

Water and human-nonhuman agency in India's Sundarbans

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The brackish waters formed where the Ganges-Brahmaputra river system meets the Bay of Bengal not only sustain the world's largest mangrove forest, they also play a critical role in the lives of the more than 4.5 million people who call the Sundarbans home. Over the past century, the mangrove forest has been partially cleared and settled, and today, more than 3,500 km of earthen embankments snake across the 54 inhabited islands of the West Bengal Sundarbans, separating low-lying villages and rice paddies from vast saline rivers. Life in the region depends upon the constant negotiation of diverse flows of water. Survival is shaped by the rhythm of tides, abundant monsoon rains, and the seasonal replenishment of freshwater lakes, ponds, and aquifers. Attention to the everyday ways in which coastal communities engage with water brings diverse forms of human, natural, and supernatural agencies into a common analytic frame, allowing for a more nuanced discussion of human-nonhuman relationships in a context of global environmental change.



A statue of the Hindu river goddess Ganga is transported from the home of the artisan to the riverside for pūjā. Sundarbans, West Bengal, India, June 2019. Photo by author Calynn Dowler, all rights reserved.

that water is not just a resource flowing through abstract space, but a culturally and experientially meaningful substance that constitutes the places people inhabit.⁶ Understanding the Anthropocene in the Sundarbans involves recognition of global forces that act on the local waterscape and render it unruly and precarious, as well as an awareness of how this precarity is negotiated locally. Below, as a brief example, I consider the role of religion and ritual in a precarious riverine waterscape.

Ganga Pūjā in the Sundarbans' unruly waterscape

In June 2019, I joined a group of fishermen for Ganga Pūjā on a riverine char⁷ next to the Bidhyadhari river in the West Bengal Sundarbans. It was a heavy, hot day. We sweltered under a plastic tarp and listened to the recitations of the Brahmin priest. Across the Gangetic plains, the Ganges river is venerated as the goddess Ganga Devi. On Ganga Dussehrā, festivals are held to mark the day the sacred river is said to have descended from heaven to earth via the Lord Shiva's matted locks. The temporary Ganga Devi statue [*mūrti*] constructed for the occasion took the shape of a beautiful young woman with hair flowing past her waist. The goddess sat atop her vehicle, known as a *makara*, represented in Hindu mythology as a fantastical aquatic creature in the shape of a crocodile or dolphin or a combination of both. She wore a white sari with golden trim, flower garlands, and a gold and fuchsia crown, evoking her status as a goddess of good fortune and plenty.

For fishermen in the Sundarbans, rivers are an important source of livelihood. Approximately three decades ago, Ganga Pūjās became common along this stretch of river due to an increase in fishing for tiger prawn hatchlings. In recent years, however, demand for prawn hatchlings has dropped, and fishing has declined. Ganga Pūjā celebrations have similarly been reduced; this year the organizers struggled to get families

to contribute financially. The Ganga Pūjā had been suspended entirely in the years following cyclone Aila in 2009, but fishermen helped to reinstate the festival. One of these fishermen, Mano, explained the importance of the ritual, and told me how he calls on Ganga Devi when venturing out on the river to collect his nets. "She can give so many fish and crabs", he explained; "She can make you rich, give you a big house, anything". The ritual was sponsored with these hopes in mind.

For Mano and others living along the river's edge, however, Ganga Devi is not just a goddess of plenty; she is also a protective maternal figure. The fishermen I met in the Sundarbans call on 'Ganga Ma' for protection on both water and land. As Mano explained to me, the earthen embankment holding back the river is fragile. The Gram Panchayat—a local village-level elected body—is responsible for embankment maintenance, but the funds allocated for embankment repair do not always reach the intended recipients. As a result, breaches are frequent. When saline river water washes in, Mano and his neighbors call on Ganga Devi: "Mā! Bāñcāo!" [Mother, save us].

I was struck by the complex entanglements of human, nonhuman, and supernatural agency that animated the Ganga Pūjā I attended. With these thoughts in mind, I returned home. Later that night, water began falling to earth in a manner that recalled the myth of Ganga Devi's thundering descent from the heavens. During the storm, a bamboo Ganga Pūjā *pandal*⁸ alongside the river was toppled. Riding my bike through thick mud along the embankment the next day, I found a group of fishermen repairing the *pandal* and delicately repainting the *mūrti*. They were preparing the goddess for her eventual *bisarjan*, which refers to the ritual immersion of the *mūrti* in the river that concludes Bengali Hindu festivals.

The moment stayed with me: the figure of a river goddess, destroyed by rain, repaired only to be submerged in water once again. Anthropocene discourses that cast Sundarbans islanders only as victims of global climate change reveal little of the everyday texture of these sorts of engagements with unruly waterscapes. It is true that those who live in the Sundarbans are affected by forces beyond their own control. However, as Ganga Pūjā demonstrates, people in the Sundarbans also engage in ritual actions that temporarily order the uncertain waterscapes in which they dwell, and in so doing exert intentions and agencies of their own.

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Notes

- Harms, A. 2015. 'Dwelling in Loss: Environment, Displacement and Memory in the Indian Ganges Delta'. Unpublished Dissertation, Berlin: Free University; p.90.
- DeLoughrey, E.M. 2019. *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Duke University Press; p.2.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2008. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Reissue, with a new preface by the author. Princeton Studies in Culture, Power, History. Princeton University Press.
- In her discussion of 'tidalectics', DeLoughrey (see note 2) draws on the work of Barbadian poet and scholar Kamau Brathwaite. The concept of 'tidalectics' draws on island geography and the cyclical nature of tides to critique the linear synthesizing nature of the European dialectic.
- Swyngedouw, E. 1999. 'Modernity and Hybridity: Nature, Regenerationism, and the Production of the Spanish Waterscape, 1890-1930', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89(3):443-65; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1111/0004-5608.00157>.
- Orlove, B. & Caton, S.C. 2010. 'Water Sustainability: Anthropological Approaches and Prospects', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39(1):401-15; <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.012809.105045>.
- The Bengali word *char* refers to sandbanks/alluvium that appear and disappear in the shallow riverbeds of the lower Gangetic plains of deltaic Bengal.
- Pandals* are temporary structures, usually erected for the veneration of deities.

In 2018-19, I spent 18 months researching shifting meanings of water in the West Bengal Sundarbans. During that time, I collected oral histories and conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews with domestic water-users, farmers, fishers, NGO staff, and local government officials. While most academic and policy discourse on the Sundarbans delta approaches water as either a threat to be contained or a scarce resource to be managed, I came to focus on everyday engagements with water, including its cultural and religious significance. My research explores what the waters of the Sundarbans mean to those who navigate them daily, and how changes in the waterscape are experienced and understood. I argue that a focus on coastal communities' engagements with water can contribute to current efforts to 'provincialize the Anthropocene'.

'Provincializing' the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene looms large in contemporary discussions of the Sundarbans. Scientists understand the term Anthropocene as the current geological age, in which human activity has come to shape the earth. The term is commonly invoked in discussions of anthropogenic climate change, which scientists argue poses an existential threat to low-lying coastal regions like the Sundarbans. Such predictions should undoubtedly be taken seriously, but unfortunately the Anthropocene discourses remain overwhelmingly rooted in scientific communities in the global north, while the perspectives of people from places like the

Sundarbans are seldom incorporated. As Arne Harms points out, when Sundarbans islanders do appear, they are usually filtered through a victimization frame that casts them as the "hapless objects of nature's whims". Sundarbans islanders' vulnerability is offered as proof of climate change to convince skeptical audiences in the global north.¹ Little attention is paid to islanders' own experiences and understandings of the natural world, which might diverge from hegemonic Anthropocene framings.

Scholars in the social sciences and humanities increasingly call for a more diverse range of perspectives in work on the Anthropocene. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues, "Anthropocene scholarship cannot afford to overlook narratives from the global south, particularly from those island regions that have been and continue to be at the forefront of ecologically devastating climate change".² DeLoughrey points to a need to bring postcolonial and indigenous perspectives into conversation with Anthropocene scholarship, and to ground universalizing Anthropocene discourses in specific contexts. Much as postcolonial studies sought to 'provincialize' the discourse of Europe,³ scholars today must work to 'provincialize' the Anthropocene. This demands "a multiscalar method of telescoping between space (planet) and place (island) in a dialectic or 'tidalectic' way to see how they mutually inform each other".⁴

Focusing on local waterscapes offers one possible way to provincialize the Anthropocene. The concept of a waterscape (or water-produced landscape) can help us think about how culture and power interact at multiple scales over time to produce hybrid socio-natures.⁵ Beyond this, the concept of waterscape brings attention to the fact