared old stories and laughs, reminiscing night parties in our friend's house, drunk stories, confessions of love and lust, and everything we did when we were young some decades ago. Bullet da said, "I have been looking at your work. It is very interesting, I must say. What are you up to now?" Things got more serious after that as I described my last visits, the devastation I saw there, and what I was conceptualising to help the women. I mentioned, "I am going to need a lot of money for it." He asked, "How much?" After thinking a bit about it, I told him the best number I could think of... and he said, "Here, I am writing you a check, but I don't want to talk about this anymore. Just take it and do the work." And that was the end of that!

On the 10th of August, we were heading down to Gosaba. The boys were catching a train down to Canning and then a bus to Godkhali. Tara could not join me in the morning but promised she would be there. In the early morning, as I readied my TipTip to head for the Sundarbans, I found a letter on top of the seat. It simply said, "Read this tonight." There was a small envelop with it, on top of which it was written "Eat this now." When I opened the envelope, I found a cookie inside. I ate the cookie, started TipTip and headed towards the forest.

At the back of Rajashee's hotel, we had created a makeshift studio. However, plans had to be altered a bit. It was going to be a logistical nightmare to create a kiln, so we decided to hire a place in Kumirmari to bake the figures. On the first day, the boys were to teach the women how to ' play' with the clay, and on the second day, the women would be encouraged to make figures of all the animals they see in the Sundarbans. I had one more agenda this time: I wanted to walk in the river and spend some time catching some Meen myself. I had spent so much time learning about this activity and its effect on the humans and the sharks that it did not make any sense if

I did not do it myself… at least once.

I reached Gosaba and then made my way to Tiger More where Rajashee's husband' s hotel was located. All the preparations were in full swing. A large plastic was laid on the ground, and 11 women – who suffered shark bites or their husbands were taken by sharks, tigers or crocodiles – had already arrived from several islands. They sat on the ground, chewing paan and chatting. On one side of the space, a large blackened pot was put on the mud stove, and the sound of the bubbling rice and smell of the turmeric paste coating the fresh fish to be fried filled the air around us. The boys soon arrived, and we reunited with smokes and cups of tea. Once the meet and greet was over, it was time to get to work.

Before anything, we had to collect mud from the river. The Tiger More ghat was just next to our hotel, so the four of us walked to the ghat with buckets in our hands. Ashim Da and I jumped into the banks as the boys watched us from the jetty. At the top of their voice, they called out that I – with my big tummy, broad shoulders, and large beard and hair – looked like the gorillas of Sundarban as I stood half-submerged in the mud and had it smeared across my arms and clothes. Dipu instructed us to remove some of the top layer of the clay and dig deep for the finer soil. With our hands, we dug deep into the surface of the riverbank and slowly gathered four buckets

full of clay, which we knew would be enough for two days, and returned to our makeshift studio.

Once we were all together, we put newspapers on the ground. he first thing the boys did was teach the women how to prepare the soil itself. An almost sensual, hard, and careful process, it demanded the right amount of water, repetition of movement, and most importantly, rest for the clay. It took us an hour. Once the internal discrepancies of the soil were broken down to a malleable structure, it was time to mould it to shapes. The boys held the hand of the women as they started playing with the clay. They asked, "What should we do? What should we make?" We replied, "Don't worry about that, just do whatever you feel with the soil, and see if you can come up with anything."

For hours, the cycle of destruction and rebuilding played out before us— drawing from the soil of our forefathers, the sacred Ganga, and the visions of forests and rivers. This profound connection opened a pathway for us to engage with the women on a deeper level. Stories began to flow like a stream of shared consciousness, each narrative unveiling layers of their experiences. They recalled how, back when the shark bite incidents occurred, there were many more encounters with sharks and crocodiles. Over time, the shark population has dwindled, but the forest department has since reintroduced crocodiles into the water, making them a more common sight again. These crocodiles occasionally take goats near the water's edge. However, they could never spot the elusive Kamots. The children of today don't even know what Kamots are, and no one has passed down stories, poems, or art about them. Despite this, they recognise the role of Kamots in their ecosystem: where crabs are harvested, Kamot meat is often used as bait. Some of them recalled eating Dudhe Kamot in the past and occasionally spotting larger Kamots in the local market.

Kamini recounted a harrowing experience from her time in the jungle. Early one morning, just before sunrise, she and her husband were fishing in the water, a few hundred meters away from their boat. The jungle was serene and quiet, but as they turned back toward the boat, they froze in terror. A tiger was crossing the water between them and their boat. Their newborn baby was on the boat, and Kamini' s heart pounded with fear. She knew that even the smallest sound from the baby could spell disaster. Holding their breath in tense anticipation, they watched as the tiger swam closer. Miraculously, the baby remained silent, and the tiger passed meters away from the boat, completely unaware of their presence.

Neela vividly remembered an evening from seventeen years ago, one that changed her life forever. H er husband, who had just returned from working in the forest, decided to catch fish in the water near their home with a close friend. As dusk settled, the two men waded into the water, with his friend walking ahead and chatting with him. After a while, the friend noticed an unsettling silence— her husband was no longer responding. When he turned around, he was nowhere to be seen. Confused and alarmed, the friend suddenly spotted a hand breaking the water's surface several hundred feet away, near the middle of the river, accompanied by a faint, desperate cry, and then— nothing. Four days later, the grim truth was revealed. H is half-eaten body was discovered in a burrow under a coconut tree about a kilometre away. The family came to the devastating realisation that a crocodile had taken him that fateful evening.

As the evening approached, the late lunch was cooked, and we all sat together and enjoyed our rice, dal and 'Deshi-Murgi' (village chicken) . All the women went back home, and the three of us sat with cold beers and smokes. When everyone had gone to bed, I stayed awake. I walked out to the terrace of the building and took out the letter Tara had given me. Inside, there was a Tagore song and her explanation of it for me.

“তাই তোমার আনন্দ আমার 'পর, তুমি তাই এসেছ নীচে।
আমায় নইলে ত্রিভুবনেশ্বর, তোমার প্রেম হত যে মিছে।
আমায় নিয়ে মেলেছ এই মেলা, আমার হিয়ায় চলছে রসের খেলা,
মোর জীবনে বিচিত্ররূপ ধরে, তোমার ইচ্ছা তরঙ্গিছে॥
তাই তো তুমি রাজার রাজা হয়ে তব আমার হৃদয় লাগি
ফিরছ কত মনোহরণ-বেশে প্রভু, নিত্য আছ জাগি।
তাই তো, প্রভু, হেথায় এল নেমে,
তোমারি প্রেম ভক্তপ্রাণের প্রেমে,
মূর্তি তোমার যুগল-সম্মিলনে সেথায় পূর্ণ প্রকাশিছে॥”

“This Tagore song reminds us of the eternal connection with the universe. Because we are such a minute part of the cosmos, he reminds us that the cosmos must love us, otherwise why would it give birth to us? He prays to the lord that, because of your love the cosmos comes to us in different forms, different sensations, just in front of us. For the happiness and the love you have, you have come in front of me, if I was not there my lord, your love would be unfulfilled. Because of the celebration that you have created with me, life goes on in my heart, and in this life, in its varied forms, I find your love my lord. That is why you being the Lord of Lords show yourself in all these colours, and all these forms across the galaxy, across the world so that I find peace, I find happiness. That is why, in the love of your disciple, you find fulfilment, my lord. If I was not there my lord, your love would be unfulfilled.”

Holding her letter close to my chest, I went to sleep. The next day began, and everyone gathered in our makeshift studio. The shark bites inflicted devastating damage on the soft human flesh, leading to severe disabilities, maiming, long-lasting discomfort, and, in some cases, even death. Beyond the physical toll, these bites also had profound financial, social,

and emotional consequences, particularly for women. Many women stopped going into the water altogether, which had been an integral part of their connection with the environment in which they were born and raised. This shift not only prevented them from earning money but also hindered their ability to care for their children, adding significant financial and logistical burdens. As a result, they were often pitied by society and their families. On a personal level, these women struggled with the loss of their beauty, the need for assistance with everyday tasks, and the mental toll of nightmares and post-traumatic stress from the terrifying experience of a shark bite. While the government had official schemes to support families affected by tiger attacks, as long as the fishers had proper documentation. But there was no assistance for those affected by crocodile or shark bites. Private organisations, however, played a vital role in supporting women's sustainability, which made the idea of opening a shop seem worthwhile to me.

Next morning, after everyone had gathered in the studio again, the boys gave the women liberty to make images of any animals they see around themselves. And beautiful interpretation of the natural world in clay thus started taking shape slowly and delicately. I had one question on my mind, even though I was hesitant to ask it. After lunch, the moment finally felt right, so I turned to Rajashee and asked, "After the shark attack incidents, do women feel less attractive? Does it affect their relationships with their partners?" Ashim had mentioned a man who once left his wife because he was no longer attracted to her. Rajashee had also spoken of a woman who had lost her entire hip and part of her leg due to a Kamot bite. When asked if it affected her relationship with her husband, she had replied that it didn't. The incident had occurred when she was 19, and now, at 42, she had two sons. She felt that people were more kind to her, and there was no sense of " disgust" associated with her. Rajashee then shared a

saying from the community: after the shark bite, “kama theke Koruna hoie jai” (from the lust of the lover, it becomes pity for the wife) . She also mentioned a woman named Kanchan, who often cried when speaking about her experience. Kanchan expressed how the other women in the community walked normally, while she could not. She felt like she had become an object of pity, no longer seen positively by her family because she could no longer do the work around the house. Kanchan shared that, even if she were “normal,” the husbands still looked at their wives with pity when they became sick. The love seemed to fade once the woman couldn’t fulfil her responsibilities, especially her husband' s personal needs. “ The love is there as long as I’m fit and can take care of everything. The men here don’t care about their wives, but about what they do for the family,” she said. “Even if I’m a professor, I still have to cook and feed everyone, even with a 6 AM job. We don’t have freedom.”

I enquired to Rajashee, “What are the major fears for women in the region?” She explained that the primary fears for women in the Sundarbans stem first and foremost from their husbands and families – particularly if they are seen speaking to a known person in the community in front of others. There is also the fear of losing their husbands if they need to go into the jungle. For poorer women, their daily work brings a predictable outcome— they know what they will have at the end of the day. However, for those with some education or exposure, the desire for more can become a source of frustration when they cannot achieve it. Women with even a little education often face even greater challenges. On one hand, heir self-respect prevents them from working in the city as maids; on the other hand, staying at home with a husband who subjects them to physical and emotional abuse becomes unbearable. Many women end up committing suicide, and for those who survive, the mental trauma leaves them physically and emotionally drained, worsening their position within the

family. Amidst all these discussions, as we moulded the clay with our hearts and hands, hundreds of clay idols materialised before us by the end of the day.

The time then arrived for me to do the Meen walk in the river. But truth be told, I was petrified. I have seen big sharks inches away from my face, and I was very aware of what they can do. Moreover, as someone who – in the last few years – had already seen countless mangled legs of the women after shark bites, I could barely gather up the strength to get into the water. I knew I had to do it, but I could not bring myself up to it. Ashim da and a couple of women had accompanied me and were gracious enough to get my hand wet in the practice of Meen catching. As soon as I came back to my room, I passed out with the fatigue of the last 3 days. In my somnolent state, I was back at the banyan tree once again. I could feel the damp grass underneath my footsteps, I could smell the Shiuli flowers and rotten seaweed. I could hear the sound of Tara humming somewhere, but I could not see her. I started walking around the tree. A few diya burned in a small shrine, and above which I saw the noose made out of the great banyan vine swing in front of me. Tara was hanging from the noose, wearing the white saree I had given her. Her eyes were shut, but she was singing softly. I walked to her beautiful foot hanging from the vine. It was still painted with the Alta, pristine, like a new bride. The tall trees howled around me, and the touch of the shy lights from the diya was coruscating through the long leaves of the tree. I called to her, 'Tara… Oh Tara.' As I kissed her feet, her eyes opened, and she looked at me… in silence. With a startle, I woke up.

I had to do it. It had to be now – put up or shut up! I got out of bed and found the open bottle of warm beer from last night. I drank it in one go, slapped my face hard, and raised a loud growl. I walked downstairs, and declared to the room, " Let's go". The women, Ashim da, and I started walking towards the river along a riverside path. I was a bit cold, but I

stepped into my vest and very short shorts, and slowly made my way down the slippery ledge into the water. As I got in, I was warned to be more careful of broken bottles of beer that tourists littered in the water, instead of sharks. But I knew for a fact that shark bites and crocodile attacks are quite known in this particular stretch of water. Despite this knowledge, as with most of the time in my life, the brute force of my body often ignores my mental state, driving it over everything else.

The nets in the water felt heavy, but still buoyant. As I started walking in the water, I followed one of the women, who was encouraging me to get deeper and deeper, till the water rose up to my chest. I suddenly felt that Tara was walking behind me with a net too, part of me instinctually wanted to tell her to get out, but I also knew that as long as I was there nothing would happen to her. I suppose that is what all the families felt when they took their young daughters or the loves of their lives into the water, but unfortunate fate did ensue at times. I finally realised that as much as this was for making money, it was to an extent also relaxing – simply walking in the soft warm mud, with your mind not thinking about anything. This is where friendships and communities were built stronger too.

But at the same time, I knew this seemed relaxing to me perhaps because it was a choice – and God knows, to even satisfy my ego – but to them, this is life, this is where and how they made a living, and this is where they sometimes lost their own identity by the loss of a limb or a loved one. I was getting cold now, and I knew it was time for us to get out of the water. I saw Tara walking on the ledge of the river towards our hotel. I followed her from a distance, her white feet were smeared with silver mud. H er t-shirt and linen pants were embracing her beautiful form. We got back to our room, and into the shower... and stood there quietly. The warm water washed away the now dried clay off her pale skin, glistening in

iridescent droplets. We held each other, and in our deep kiss, I passed out.

I rented a shop at Pakhiralay for a year and named it after my mum – Gouri Sundarban Handicraft Project. So, with TipTip I headed back to the Sundarbans on 9th September 2022 for the inauguration. I had an additional responsibility this time, as eleven of my master's level students from the university had requested to join me. I had told them that this was not a holiday but a field trip, and it was not going to be easy. Everyone was asked to carry torches and pocket-knives, and I gifted them whistles, which they were instructed to keep around their necks at all times.

The young women left at 4 AM from their homes to catch the train from Sealdah at 5:30. From Sealdah, they were supposed to take the train to Canning, which would take about 3 hours. Tara did not come with me. She said that since the young women were travelling by themselves, she would be with them as their guide all the way to Sundarban. I had wanted to reach Canning before they arrived, but they reached 20 minutes earlier. So I asked them to wait for me on the platform. I, however, had to take a detour before rushing to them as Tara had forgotten her sandals and I picked up a pair of blue plastic sandals with pink flowers on them for her. I parked my motorcycle and rushed to find them amidst the crowd on the station platform. After looking for them for nearly 10 minutes, I finally noticed red-green-blue-yellow dots in the distance. My students were all standing by the train track looking for me. My eyes instinctively scanned the group for Tara and found her a few feet next to them, standing in a flowy blue dress – her hair still wet, fresh as the morning rain. I met up with them without wasting any time and put them on an auto rickshaw to Godkhali. Reaching Godkhali, I carefully assisted everyone onboard, followed by TipTip and Tara. The beautiful summer morning splashed on the flowing river,

which echoed with the laughter of the young ones as I held on tight to Tara's hands.

Once we got off the boat, the group accommodated two autorickshaws and we headed to our hotel in Pakhiralay. The Tiger Widow team had invited the tiger, crocodile and shark attack victims for some social activities, and there was a saree distribution ceremony. So, after a lunch of Luchi and Tarka, we assembled at the Tagore Society hut – a place to support the women. We sat down on the ground and put muri (rice crispies) and chanachur (fried condiments to be consumed with muri) in the paper bags for the women, and my students distributed the food to everyone.

The young women sat with the local women and wanted to know about their lives. The women shared stories of the mental torture they endured from their patriarchal in-laws. Reflecting on this, Tara explained to me that while similar issues exist in cities like Kolkata, there are avenues for women there to escape such situations and still live their lives. In some cases, couples go together to work in factories outside the state, seeking a livelihood elsewhere. The women know from childhood that once they turn 18, they will be married – it is a predetermined path. In contrast, they felt that the women in the city have the opportunity to pursue careers and independence. However, here, if they have a bit of money and a home, no one wants to leave. Sometimes, it's simply a matter of habit that keeps people rooted. For some, it's not just about poverty; they don't want to leave because it's all they've ever known. Nevertheless, everyone is supportive, and even the young men of the communities treat the young girls as family and sisters. As evening fell, I took my students to Gosaba, treating them all to mocha chops, steaming cups of tea, and noodles from my regular noodle shop.

The next morning, as the sun came up across the river, I knew that it was an opportunity to show my students what fieldwork entails. But it was a particularly hot day, so I knew

we had to start early. I went back to the hotel and woke everyone up. I ran it like a military camp, and so everyone was ready for breakfast in just 30 minutes. After breakfast of Luchi and dal, we walked to the Tiger More and made our way to the Gosaba ghat. Once we crossed the river, we started a 30-minute walk. I walked behind them as eleven young women moved ahead of me, stopping now and then for some cold soda and water. But when one of my students fell ill, Tara went ahead to find a local dispensary, where she got some medicine and a bottle of cold water for her. We visited Uttordanga, where an attack occurred 26 years ago, in around 1997. The victim, Boisakhi Saddar, now 43 years old, recounted her harrowing experience. At the time, she was four months pregnant and harvesting Meen in the Teen Mukho River region. The incident happened at around 3 PM. While she was in the water, something struck her from behind. Instinctively, she tried to fight it off with her hand, but the shark—bit deeper into her buttock. As she continued to defend herself, her right hand was caught in its mouth and severed. Despite her friends being nearby, they were too frightened to help. Summoning her courage, Boisakhi managed to jump back onto land. As the water turned red with her blood, she felt her hand grow lighter and started fainting. The kamot did not return but appeared to vibrate with excitement in the blood-filled water. She was rushed to Gosaba Hospital, where Dr. Giren treated her. She remained hospitalised for one and a half months. Following the attack, she stopped harvesting Meen but continued fishing in the area for some time. Eventually, her sons persuaded her to stop entering the water altogether. Unlike some victims, she did not experience recurring nightmares about sharks, though she had visions of them for a few days after the incident. Boisakhi noted that two other women in her neighbourhood had also been bitten by sharks. She observed that shark sightings seemed to have decreased in recent years, possibly due to the introduction of large trawlers in the water, though

she wasn't entirely sure of the reason. When asked whether she believed sharks should be eradicated, her response was firm: "No, no—they are dying of hunger, just as we are." We walked over across the paddy field to visit Debi Bala Mondol, another survivor of a shark attack. The attack happened 20 years ago, and she vividly recalls the moment. She mentioned that her daughter was in her lap at the time— a poignant way of marking time, reminiscent of how people here often reference events to judge temporality. For instance, when my mother had asked my grandmother about her birth year, she replied, "You were born when that banyan tree in our yard was planted." Debi suffered severe injuries in the attack at Uttordanga Ghat. The shark bit her hand and legs, ultimately taking her left hand and leaving deep wounds on her right leg. Despite hearing stories like her multiple times, the sight of her leg is always shocking. She recounted that the attack occurred during "Srabon Mash" (the rainy season) in the afternoon. After the attack, she was treated by Dr. Giren and spent four months in the hospital. During this time, she endured nightmares of being eaten alive by sharks, which made it impossible to sleep. She never entered the water again. Even now, after all these years, she struggles to walk, and experiences increased pain in her leg during the winter. Debi recalls touching the shark's mouth with her hand and remembers its blackish colour, its fat body, and its impressive six -foot length. At the time of the attack, she was also pregnant with twins. Tragically, she lost both children. Dr. Giren delivered them— one was stillborn, and the other survived only briefly.

As the interviews ended, all my students were shocked, and their usual laughter was silenced. They walked slowly, lost in their thoughts. I walked behind them as they looked like scattered flower petals floating in an unruly stream. In theory, it is very nice being inspired by ' sir' and his adventures; but how the stories are collected bit by bit, and the pain of the

people around us when we have to be pragmatic to tell their story with honesty, is only learnt when you are in the field. Tara was walking a step behind me, but the evening wind was bringing me her smell. I knew even if I could not see the beauty around me sometimes, I could perhaps make an effort to present the beauty to these young women. A rainstorm was coming, but I had booked a launch to show them the river. By late afternoon, I carefully guided the group onto the boat. I had to be extra vigilant – but I am always vigilant in matters like this, so it was ok. We had some snacks with us and ate them as laughter filled the air. We could see the storm coming. When it started raining, the beauty of my surroundings became mesmerising – the splash of rain on the water echoed the laughter of my students, while the smell of the sweet saline water mix ed with the leaves of the dense forest and that of the skin of the Royal Bengal Tiger. I stood at the corner of the boat looking at their smiles. Tara looked over the young women like a protective mother, making sure everyone was safe. We had arranged for food to be cooked in the boat, and as a special treat for them, I had ordered crab meat. Like magic, hot rice and crab meat were presented in front of the girls as they sat down on the wooden planks of the launch. Suddenly, almost unknowingly, one of the girls called out,"Sir, akta dim bheje deben?" (Sir, would you fry me an egg?) . A roar of laughter arose from the deck, laughter which splashed with the torrential rain, soaking the river water, and all of us along with it, even though we were under the shade. As the day was ending, I sat on the edge of the boat. Tara sat beside me and started singing one of Tagore's songs:

"আকাশভরা সূর্য-তারা, বিশ্বভরা প্রাণ,
তাহারি মাঝখানে আমি পেয়েছি মোর স্থান,
বিস্ময়ে তাই জাগে আমার গান…"

(The sky is filled with the sun, and stars, and the universe is filled with life, and in between all of this, you my lord have

sheltered me.) By the time our boat brought us back to Pakhiralay, it was dark. I stood between the boat and the bank and held everyone's hand as they crossed onto dry land one by one. I escorted everyone to their room and they rested. Tara and I, however, stayed awake.

The next noon, the shop was supposed to be ready for its inauguration. Local dignitaries were expected to arrive, and the girls had pooled their money to decorate the space. I was rushing around, conscious of the time my students' train was scheduled to leave from Canning. The team was hard at work, preparing for the event. My students and the local women busily cut fruits, while fresh flowers were arranged. But as I approached the shop, it was clear that this wasn't the grand opening I had envisioned. The furniture was sparse, and the figures, which were supposed to arrive by 11 AM, were nowhere in sight. Ashim Da, who had promised to bring them, was still missing. As the clock ticked closer to noon, I faced a dilemma. My students needed to leave soon to catch their train; I couldn't risk them travelling home late at night. India is unsafe enough as it is, but a late journey on a local train, especially with the looming threat of rain, was an entirely different beast together. Reluctantly, I instructed one of my students to cut the ribbon and then pack up and leave. The girls departed, and only Tara, TipTip, and I remained behind. At around 2 PM, Ashim Da finally arrived, pedalling furiously on his cycle. He had brought the figures—but instead of the promised 500, he had only managed to carry about 40. It wasn't ideal, but it was something. We quickly arranged the figures on the shelves and declared the shop open. There was little time to dwell on the moment… We had to head back now.

I did not go back to the Sundarbans for one year after that. I was working through all the information I had collected and now considering the theoretical implication of this study as much as the practical. But I was always in touch with the group and made sure everything was going well in Gosaba. H

owever, the shop was facing problems, as we did not have funds to pay for someone to man the store, and we were not able to keep it open many evenings. I was writing down my Sundarban book and taking care of my university. I was also heading the Industrial Psychology specialisation at Sister Nivedita University, which brought a new purpose to my life. I had studied Industrial Psychology at my university level some 15 years ago, back then there was no job in the specialisation. The only job as a trained industrial psychologist was... to teach industrial psychology. So, I had another purpose to establish it as a legitimate discipline in West Bengal. The reality was that, even though I may not be personally invested in the discipline, I knew the potential value of it in the community. More than anything else, my young students had their lives ahead of them, and I had to make sure this endeavour was worth their time. For some reason, in Bengal, majority of psychology students are females, a phenomenon I had observed when I studied it myself.It seems to be still the case, and so, these young women became another purpose for me. But I kept on thinking about my Sundarban sharks, and the women of the region. There were some efforts to support the women, however minuscule, but what about the sharks? H ow can we support them?

The first thing we must recognise is that shark conservation is a global issue. To make sure that there are realistic actions, there is requirement of coordinated efforts across nations to address the numerous challenges threatening shark populations and their habitats. Now, there are various strategies that global governments can – and have – put into actions. For instance, marine protected areas (MPAs), sustainable fishing, and ecotourism are being employed to balance ecological protection and economic development. H owever, there are still serious challenges, including enforcement gaps, illegal finning, and habitat destruction. So, it is important that stronger international cooperation and more

effective legislation is encouraged. On that note, countries like Australia, the United States, the Bahamas, and South Africa have taken leadership roles in shark conservation. International agreements such as CITES, CMS, and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMO s) help regulate shark trade and fishing.

In India, much like the rest of the world, shark conservation is an urgent priority. Our coastal water is home to innumerable species of sharks, and there are intensely declining shark populations due to unsustainable fishing practices and illegal wildlife trade. Now, to remedy the situation, India has made significant strides in shark conservation, including legal protections – such as listing several shark species under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, which grants them the highest level of protection. India is also a member of CITES, which regulates the international trade of endangered species, including sharks.

In 2015, India banned shark finning to curb the illegal shark fin trade, and it monitors airports and ports to prevent illegal exports. Research and monitoring efforts are also crucial to shark conservation, with institutions like the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) studying shark populations and migratory patterns. These studies help guide targeted conservation strategies. Additionally, community-based initiatives have worked to raise awareness among local fishers about sustainable fishing practices and the ecological value of sharks. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) have been established around critical shark habitats to provide safe breeding and feeding zones.

Despite ongoing efforts, it is true that sill significant challenges to shark conservation remain in India, much like in other parts of the world. I think it is crucial to expand protected areas, enhance public awareness, and develop sustainable eco-tourism to provide economic incentives for shark conservation. Strengthening legal protections and

international cooperation will be key to ensuring the survival of sharks and maintaining the health of marine ecosystems. While legislative progress has been made, the illegal shark fin trade is still a very serious issue. Adding to this problem is the lack of comprehensive monitoring systems limiting the ability to assess and manage shark populations accurately. Climate change is also a growing threat to shark species, especially those reliant on specific coastal habitats for breeding and feeding. Legal frameworks designed to protect sharks must adapt to account for the impacts of climate change, including shifting migration patterns and changes in prey availability. In India, enforcement of conservation regulations is particularly challenging due to the country's ex tensive coastline and limited resources. Public awareness about the ecological importance of sharks remains low, and persistent misconceptions about these creatures need to be addressed. To ensure the success of conservation efforts, sustainable fishing practices must be promoted to balance ecological preservation with the economic needs of local fishers. This requires the development of alternative livelihood programs to support communities that depend on fishing for their survival. As part of the conservation effort, one of the first paths I have constructed is the creation of a handbook for ' Identifying the Elasmobranchs of India' s Sundarbans.' It intends to serve as awareness and outreach material for elasmobranch conservation projects for scientists and non-scientists on a group of threatened fishes found in a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The second step is to create a citizen science web platform through Sister Nivedita University. It will be an interactive web page, under the umbrella of the Sister Nivedita University website, where citizens can upload information about sharks they observed in the Sundarban region. This will be the first citizen science web platform dedicated to biodiversity data in Southeast Asia.

Based on the questions I contemplated upon in the Sundarbans, my years working with the Great White Sharks, and further theoretical explorations, I propose the seeds of thoughts for a new approach in human-shark research. As we know, sharks are essential to the health of marine ecosystems, but their populations are declining at an alarming rate due to overfishing, bycatch, pollution, habitat destruction, and human-shark conflict. On the other hand, there are unfortunately innumerable shark bites and/ or attacks on humans by sharks (a lot of them being undocumented). These forms of conflicts, where both the species predate on each other and compete for food and water space, are not well understood holistically, compared to other human-animal conflicts. Current research methods aren't addressing the full scope of these issues. Consequently, I present the SHHRKS (Shark-Human Holistic Research and Knowledge System) methodology. The SHHRKS methodology that I propose aims to integrate ecological, biological, social, cultural, and artistic knowledge to create more effective solutions for shark conservation and human-shark conflict resolution. There are four core principals of the system designed to foster a holistic understanding of human-shark interaction as well as conflict. These are: multispecies research, transdisciplinary research, trans-modal research, and trans-knowledge research. This system aims to transcend the boundaries of disciplines, modalities, and knowledge systems, incorporating art, sensory experiences, and local expertise alongside scientific research. Additionally, SHHRKS takes a systems approach, viewing shark conservation and human-shark conflict as part of a larger, interconnected system. This approach encourages collaboration between diverse stakeholders, including scientists, local experts, policymakers, and the general public, to develop sustainable solutions. By integrating various types of knowledge—from scientific research to cultural narratives— SHHRKS aims to create more comprehensive

policies that support both sharks and the communities that rely on them. Ultimately, I hope this methodology will bridge the gap between research, local expertise, and policy, thereby fostering long-term conservation and peaceful coexistence between sharks and humans. The year went by in a blink of an eye. At the very end of 2023, I knew I had to do one final trip, even though I did not want to. I had to bring it all together. I realised that I needed to organise a proper press meet about this work, and bring attention to the women and the lives of the sharks… one last time. Thus, on the 19th of December 2023, Tara, Tip-Tip, and I headed back to the Sundarbans. I was suffering from a nasty cold, so I had to take antibiotics and cough syrup before the trip. Listening to Amar Pal on our earbuds, we made our way down the misty morning, and down across our favourite winding road. Every time, I used to spend a few minutes at my favourite tea stall. But this time, I could not seem to find it no matter where I looked. We reached Gosaba, and I had three important agendas for this trip: firstly, I had one more piece of data to collect; secondly, organise the press meet; and thirdly and most importantly, take back the sensation of the place on my skin. In an attempt to fulfil the last goal, I had decided to spend the night in a boat near the forest, and finally to get into the core area. As we got down from the boat on the other side, a gentleman stood on the Gosaba ghat, praising the Christ and spreading the story of him dying for our sins… in Bengali.

This time, Ashim da had booked our hotel in Gosaba again, because he had arranged the press meet in that building. I had one last data to collect, but Tara had some writing to do. So, I decided to go finish collecting this data by myself. Travelling from island to island, I finally reached the 12-foot by 6-foot mud hut of Kamala Roktan. Around 2003, Kamala Roktan was bitten by a shark at 4 AM near the Gomore River. She was the last woman I interviewed (or tried to interview) who had a shark bite. When I went to her house, inside the forest, there

was no place for me to sit. They gave me a broken chair, even though I was happy on the ground. As I was speaking to her son, she kept on looking at me and started crying. In the shark attack incident, all those 20 years ago, her foot was crushed, and she could never walk properly after that. She never went in the water again, not even in the house pond to bathe, and her son had to fill up buckets of water for her to wash herself. Now she is 62 and has severe Alz heimer' s. I was trying not to concentrate on her and speak to her son instead, attempting to collect as much detailed information as I could. From the corner of my eyes, however, I felt as if my Mumma was crying for her son. My hands started shaking, my eyes were filling up. I could not go on with the interview and had to stop and walk out. I was missing Tara, even though I knew she was there, but I did not know if I would see her when I returned to the room. My eyes were almost teary. I do not know at what loss, I walked back hurriedly to the hotel. I pushed open the door in breathless anticipation, but she was there asleep on the bed. The amber sun was kissing her soft neck, touching her gold chain, and playing hide and seek with the soft blanket that had covered her winsome back. I sat beside her, her lips lay open like Plumeria, soft and heaving. H er glasses rested on the tabletop. I stroked her hair... and in my heart, I said... “Tara, Oh Tara... never leave me… I don’t think I can make it without you.” but I did not utter it. She slept blissfully as I stoked her hair and placed my cheeks on her head. I don’t know when my eyes closed for a while.

I had never visited the Sundarbans in the ‘peak season.’ So, that night, we decided to visit Tiger More. As we reached my favourite ghat, my peaceful Sundarban had transformed into a cacophony of plastic toys and bottles of water, with loud uncouth music filling the air. Thousands of people had gathered in that small area. Shrilling cries of kids wanting purple candy, loud arguments of adult women haggling shopkeepers for synthetic scarfs, and horrid shouting of ill-

fitted fat men angry at hoteliers for lack of enough tea in their rooms started throbbing in my mind. The usual dark water of Bidyadhari was lit by innumerable lights from boats scatted around as far as the eye could see. After 10 minutes, it was getting too much for my senses to handle, and we had to ride Tip-Tip back to our hotel.

The next morning, I was on my usual walk near the banks of the river in Gosaba. On this month, about 111 years ago, Tagore had come to visit Gosaba. He had admired Hamilton's work and supported him in his rural reconstruction program of the region. Hamilton was a Scottish businessman, and in 1903, he bought 9000 acres of land in Gosaba to live and develop the lives of the people in the region. He had constructed two bungalows, and in 1932, Tagore had stayed for two nights in the bungalow next to the river. The bungalow has now been sequestered behind large walls and has been repainted in neon green and yellow, charging tourists five rupees for a quick tour. I sat down on the ground behind the bungalow on the sunny yet chilly morning. Pink flowers bloomed behind the great walls of the building. My phone rang – it was Chiku calling me. My beautiful friend Chiku (Amritanu Das) and his girlfriend Camy (Camila) came to visit me in the field from the US. We hired an auto and showed them around the town. The sun was high, and since they had taken a long flight, I advised them to rest in the afternoon. The evening was supposed to be interesting, to say the least. We were supposed to catch the launch to spend the night on the boat, and so, at around 8 PM, we headed to Tiger More. We were waiting for the launch to arrive. Finally, after 20 minutes of waiting, a small boat toddled along in front of us at the Pakhiralay More. We were startled, as I had paid for a full launch for the entire night. After raising concerns, we were made to understand that this small boat was going to take us to the larger launch for our night stay. Sure enough, the boat took us to a waiting launch. However, as we were about to board, a happy Bengali family–

husband, wife and their 12 or 13-yearold son – looked at us with curious eyes. It turned out that they had booked the same launch and were supposed to be our boat mates. We were shocked. Even worse, our launch was anchored in between all the other boats, with drunk people singing and shouting, and lights glaring all around. I got furious and my roar raged out in the land of the tiger. I instructed them, "This is what is going to happen – I need this small boat to take us away as far as possible from all this light and sound, and near the forest." After a lot of haggling with the boat's men, Ashim da was able to arrange what I asked for. It was a 20-foot boat, with only a plastic on the top to shelter us from the cold. It did not matter to me, I was going to do it anyway– I was going to spend a dark evening near the forest, come what may. However, I was worried for my friends. We got down on the boat and set out to go as close to the forest as possible. After about 20 minutes, we reached a secluded spot away from everything and everyone, and the anchor was laid in the water and thus, our night began.

A night as deep and heavy as an old leather coat soon enveloped us. Chicku had brought some 'Teachers' whisky for the teacher. "Befitting!" I exclaimed. We poured some into plastic cups as the dying red moon looked on. I did not want to sleep. Soon, the night got colder and there were only two blankets. Ashim da and the boatsman took shelter inside the small engine room. I put Chicku and Camy underneath the plastic roof and covered them with both the blankets before finding a place for myself at the edge of the boat underneath the open stars. I took Tara underneath my jacket, pulling her close to my bruised &blackened but still vital &beating heart. I covered my face with my jacket and the cap. The chilly hours crawled on, and my eyes and fingers started to go numb. Everyone was asleep. I travelled to and from consciousness, and the only thing that was keeping me warm was Tara's hand on my recently dyed blue chest hair. I must have dozed off, but

I could hear small sharp waves hitting the hull, sounding like mermaids knocking. A sudden splash startled me out of my sleep! Was that a tiger, or robbers coming for my precious friends and Tara? My hands reached for my three-and-a-half-inch tanto knife, convinced in my half-awake state that I was going to fight off an enraged and hungry tiger with it. Around 12, the sound of the ripples stopped, and around 2, all the lights and sound in the far-off boats ceased.

Deep hollow darkness clashed and intersected through my body, soul, and the rhythmic rocking of the boat until it all emulsified into a great grey silence. The stars kept burning, reminding me of hope in absence. The grey ensnared the edge of the river and that of the forest into one vivid organism that throbbed in silence. This grey and dark had various accoutrements to dress her various tinctures, providing numerous shades for memories and imagination to play and reflect on me. Perhaps, I could also meet the spirits of my loved ones yet again, of those who have left me. Perhaps, somewhere on the edge of the river and forest, they were sitting and washing their clothes, for the long journey ahead. Perhaps, I could see them for one last time. At around 3:30 AM, mist engulfed the entire waterscape, as if the grey silence had overflowed from my soul onto the flowing river and had swallowed all that was light and life. I sat there, with Tara scratching and scarring my chest, to keep on reminding me I was still alive.

Soon, it was 4 AM, and I saw Ashim da emerging from the engine room, and he seemed worried.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The guy who was supposed to get us the auto-rickshaw to take us to Marichjhapi is not picking up his phone," he said. "But don't worry, I will figure something out. There is another guy in the neighbourhood. I am trying to get him to take us." So, the boat took us and dropped us to the ghat from where we

were about to get the auto. We got down on the dark ghat, everything was closed, and Chiku and Camy were shivering in the cold. Thankfully, a tea stall was almost open, and we were lucky to get a cup of tea. Chiku was tired, and so we decided it was best for them to go back. Most importantly, it dawned on me that my hair brain idea was – as usual – more dangerous than I first realised, so there was no point in risking them. I tried to convince Tara to go back with them, but it was a non-negotiable situation, and she was not having it. The boat to take them back to Pakhiralay was supposed to come at 5 AM, and from there they would take an auto back to Gosaba. I could not leave them like that, so we patiently awaited. The only problem was that our time was limited, as guests were coming to Gosaba at 9. As Ashim da vanished into the darkness of the neighbourhood, Chiku and I shared a cigarette among ourselves. "You have to sleep, I saw you doing some weird meditation and looking at the stars all night," he said. I replied with my usual cliched answer, "An eternity to sleep when I die" (which I stole from Hitchins). Tara was feeding some of the dogs in the neighbourhood some fruit cakes we had purchased in the shop. It was dark, so I was always keeping an eye on her, and she was walking around... in and out of my vision. It was 5:15 AM, and the sun was waking up over the river when the boatman from the neighbourhood arrived to start the boat for Chiku and Camy to head back. I put the tired couple on the boat, and it set off for Pakhiralay. Invariably, Ashim da had not failed me– he had woken up an auto driver in the neighbourhood, and as an auto-van arrived out of the mist, it looked as if the super Villon Skeletor was revving up to trick H e-Man and win over the Castle Greyskull.

We started our journey to his ancestral village – No 10. Chargheri, Lahepur GP, nex t to Marichjhapi. Ashim da suddenly quietly told me, " Dada Dr. Amal Krishna Mondal, who was the medical officer of Chotmollakhali, passed away last night". I was shocked and for a moment was

dumbfounded, however I was brought back to my senses with a sudden jolt. In all the years I had travelled in the Sundarbans, for the first time I felt that I would not survive this journey, but the journey had to be done. I hit my head a few times on the metal rods jutting down from the roof. At one point I hit my head so hard, I had to check for traces of blood. But thankfully, my wild boar-like skull did not crack, otherwise, that would have taken a bit of fixing before reaching the destination. Tara patted my head like one does with their teddy bear, and I was ok. I had her on my lap, so my tummy was working as a shock absorber, preventing the ride from hurting her. I do not know why this particular journey seemed so bad. Perhaps, it was the roads that were simply too bad, or it could have been that the rickshaw hardly had any suspension spring. It also might have been the fact that we were rushing to our destination in the early morning mist. We had to be back in Gosaba by 8 AM because everyone would be arriving soon. Once we reached Ashim da's village, we jumped off the auto and started walking briskly in the early morning wind, since we did not have a moment to spare. After fifteen odd minutes, we reached Ashim da's cousin's house, who was supposed to take us. We rushed down to the creek next to their home. As we crossed the thin creek through the mud and shrubs, we had our eyes on the still golden river, and the infamous Marichjhapi jungle across from it. In the creek we were supposed to enter, two people were taken by a tiger only three weeks ago… in broad daylight. It took us another 10 minutes to reach the other side.

Now, if I were a man who engages in life-threatening, potentially illegal activities for expeditions into the unknown and unfelt, one might describe it like this: we would have lifted the net at one corner of the Khari (creek) and slowly pushed our boat into it. One could even say that we had travelled about a kilometre inside the Khari, keeping very quiet and hidden beneath the thatch of the boat – and if we had been fictionally pounced upon by a fictional tiger in this fictional scenario, one

might argue that the tiger would have gotten the most out of his effort by pouncing on yours truly.

In this fictional scenario, I would have shrivelled up in fear, constantly glancing at the darkened edges of my vision – shaded by the crisscross of the mangrove – startled by every small movement or sound. I would have been imagining the terror that the fishers must feel every moment, and at the same time wondering what it takes to step into the water in search for a crab under such crippling fear of the wild. Is it courage, desperation, or perhaps both, that pushes a man to pursue this? And all my imagined heroism would have gone out the window.

But in reality, in this brightly lit morning, even as I replayed all the stories I had heard on a constant loop in my head, everything felt surprisingly normal... just another normal day in the forest.

Mangrove leaves floated down the river, the distant call of deer echoed, and the smell of honey hung inches from my face.

Perhaps, I should have played some horror background music with a big microphone and simulated the fear that was truly lurking there. But the reality was that the king of the jungle must have known we were there... even if we did not know of him. Perhaps the fear felt more intense because, on the surface, there was nothing scary about it. If no one knew the history and the human-animal conflict in the region, no one would know the true nature of the danger lurking behind the leaves. Even then, it was a perfectly normal day in the jungle, predators feeding on food down the food chain, and in this case, I was a good feed. After a kilometre or so, however, my senses suddenly screamed that something was wrong, that something was awaiting us just around the next corner. It was as if I could hear sharp claws emerging from soft fur. Tara too started pulling at my jacket, reminding me that I did not have a moment to spare… it was time to go!

We reached back to the banks of Ashim's village, and then we had to rush back to Gosaba. All the dignitaries were supposed to arrive in no time. The Vice-Chancellor of Sister Nivedita University, Prof Dr. Dhrobojoti Chakrabarti, the ex - Director of the Sundarban Bio Reserve, Dr Atanu Raha, some young rangers, and my father-painter-and social-activist, Samir Aich had been invited to come. Along with him, my beautiful Bouthan (sister-in-law) , dynamic brother (Raj Kamal Aich) , and my Haloom (the Bengali word for a tiger's roar is "হালুম,", Which is an onomatopoeia and is used in a facetious manner) were to come as well. All were supposed to reach by 10 AM, and so, we had to be back at Gosaba latest by 8:15 AM.

As such, we rushed over the cobbled roads and across the calm river, and finally, at 8:30, we arrived at Gosaba. Ashim da rushed and started working on the preparations for the day. I started calling everyone to see where there were. Dr. Chakarabarti was not able to make the meeting, but the others were. Dr. Raha was to cross the river on a special boat by the forest department on a different ghat. I was pleased that my father was able to make it. For the first time, he would be able to see the fruits of my labour – we never outrun the image of our fathers, after all. My phone rang. It was my Bouthan calling me and said, "Ha bhai, amra pouche gachi Godkhali Ghat" (Yes brother, we have reached the Godkhali ghat) . I rushed towards the ferry and jumped onto the next boat, and after 7 minutes, I saw my family waiting for me from afar. I leaped onto the ghat, and with one hand, I picked up Haloom in my arms, and with my other hand, held my father's as we got up to the boat and crossed the eternal river.

Everyone was escorted to the hotel. However, I was jittery. Even though I had arranged this press conference, part of me still was not sure why I did this and wondered if I should have done this at all. The last few days had taken a toll on my body,

and I took a paracetamol so that I could last till the end of the day. Tara came and stood beside me. Quietly, she whispered in my ears, “At the end of the day at Christopher Hitchins's last public appearance, in Texas, in 2011, an eight-year-old child approached him with her mother. After recognising her interest in reading – and that she read at her age – he exclaimed, “She has floored me twice now. It is like the Rabies, confronting Jesus outside the temple you know!” The child said, “I wanted to meet free thinkers because I want to grow up to be a free thinker.” As the conversation came to an end, he smiled at her and said, “I wish you well, I wish there were more like you, and… Remember the love bits.” Knowledge isolated from love is futile I suppose, for this love transcends humans, oceans, all other animals and the cosmos, and at the same time this love binds us together and helps us share stories. This love had brought you here, and this love you hold in your hand and heart will help you finish this last leg of the journey.”

By this time, seven of the shark bite sufferers, seven reporters from various national media houses, and some local dignitaries including Soumitra (or as he is rightfully named the Oxygen Man because of his contribution during the time of COVID – he had taken it upon himself to carry bottles of oxygen on his cycle and save people in the Sundarban villages who could not breath) and the Tiger Widow team had arrived at the hotel, along with some older fishers of the region. I had arranged for good catering for everyone, and included fresh fish and crab. The women ate, as did all the dignitaries. As people were enjoying their food, we had about 20 minutes to spare. So, I took my brother, Haloom, Chiku, and Camy for a ride in an auto van across the neighbourhood, and Haloom rode on TipTip with me. He wanted to see some tigers, but I said, “On this trip, I will not show you tigers, but I will take you down that field, and you can play with the goats.” From then onwards, it seemed that whenever anyone asks him if he

saw any animals in the Sundarbans, he very excitedly mentions, “Yesss… I saw a big goat!”

By 11 AM, everyone had assembled in the main hall. It was my privilege to start by introducing the story. As I started discussing, the hall quieted down, and a visible shock reigned down the room. Dr. Raha came up to speak, and he mentioned that even though he was the director of the Sundarban Biosphere in the early 2000s, he had never heard of these incidents, and neither had his forest rangers. He was baffled, why none of these stories reached him? To which I wanted to ask, exactly… why did these stories never reached him? My father also shared that he had never heard of these and raised more concerns. Then came the time which I was dreading, but I knew that it had to be done, nevertheless. I had to ask the women to show their scars from the shark bites. The women walked up to the stage and sat down on the chairs. Slowly, one of them lifted her old saree over her legs, and the remains of her beautiful old leg lay naked in front of the people around. My Bouthan did not want to get too close and see them, and neither did my father. But the press people jumped up and rushed towards them with cameras aimed. Loud flashes lit up all the crevasses of molten chewed-up human flesh. Dr. Raha was spellbound as were his rangers.

I stood there, once again dumbfounded. My hands started shaking, and a deep sense of loss started to overpower me. Along with this loss, came a deep sense of guilt. To me, it looked like these women were being masqueraded for the clicks on some website. I ran to the corner of the large hall and fell to my knees, tears starting to flow from my eyes profusely. Soumitra was standing a few feet away from me, and he immediately came to talk to me. I hugged him instead, and as if a confession which I was carrying on my shoulders for a century came out of my mouth, “I am two decades too late, I should have been here 20 years ago. Everything is gone, the lives of women are gone, the sharks are gone… the water is

gone… the forest is gone… I am 20 years too late." Soumitra tried to console me, but I could not be consoled and kept on weeping. Suddenly, I felt Tara's hands lifting me from the ground.

Tara pulled me by my hand and took me to our room two floors up. She closed the door and stood in front of me. She did not say anything, but she was breathing heavily, and her eyes were red. Tara let her hair down and took off the white-red pleated saree off her shoulder, and from her body... and stood there in all her glory. My weeping eyes were mesmerised by her beauty. Tara put her hand in a mudra, and lifted her left leg, and in front of me stood the incarnation of the Nataraja. H er hair cascaded her bare body, moving in a deep rhythm as her eyes looked at me, piercing into every corner of my dark existence. Tara said:

> "Raj, look at me… look at my beauty, and look at my power. In this eternal, rhythmic motion, I am creation, preservation, destruction, and rebirth. I am religion, I am art, and I am your science, and I shed ignorance and the ego. My uncapped hair is rejection of society and normal existence; my snake shows the power I have over the deadliest of creatures. My damaru (drum) in one hand and the flame of destruction in the other is the rhythm of creation and the transformative power of annihilation. Destruction is not an end but a necessary step for renewal. My outstretched hand is of protection, refuge from fear, a reminder that liberation and enlightenment are accessible to all who seek them. I am the God of the Ganges; I catch her immense power in my tangled hair. My uplifted left foot is the path to salvation, and this other foot treads firmly upon ignorance. This is all illusions – love, creation and destruction, life and death, are but one. This is all transient, yet interconnected, and this unbroken, sacred dance that unites all beings in the divine."

Behind her… in the corner of the ceiling, I saw a giant spider. She said, “Don’t be afraid love. Over the years, this spider has captured you in its web of physical pleasure and that of the awaiting adventure. Perhaps, that is why you could never see the beauty around you. Maybe something you lost, and its parts scattered into a hundred pieces, all across the planet... and here in the Sundarbans, in the form of its people, forest, and sharks, your pieces are one again. But you have to let go now. Your duty is to do your work, my beautiful love. The universe takes care of the rest. Your work is now that of your idols... it is the love, it is the knowledge and yes, it is the deep urge to help the humankind and all the other beautiful animals that shares the waters and sky and land of this planet. Look at me… look at the beauty around you, look at my naked body… you have done your duty, my darling. Nothing is truly gone; they remain with you forever.”

I rushed and fell on her feet weeping. There was a knock on the door! “ Raj da, they are leaving. Come, bid farewell to them.”

I opened the door, and I realised that I had a high fever. Despite that, I went down and helped everyone on their way back to Kolkata before the rain set in. Tara, TipTip, and I had to leave now too before the storm caught us. I felt weak, but I knew I had to be strong, if not for myself but for Tara and TipTip. We got on TipTip, and rode through the winding road towards Gosaba Ferry Ghat. The boat was about to leave, so we got on as soon as we could. Something was wrong. I knew the mission I had set for myself was accomplished, but something still felt amiss. I held on to Tara as I knew she was still a bit unsure of the water. But the storm was catching up to us, and I could see the clouds in the distance.

I had one more task to do before finishing my work. I had promised Khitish I would meet him before I headed back to Kolkata. As we set off from Godkhali, the rain started to drip bit by bit. The darkness overcame the sky, and for 30 long

kilometres, we rode in the dusk. I felt protected by my Tara's embrace over my tummy. After about an hour and a half of slow driving, we reached Khitish' s house. We were soaked from the rain, and he welcomed us with hot tea and nadu (Bengali sweets made out of condensed milk and coconut) .

I told Khitish about our puja and our project with the women. He was delighted and mentioned that he had created idols of tigers and other animals of the region and would be glad to go and teach the women. Touching Khitish's feet for one last time, we bade our goodbyes. We got on TipTip for the last stretch of the journey. By now, it was dark, and heavy rain had set in, but we had to get back. Inch by inch, kilometre by kilometre, we made our way home. I was shaking with cold, and Tara rubbed my chest and tummy, trying to calm me down.

She said, "Have I ever told you the story of Bubily TipTip?"

"No."

"Oh…would you like to hear it?"

"Yes please, as long as I can hear your voice… tell me the story."

She started whispering in my ears:

"This is the story of a day in the life of Bubily TipTip. Picture this, her eyes half open into a chilly morning in Mermaid's Tail, a Hebridean island 20 km away from the closest town of Harmonica on the northwest coast of Scotland. She is curled up in her bed that she is sharing with a scruffy dog, a chubby bunny, a moody cat, some underwater digital photographic equipment, a pocketknife, a mandolin, and a hot water bottle inside the wooden cottage. A streak of silver wooden floor reflects the last ambers of the starlight travelling through the cherry wood, and there in the distance, near the edge of the cabin by the little potted plants, lays her expedition bag enmeshed in sweat and seawater – and looking at her... enticing her to get up and touch him. A

little bit of cold tap water on her face wakes her up and she puts the pot on for her coffee. She has long brown hair cascading down to her hips where you can see a tattoo of two Bengal tigers making love underneath the moon. Her deep brown eyes catch your gaze, then release to her rosebud lips, and the bronze lip ring and some way below to a tattoo of the bow of Ashur.

She is a shark researcher, and for the last four months, she has been settled in the field site of Mermaid's-Tail to learn about the human relationship with the Basking sharks of Scotland. The sun is coming up and she is teary, but the ocean calls. Her strong arms and powerful shoulders lift her bag. Her small cabin in this isolated island is only one of the three. The blind shepherd and his dogs and horses are next to her house, and at the end of the hill lives Miss Dolly. The open red field jumps into the dark ocean, still asleep. For a moment she closes her eyes to take in the breath of the island moss. She had grown up in the Mongolian mountains. Her mother was a potter, who used gold and bronze wire to design terracotta pots and taught her to ride horses. Her father was a builder, making wooden thatches across the mountains. She grew up in their loving arms surrounded by the high mountains, books, snow, stories of Yeti, Mongolian horses, and the embrace of the arid Mongolian winds. But nothing prepared her for the Scottish gale. Her eyes open, the grass moves with the cold wind, and the ocean ignites with the first splash of vermilion light. Mermaid's Tail – the island is so named because one end of the island has a steep climb down to the end of the land meeting the ocean, and there… just at her edge, she sees… the ship awaits.

Her days are dynamic; sometimes, she travels on military ships, sometimes with scientists, and today she

is with tour operators who take people out in the ocean to see the basking sharks. Standing in front of a fast-moving boat, we follow Bubily through the day as she goes to learn about the second-largest fish on the planet and their interaction with humans. When the time is right, she downs her free diving gear, jumps into the water with the tourists, and observes the interaction of the humans and sharks in a symbiotic marine contact zone. The salty water of the ocean and that in her eyes merge as she finds herself mesmerised by the beauty of the animals, and thanks her stars for the opportunity to be with them.

Late afternoon, the boat drops off Bubily at the wobbly wharf of Harmonica, a quaint little coastal town. Once or twice a week she makes time to come to the town to talk with the locals and learn from them their knowledge, perception, and feelings about the sharks, and how they are linked with the giant fish through myths, legends, and art. She shares drinks and stories of the Hebridean sharks with the fishers. After the bar, she has a meeting with Sigrid an old Harmonica resident, on her gray-purple sandy beach. Sigrid shares with her the story of 'Humming,' the giant glowing basking shark of the woods. Sigrid used to walk in the woods at night to collect plants and seeds. It was 2:30 AM, and in a trance, Sigrid had walked out into the jungle. Underneath the purple banian tree, there were some seeds that she needed for her potion. Engrossed in the musty smell and purple moonlight underneath the tree, suddenly she heard the stomping of hooves. She looked up and through the bushes burst out a heard of wild Harmonican mustangs. From the horses' hairs, flares of light cascaded towards the sky, and as she looked up, those lights merged to create the figure of a giant glowing shark. His skin was purple and green, made out

of thousands of fireflies, lighting the leaves, the trees, the rabbits, and the bird's nest. The forest stopped with her to look at him flying amid their branches. His body twisted and turned, and the lights sparked with the contour. He turned back and came towards Sigrid. He opened his jaws, and a giant 7-foot gape of yellow warm light opened up in front of Sigrid. All she remembers after that was that she had closed her eyes and shouted… take me!! When Sigrid regained her consciousness, she was left in the cold dark forest… again… alone by herself.

Saying goodbye to Sigrid, Bubily walks up to Åse's garage. Åse has been building a Viking canoe for the last 2 years. Åse has told her about the lineage of the Vikings in the region, how she connects with their language, their love of the ocean, and their fighting spirit. They walked together to the Moontop-Hill next to her house to visit the ancient cave paintings deep in her recesses. Standing below them with their small lantern, Åse tells Bubily about the significance of these sharks drawing to their land and water. Before leaving the dark and musty cave, Åse kisses Bubily's hand softly and places a flute of fossilized whalebone she has made for her in her palm. She promises her when the canoe is ready, she will take Bubily with her on a circumnavigating sail around the Scottish Isles. Bubily promises to take her up on that offer. Before the day is over, Bubily visits the Bronze Pot, the local art and confectionery shop in Harmonica. Whenever she gets the time and has a bit of money, she goes into the shop to talk to Mrs Miggins and pick up some handmade paper and some charcoal. Her face lights up, for today there is a sale on the stick of muggy green charcoal in the front window, and she still has 3 dollars left for a lemon tart.

As the evening closes, we walk down to the wharf to board the boat with Bubily to head back to her home away from home, Mermaid's Tail. She still has all her field equipment on her body, and in her hand, she has a bit of handmade paper and charcoal, with which she paints a lot of sharks when she gets the time. The last year has been particularly very challenging, with her suffering chronic depression after losing something very close to her. When she didn't have a voice, the sharks helped her express her emotions. Her drawings with sharks now have almost nothing to do with the fish, but their form has become the language she uses to engage with the recesses of her mind her conscious self does not have access to.

The evening is here. Bubily thanks the boat's person and jumps down at the edge of the Mermaid's sandy Tail. The dog and the cat come running down to meet her, the rabbit is indifferent, and the rain starts to drizzle. After the steep climb, she looks across the highland, the shrubs dance with the breath of the isles, and the shadows of the impending clouds roll over the blue field. A streak of silver grass reflects the last ambers of the starlight travelling through the bluegrass, and there in the distance, near the edge of the cliff, she sees her mother and father enmeshed in a deep embrace and looking at her. Her tears travel down her cheeks as her brown eyes are covered with mist, and in that mist and the mist of the island, they cease to appear.

In bed, still cold from the ocean, 'Potato' the dog sleeps next to her, 'Marley' the cat sleeps on her head, and 'Drumstick' the rabbit lays on her tummy. Today, exactly 21 years ago, her mother and father shared their love for each other for the first time, and 1 year ago on this day, she lost them somewhere in the vast ocean, and in the somnolent state Bubily found herself calling out their names. When they went away, she looked for them

in everything beautiful, every touch, every pretty face, laughter, and kindness- but all that she found was stygian silence. It is only the knowledge that her expedition bag awaits to be picked up, that helps her to have some meaning to get up the next morning. She doses off thinking of her mother's bronze anklet on her flawless golden skin, and the bruised shark tattoo on her father's chest amid salt and pepper hair. She feels sheltered by the memories of long winter nights, when her father and she laid inside a warm wolf blanket just underneath her mother's feet, as she breaded golden wire and told them stories of sand, rivers, and lands and loves severed thousands of years apart. The last sound she hears before the finite eternity is the hooves of the horses next to her house, and the movement of the golden fins of the basking sharks breaking the surface as the storm howls from hill to hill."

Finishing her story, Tara held on to me tighter, as if wanting to unite us into one entity. I had never seen this road in the dark, nor in the rain, and little TipTip was a bit intimidated by the big light of the passing lorries and shaking in fear. I reached my favourite bend, but in the darkness, the trees loomed over us as Tiptip's timid light tried to light the way. Down the path, there was some road maintenance being done. As I was passing through, a little goat suddenly decided to cross the road. I pressed the brakes hard, and with all the weight on her, TipTip stopped, but in the rain, and gravel road, her wheels locked. The three of us thus crashed across the gravel, and into a ditch by the road.

It took a second, but I got up from the darkness of the ditch. My two girls were in the mud. I reached for Tara with my hands behind me, but I could not reach her. I looked back to see if she was a bit far behind, but she was not there. I called her name, "Tara." Thinking that she must have been on the

road, I quickly jumped up the short ditch and started looking for her. The rain ensued heavily, and it had already engulfed my face and body. I shouted for her,*"Taraaaa…."*
No one answered but the crickets on the eucalyptus tree around me. I shouted again…*"Oh, Tara…."*

The rain got louder… and no one answered. Where is she? *Where is she?* I lit my torch and went down in the ditch again. Enmeshed in the mud lay my TipTip... but no Tara. I started walking back the road and called her name again and again,*"Taraaa…. Taraaa… Tara…"*

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Photographs

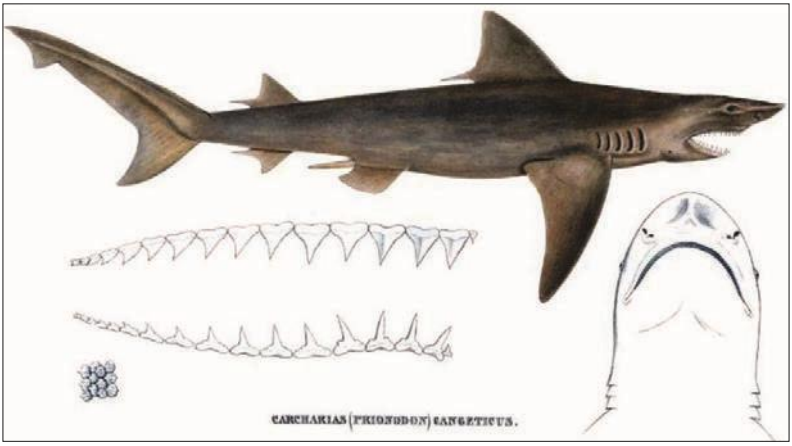


Komola Mondol



Learning for the locals





Archival painting of Gangetic shark



Learning for locals



Priankar showing fisherman shark teeth for identification



The day begins in the river



The day ends near the jungle





S hak attack victims from incidents in early 2000



Shark bite incident from 19 9 5



Komola Mondol' s shark bite from 19 9 6



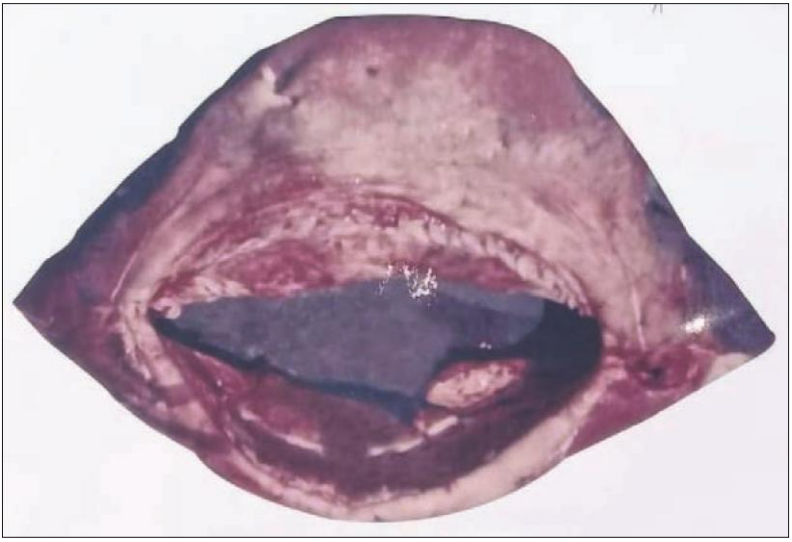
A shark bite from the early 2000s



Shark bite on a man while fishing



Photograh of the shark jaw from the Bangladesh side of the Sundarbans. his gangetic sotirindrana From Lahiri.



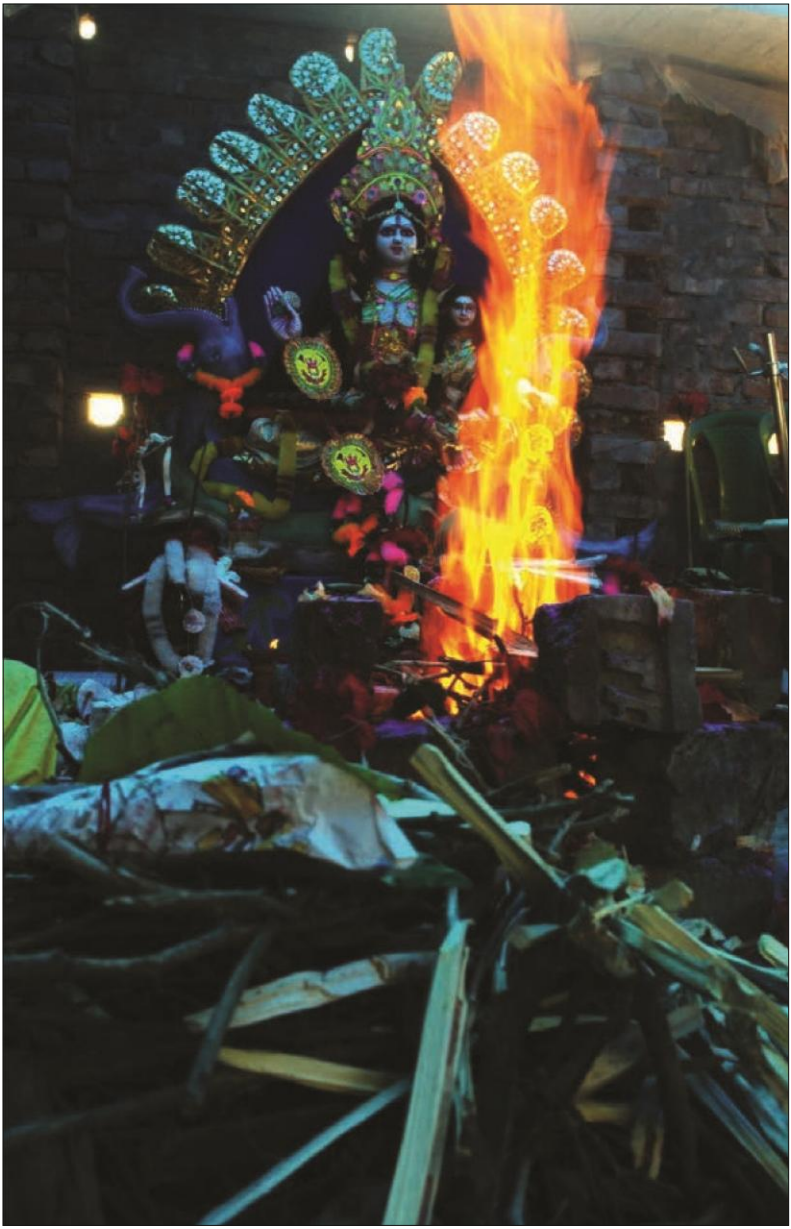
Shark Jaw from the Indian Sundarbans, provided- Dr. Mishra



Creating the I dol



The idol in her glory



The puja



The Bull shark of the murky water



TipTip in the Sundarban



The w omen playing with mud



Mud taking shape into surreal crocodile





Delicate terracotta figures from the mud



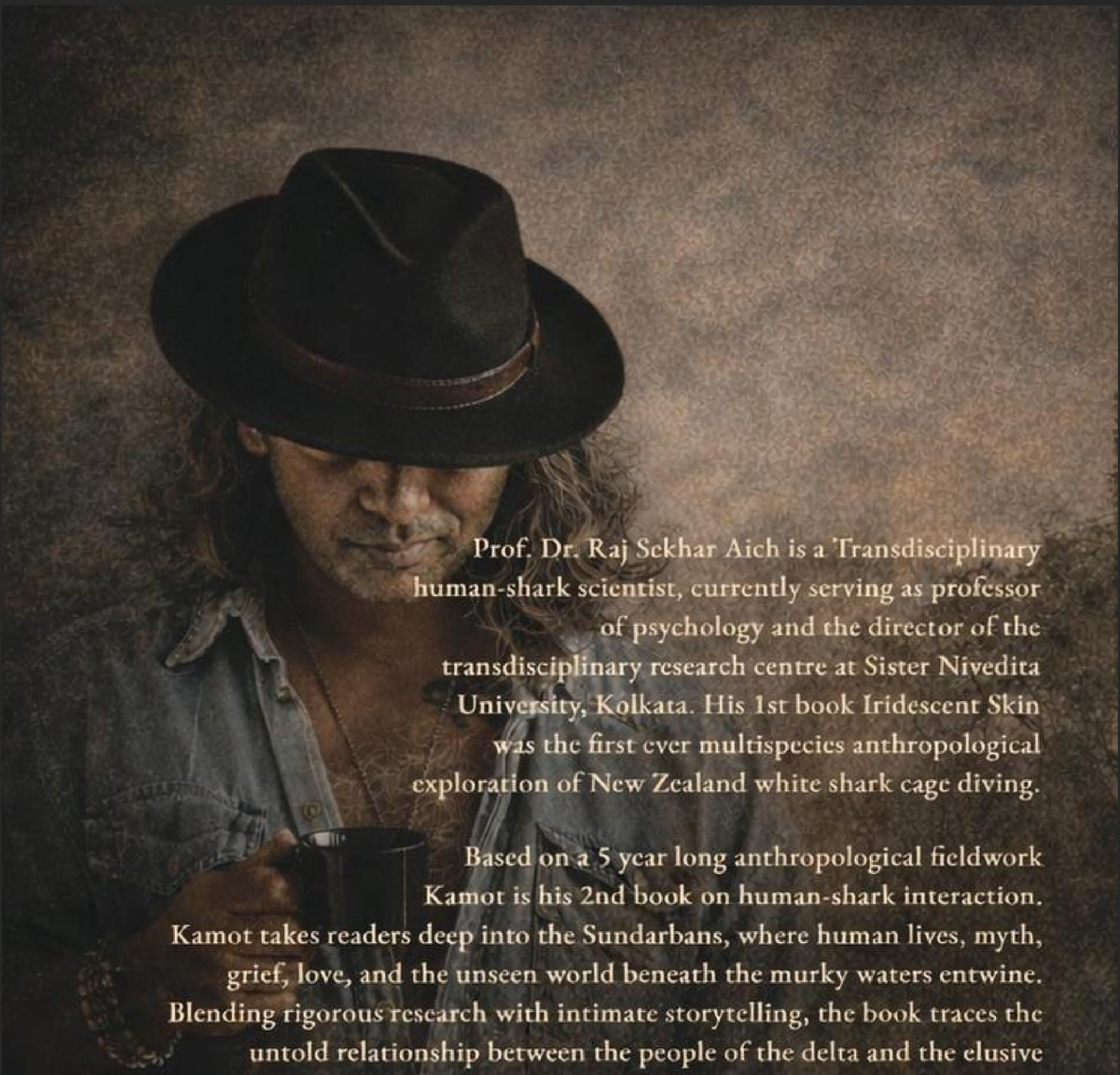
Students crossing the river with their mad Professor



The Final press meet



The thin liminal line



Prof. Dr. Raj Sekhar Aich is a Transdisciplinary human-shark scientist, currently serving as professor of psychology and the director of the transdisciplinary research centre at Sister Nivedita University, Kolkata. His 1st book Iridescent Skin was the first ever multispecies anthropological exploration of New Zealand white shark cage diving.

Based on a 5 year long anthropological fieldwork Kamot is his 2nd book on human-shark interaction. Kamot takes readers deep into the Sundarbans, where human lives, myth, grief, love, and the unseen world beneath the murky waters entwine. Blending rigorous research with intimate storytelling, the book traces the untold relationship between the people of the delta and the elusive Kamot—sharks whose presence is felt in wounds, memories, and survival itself. Moving between science and emotion, personal journey and collective history, Kamot explores human–animal conflict, ecological fragility, theresilience of the Sundarban women, and an enigmatic but vulnerable creature that has haunted imagination and shaped reality for generations.

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