

She loves it for its beauty, fierce beyond the reach of civilization. Above her home, the mountains soar in twisted, hornlike peaks and convolutions that seem to mirror the region's history and politics.

We spend a rainy-season dusk on her veranda. Below, the army is eating dinner in the mess. Above, in forests of bamboo, the monks are chanting their last prayer of the day. It is so peaceful now, but it is impossible not to reflect on the fact that life here is a complicated endeavor. As a doctor working in a clinic in the bazaar, my aunt has seen the darker side of life here, the worst effects of poverty and political upheaval.

I ponder, then, the particular form of tantric Buddhism that is nurtured in the Himalayan monasteries, their reflection of the complex human soul that seems related to this landscape, this history. I think of the monks housed in dark, swampy rooms, living so remotely, so simply, so as to pour all they have into keeping this faith fervently burning, this form of Buddhism even more ancient than the one practiced in Tibet, close to Bon and the spirit worship of the Lepchas. I think of those phantasmagoric murals, the dragons that we have scoffed at, condemning ourselves to savor them only in meager ways, illustrations in a children's book or a cartoon film. Here they are free and freeing, and something precious to the human spirit, lost elsewhere, is yet vibrant.

We sit as people do most evenings, in the wavering light of uneven voltage, grand moths with the wingspans of birds flying by. We eat mutton, stuffed *momo* dumplings with red-chili chutney on the side, and drink *chang* through bamboo straws in mugs, topping and retopping the fermented grains of millet with warm water from a big copper kettle. We wait for the evening's usual episode of rain. When it arrives, the storm blocks everything out but itself, drowns out all observations and meditations, ruins all conversations. The dragons the monk at Tashiding assured me were alive are writhing and gnashing. They are far too compelling to balance against any human consideration. In these hours, there is immense relief.

We sit and watch, lighting the lanterns when the electricity fails entirely.

CAROLINE ALEXANDER

Tigerland

FROM *The New Yorker*

THE OLD MAN stepped onto our boat out of the utter blackness that falls between the abrupt fall of twilight, at five o'clock, and the rising of the full moon. His name was Phani Gayen, and he was employed at the Saznekhali Wildlife Sanctuary, in the mangrove forest on the northern border of India's Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, where we were moored. Formerly, he was a crab fisherman, taking his small, pole-punted boat down along the forest's brackish tidal creeks and narrow channels. On June 23, 1984, at half past noon, he had gone into the forest with companions to collect wood. He turned and found a tiger springing for him, roaring. "I was then forty-five years old and very, very strong," he said. "I did not allow the tiger's face to touch my face." He stroked his Adam's apple. "The tiger's throat is very hard, *here*." As the tiger gripped him with its paws, its head hung over his shoulder, drenching his shirt with saliva. "I knew I was going to die. So I embraced the tiger. He was soft. The tiger was soft. Like a sponge." Somehow, this surrender freed him — the tiger released him and turned on one of his companions. Taking the companion by the throat, the tiger headed back into the forest.

The claw wounds on Gayen's head and face kept him in the hospital for three months. The wounds healed, but his ear was damaged permanently. Over the years, he had told his story many times. "I no longer fear the tiger," he declared, his scarred face lit by the yellow bulb that our boat's generator powered. "It is the tiger's nature." But he avoids entering the forest.

The bulb's light did not extend to the shore, and Gayen van-

ished into darkness on the long, narrow gangplank. The camp where he worked was one of only a few small stations in the 4,263 square kilometers of protected forest. At the mouth of the Ganges Delta, the Sundarbans encompasses the largest single mangrove ecosystem in the world, of which roughly 40 percent lies in India and 60 percent in Bangladesh. The 9,630 square kilometers of the Indian Sundarbans, designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, are in turn divided into two more or less equal regions. Of the hundred and eight islands lying in the web of tidal rivers, creeks, and channels, fifty-four are inhabited — or “reclaimed” — supporting a rural, poor population of more than four million people. To the southeast lies the tiger reserve, whose swamp forest and intricate waterways are the improbable domain of the uniquely aquatic Royal Bengal tiger.

Washed by powerful, twice-daily tides flowing from the Bay of Bengal, and regularly buffeted by cyclones, the Sundarbans has always been unstable, its low landmasses constantly being eroded, silted, and reconfigured. Upstream pollution, from Calcutta; increasing salinity, caused by naturally occurring displacement of freshwater sources; and depredation of the forest by villagers cutting wood are long-standing threats. Still, the Sundarbans remains “intact,” thanks partly to stringent conservation measures and to its inaccessibility, and partly to the Sundarbans tiger, whose presence ensures that the forest is too dangerous to enter casually. “Without the tiger, we would have no forest,” I was told by villagers, fishermen, wood collectors, honey gatherers — by all who cautiously skirt the forest.

I had come to the Sundarbans in late November, after the rainy season, with members of a not-for-profit agency, the Anudip Foundation, which offers livelihood training, and whose members were interested in producing a film about the region. Kushal Mookherjee, a Calcutta-based naturalist and wildlife consultant, who had been coming to the Sundarbans regularly for field study for more than a decade, was also on board. Another companion, Dr. Pranabes Sanyal, an authority on mangrove ecosystems, was the former field director, from 1980 to 1986, of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve. The forest reserve can be reached only by boat, and our plan was to travel the rivers and back ways haunted by one of the most viable tiger populations remaining in the wild.

We had joined our launch, the sixty-two-foot *M. V. Tanaya*, at a

small port on a channel off the Matla River, one of the main arteries through the reserve. Little other traffic was going our way as we wended through the waters of the reclaimed Sundarbans. On either side, broad embankments of baked clay fortified the land against the tide, giving each village the appearance of a walled city. Fishing vessels listed in the mud below them; hours later, the same boats would be floating as much as fifteen feet higher, level with the walls. In recent years, the tides have become more menacing, as the sea levels have climbed inexorably. Toward the end of 2006, two islands from the western edge of the Sundarbans archipelago were reported to have vanished beneath the water.

“If the Sundarbans goes under, the tiger episode on earth is over,” Kushal said, a belief shared by many authorities. The plight of tigers worldwide is critical, with the most optimistic estimates positing a population of between 3,300 and 4,300. Some four hundred tigers are cautiously estimated to inhabit the combined Sundarbans of India and Bangladesh.

From time to time, we passed solitary women trudging through the water near the shoreline, pulling nets behind them as they trawled for prawn seed. This practice, introduced in the past twenty years or so, has disastrously reduced prawn and other fish populations, and the constant pacing along the fragile shore by the women and children who drag the nets has contributed to erosion. In their flowing saris, the women presented picturesque silhouettes that belied the danger of their work, up to ten hours a day waist-high in the murky water. As many as ten fatal crocodile attacks are documented each year, and, I was told, too many shark attacks to report. The most common are by dog sharks, which take a bite of soft tissue — a leg or buttock — but do not kill. “They are considered minor hazards,” Dr. Sanyal said, with a sympathetic grimace. The Sundarbans’s occupational hazards — crocodiles, sharks, cobras, kraits, swimming tigers, and cyclones — make it one of the most dangerous places in the world.

As we passed from the reclaimed area into the waters of the protected tiger reserve, the villages petered out, the occasional wooden ghat or jetty the only evidence of human presence. On the right bank, there were, suddenly and starkly, no structures at all, but only a barely discernible web of netting draping the forested waterline — a fanciful strategy intended to deter straying tigers.

The boat arrived at the long jetty of the Saznekhali Wildlife Sanc-

tuary, in a buffer zone established around the tiger reserve's most stringently protected core, which is off-limits to everyone except personnel and vetted researchers. The river was at very low tide, and a compound loomed above the river and fifteen feet of exposed mud banks like a fort bristling with defenses. Stoutly staked at the high-tide mark, a quadruple row of bamboo pylons formed a palisade, patrolled by a troop of rhesus monkeys. Inside the compound stood a shrine to Banbibi, the divine protectress of the forest, and to Dakshin Roi, the tiger god.

"In most of the forest stations, there is a deity statue," Dr. Sanyal said as we stood before gaudily painted representations of the gods. The inhabitants of the Sundarbans are both Hindu and Muslim, but the wilderness has forged its own idiosyncratic beliefs, honored by people of both faiths. Banbibi is depicted as an attractive, sariclad woman; she does not accept sacrifices of animals or blood but is propitiated with sweets. She is serene and kind, and is often shown riding unconcernedly on a roaring tiger, like Dionysus on his leopard.

"*Mother, we are going to your kingdom,*" runs a characteristic *puja*, or prayer, offered to Banbibi by devotees who must enter the forest. "*Kindly protect us, please see that we get a safe return, we do not fall prey under your tiger's paw.*" Sometimes Banbibi's brother, Shajangali, is depicted with her. In "dress and countenance," as one authority has written, he seems to belong to "Muslim gentry." The dashing Dakshin Roi, depicted as a mustachioed, gun-carrying, horse-riding, sporting gentleman, is Tiger incarnate. He is deep yellow, with large, compelling eyes. Within this nexus of sometimes contradictory associations, he is, like Vishnu, the Preserver, principally worshipped for his curative powers: "A god can create life and can take it," as a village woman told me with some energy. An actual tiger might be Dakshin Roi, or the animal on which Banbibi rides, or Vishnu.

"Tiger is the king of the Sundarvans," writes Tushar Niyogi in his "Tiger Cult of the Sundarvans" (from which the quotations above are also taken). "Any account of the Sundarvans remains incomplete if it does not include elaborate notes on Tiger."

The boat pulled away from the Saznekhali jetty at dark. Some miles upstream, we dropped anchor at another village. By eight o'clock,

the full moon had risen, and sky and river alike became milk white. The sound of the generator *chug-chugged* pleasantly across the water, and when it was shut off there was nothing to be heard at all. The few dhows also at anchor appeared as half-moon silhouettes. When dawn broke the next day, they had already departed.

We continued generally east, going against the tide in a narrowing of the river, which smoked with dawn mist. A small fishing boat appeared ahead, and as we drew abreast our captain hailed it. A man dressed in a ragged blue-and-white-striped shirt and a checked *longi* waved uncertainly. He was joined by his wife, who wore a heavy sweater over her sari against the morning cold. His name was Parimal Biswas, and he was a crab fisherman. A swath of tattered awning sheltered their bedding and tiny kitchen, and the bow was filled with a huge basket teeming with crabs, which Biswas uncovered with obvious pride; there were, he estimated, some fifty to sixty kilos. At a hundred rupees, or two dollars and fifty cents, a kilo, he expected to get more than a hundred dollars from this trip — a lot of money. His line was already rebaited, and he was punting along the shoreline, looking for a likely place to make a final drop.

Yes, he said, in answer to Dr. Sanyal's query, he had often seen tigers. "When we see one, we cross to the opposite bank and lie down low," his wife explained. "We pretend no one is around." Biswas knew his work was dangerous. "But I have to eat," he said with feeling. Digging into a pocket, he drew out a document, reaching across the water to hand it to Dr. Sanyal. "It is a permit to fish here," Dr. Sanyal said. "He was born a cripple, and is allowed to fish here," in the reserve. The permit, issued by the Government of West Bengal, Forest Department, was important: among other things, it ensured that his family would be recompensed in the event that he was taken by a tiger.

We were still heading east, toward the most remote part of the reserve. Fronds of the great nipa palm and of the phoenix palm burst out of the leafy mangrove greenery. According to folk etymology, "Sundarbans" is Bangla for "the forest of beautiful trees," and the mangroves shimmered in the low morning light — literally shimmered, as the leaves of some species are covered with a glossy protective wax, which is secreted, along with excess salt, as one of their strategic adaptations to the saline water. The vast majority of the Bengal coast's marine life begins in the nursery of the Sundarban

slightly rectangular, each measuring about two and three-quarters inches. The pad marks of a male would be squarer and broader.

The prints had been made not far from a "mangrove cage walk" — a two-hundred-meter-long path through the forest under a protective wire tunnel, such as one might find in a maximum-security prison. The path ended at a thirty-foot-high watchtower, level with the tops of the tallest trees and overlooking a broad river that marks both the eastern limit of the Indian Sundarbans and the international border with Bangladesh. Historically, bandits have operated on both sides of the border, but the Bangladesh Sundarbans, which is also under protection, is considered the more lawless. The possibility of closer collaboration between the two Sundarbans is being explored, but for now the little-patrolled seventy-kilometer-long river border remains vulnerable to traffic and to poachers.

"A male tiger on this side who hears a female over there will swim over to her," Dr. Sanyal said. Tigers can swim five miles, so the two-mile dash to Bangladesh would be a mere jaunt. "Once, I was following a tiger in a motorboat," Dr. Sanyal said, as we continued looking across the river. "And the tiger was swimming faster." A tiger is said to have clocked more than eighteen hundred feet at seven minutes and eighteen seconds — against the tide. Put another way, a tiger's time for a hundred-meter freestyle would be a respectable one minute and twenty seconds. "Tiger is a very silent, very swift swimmer," Dr. Sanyal said.

The Royal Bengal tiger is solitary and "secretive" — the last attribute regularly appears in the language of even the most sober field manuals. A group of tigers — should one be so fortunate to see one — is called a streak. A male tiger can be as large as ten and a half feet in length and weigh more than five hundred pounds. The tiger's coat is deep amber, the lines of its characteristic black shadow-stripes abstract and sophisticated. Its claws retract, like those of a domestic cat; it "pruists," or chuffs, rather than purrs, as well as roars. The iris of the tiger's eye is amber yellow. The tiger is one of the few anointed animals commonly referred to as "charismatic"; "Nature's masterpiece of the creation," to cite a recent book; or, as Kushal put it, "something to look up to," both beautiful and powerful. The tiger is also a very clever animal, and a very effective predator. Stories abound of its strategic, chess-player ma-

fifty-three species of reptiles are harbored here, more than two hundred species of birds, and at least fifty species of mammals, including the endangered Irrawaddy and Ganges dolphins, the Smooth Indian otter, and the cheetah-spotted fishing cat. A hundred years ago, there were Java rhino, wild buffalo, and swamp deer.

Sitting under the bow breezeway, Dr. Sanyal was watching the forest drift past, noting with pride its many accomplishments: the pneumatophores, or respiratory roots that rise in perpendicular spikes above the mud, like snorkels, carrying oxygen to the mangrove plant; the "derricks," or elaborate root scaffolding that secures the mangrove in the tugging tides and the region's many cyclones. "There are twenty-eight true mangrove species in Sundarbans," Dr. Sanyal said, and he seemed about to embark on a loving recitation of them all. Reed-slender, inherently elegant even in bush attire, Dr. Sanyal exuded an aura of gentleness and humility. To meet him in civilian life, in his home city of Calcutta, say, one might have surmised that he belonged to some contemplative priestly order; in reality, of course, he was a renowned authority on the hero-beast *Panthera tigris tigris*, the Royal Bengal tiger.

The adaptation of the Sundarbans tiger to the mangrove ecosystem is every bit as remarkable as that of the mangrove system to tidal ecology. Tigers, the largest of the world's big cats, migrated to India twelve thousand years ago from south China and southeast Asia; the time of their arrival in the Sundarbans is not known. In the marshy land and brackish channels caused by encroaching tides, the huge terrestrial animals took to the water. "The Sundarbans tiger is amphibious," Dr. Sanyal said. The tiger's diet is not only meat-based; it also includes aquatic prey, such as monitor lizards and other reptiles, frogs, and fish. The variety of the tiger's prey — ranging, as one field manual cheerfully notes, "from fish to human beings" — is another advantage that the Sundarbans tiger has over other tiger populations.

It was only nine o'clock when the boat arrived at a neat compound of concrete-block buildings and gardens, where reserve officials and staff, some with their families, lived, surrounded by high, stout wire fencing. The day before, a tiger had sauntered along a creek outside the compound and left its pugmarks. "This was a female," Dr. Sanyal said, pointing out that the four pads were

Tigerland has existed as a world unto itself, protected, as Kushal had pointed out, by its inscrutability — impenetrable, secretive, inviolate.

Veering southwest, we entered a new network of creeks, cutting diagonally into the interior of Pirkhalli, a block of islands measuring roughly a hundred and fifty square kilometers and marked on maps as being “dense mixed jungle.” “There are resident tigers at Pirkhalli,” Dr. Sanyal said. “As well as those that visit.” We entered an arm of the Gosaba River, which broadened to open, long views down its straight course.

Ahead, lazing on the mud, was a small crocodile. As the boat ambled on, Dr. Sanyal told of an eyewitness account reported many years ago: Crossing a broad river, like this one, a tiger had been followed by a crocodile. Maneuvering alongside the tiger, the crocodile thrashed its great tail, striking the tiger across his nose. Here Dr. Sanyal straightened his back and raised his head imperiously; unconsciously, he assumed the mien and manner of the hero-beast. “Tiger had blood coming out of his nose,” Dr. Sanyal said, majestically. “But he did not say a thing. He kept on swimming. As soon as he got to the other side, he put one paw on the ground, and he turned with the second paw and came up under the crocodile’s belly, and flipped him” — eighteen hundred pounds of estuarine crocodile, which the tiger then ripped open. There was a pause while we savored this tale of strategy and courage. Dr. Sanyal had regained his own gentle manner. “And this is why we love Tiger,” he said.

Netdhopani Camp stood at the southern limit of the buffer zone and on the edge of the reserve’s most protected core area. Unusually, the site had historic remains: the ruins of a three-hundred-year-old brick temple, built to commemorate a young widow whose prayers to Shiva were said to have brought her dead husband back to life. The interior was rumored to house a lingam of Shiva; two weeks earlier, it had also housed a tiger, which had borrowed its convenient shade.

The quarters of the camp’s officials were domestic and attractive, with paths lined with pots of hibiscus, marigolds, and roses — the whole surrounded by a palisade of wire. The fence bore a large inward dent, which had been made by a tiger charging at chatting

neuvering of prey and of its extraordinary stealth. Every story told to me by a witness or survivor of a tiger attack included words to the effect of “it came from nowhere.”

Project Tiger was inaugurated by the government of India in 1973, following the first tiger census, which disclosed that, of the estimated forty thousand tigers living in India at the turn of the previous century, fewer than two thousand remained. For decades, the conservation program had the reputation of being one of the most effective in the world, but in recent years tiger populations in India, as elsewhere, have plummeted, with drops in many reserves of as much as 50 to 60 percent. In 2005, it was learned that every tiger in the Sariska Tiger Reserve — some hundred miles from India’s capital, New Delhi — had been killed by poachers.

A booming Chinese market for traditional medicines, responsible for other wildlife losses, remains the primary incentive for tiger poaching. In the Sundarbans, developments such as building projects and new roads within the reclaimed land are also cause for concern: roads, jetties, even cell-phone towers make remote Tiger-land more accessible.

“Sundarbans is a very, very difficult place — it’s one of the most difficult places. That is why tigers are surviving in Sundarbans,” Kushal said. “The poachers don’t know exactly how the tiger moves, where it’s living. That is why they could possibly not do what they have done to other places. That is the only reason — the terrain itself is protecting the tiger in Sundarbans.”

The results for the 2006 census of the Sundarbans population have not been announced. Estimates by scientists who know the area intimately suggest somewhere in the region of two hundred tigers. The Wildlife Institute of India, which was responsible for conducting the nationwide survey of all reserves under the auspices of Project Tiger, has cited the logistical difficulties presented by new methodology. Previously, a plaster cast was made of the rear left paw of each individual set of pugmarks — a task that, from the deck of the Tanaya, at least, seemed of almost Sisyphean impossibility. For the 2006 census, pug counting was combined with camera trapping and prey and habitat assessment, and in 2007 the census undertook the new strategy of radio-collaring representative Sundarbans tigers — a momentous development. Hitherto,

Mike with me so that I could guide the people — 'Don't come very near Tiger, keep a distance.'"

In his monthly rounds to the islands and villages, Dr. Sanyal sought to persuade the local people that officialdom was committed to the region, not just to the tigers. Initially, there had been resentment; villagers pointed out, "The tiger is killing us — why is it protected?" "When they saw that we were attending to them, their enmity to Tiger was gradually reduced," Dr. Sanyal said. "Quite a few tigers were killed before by the villagers." He continued, "Fortunately for me, all the six years I stayed there as field director, not a single tiger was killed by the local people — not a single one. It was only due to the cooperation I got."

Sundarbans tiger attacks were documented as early as the 1600s, and legend has it that during the British colonial era tigers every year claimed hundreds of lives. Today, the number of reported deaths has averaged around ten a year for the past decade. This reduction involved an aggressive campaign to modify the conduct of both man and tiger, which inspired an arsenal of hopeful and imaginative tiger deterrents: masks with a painted human face worn on the back of the head to trick the tiger, who prefers attacking from behind; Tiger Guard Head Gear, a fiberglass casing for the head, neck, and chest, issued to forest staff, who, like villagers, are highly vulnerable. Hot and awkward in the summer, the outfit was, according to Dr. Sanyal, "very comfortable" in the winter, which is the working season. "I went inside the forest many, many times without attack — you look something like an astronaut," he said, which alone may have deterred the baffled tigers. Another measure was the creation of life-size electrified clay dummies, dressed in the clothes of honey gatherers and fishermen and left to stand in the forest, administering a 230-volt jolt to any attacking tiger.

But the primary strategy to "minimize man-eating" was to keep as many people as possible out of the forest. "During my entire stay, I did not find a single case where a tiger came inside a village and killed a man," Dr. Sanyal said. Livestock, not people, were the victims; in 2004, a tiger famously killed sixteen cattle in a single night. "The problem is when the people are going inside the forest," he went on. "That's what I tried to convince them. 'This is what is happening: when Tiger is coming to your territory, he is not killing you; but when you are entering Tiger's places, then the killing

forest officials. The warden told us that he had lived here for a year and a half, and had seen a lot of tigers. Just five days earlier, two had strolled in together and rolled around on the ground near the sweet-water pond outside the compound, and only two days ago a man in a small fishing party had been killed by a tiger very nearby. One of his companions, who had witnessed the death, had "lost his senses" from fear. It was the third person killed in the area this year — all victims, it was believed, of a single tiger. As the warden put it, "There was a true man-eater around."

The warden was about to go on patrol, and agreed to let us follow his boat. It is not known why Sundarbans tigers have a propensity for man-eating, although theories abound: because the saltwater makes them irritable, because human bodies floating down from the Ganges have whetted their appetite, and so forth; more plausibly, Sundarbans tigers, in their remote domain, have never learned to fear man. Their taste for humans is not, however, as happens elsewhere, because the tigers are old or infirm and humans make easy prey. A distinction must be made, as Dr. Sanyal pointed out, between the "circumstantial man-eater," such as a tigress protecting her cub, and man-eaters like the one across the river, the site of whose last kill the boat had now reached.

It was a pretty bay at the entrance to a narrow channel, and it was easy to see why someone might use it as a mooring. Ahead of us, suddenly, the warden's boat began churning backward; the officials in their khaki park uniforms crowded the starboard rail, pointing into the forest; remembering us, some turned and urgently beckoned. Less than two minutes later, when we pulled up, there was nothing to see but low-growing mangrove trees. The tiger had been resting on the shaded beach afforded by the low tide. Peering deeply into the forest recesses through high-powered binoculars, I could see the natural paths that wound among the mangrove clusters, shelters made of a matting of branches, lairs, and dark shadowy areas — a thousand places to hide a tiger.

"After Project Tiger was launched, it was our duty to minimize the man-animal conflict," Dr. Sanyal said afterward, recalling his years as a forest officer. "Whenever a tiger strays inside a village, one has to go immediately . . . It's an emergency." As field director of the Sundarbans, he had been equipped with two jet speedboats and a marksman with a tranquilizer gun. "I used to take a hand

takes place.' They realized that, but they said, 'Our living is fishing, honey collecting, and woodcutting, so what to do? We have to venture to Tigerland.'

We had arranged to meet with a group of honey gatherers, who, of all who venture into Tigerland, undertake the most dangerous forest work. Joining us on a small launch that we had acquired for the outing, they gave instructions to the captain, who took us to a place where the gatherers commonly entered the forest.

A spokesman emerged from the honey collectors, a thin man, with gray hair and beard stubble, named Haldar. He had been going into the forest for honey since he was about twenty, some thirty years ago. There was a protocol for his profession, which he outlined with much authority: around the first of April of every year, when the forest was in full bloom, you went to the Forest Department to obtain a honey-collecting permit, and were issued a tiger-tricking mask, for the back of the head. "We leave them in the boat," he said matter-of-factly, to Dr. Sanyal's consternation. "The mask gets in the way when you are climbing trees." A team of men works together; this year, he had gone out with five companions. Before you went, you made a *puja* and prayed to Banbibi.

To find honey, you followed the bees, climbing a tree and looking up to sight them. The bees must be *full* bees; an empty bee wags his tail and flies erratically, a full bee flies in a true beeline. You spent all day in the forest, smoking out hives.

Traditionally, honey collectors and wood gatherers entered the forest only with a *gumin*, a man credited with knowledge of charms to keep tigers at bay; but, as "Tiger Cult of the Sundarvans" notes, in recent times "more than once their tricks have been proved ineffective . . . to check the howling beast," particularly when *gumins* themselves have fallen to the tiger's paw. The book continues, "And it is interesting that, usually, when a tiger attacks a jungle entrant it breaks the neck of the victim and carries away. But while a tiger attacks a spirited *gumin* . . . it generally puts its paw on the face of the person so that he cannot utter his charm." In thirty years of honey gathering, Haldar said, he had seen twenty-five tigers, and, like the other collectors on the launch, he had been attacked. His friend Sardar, who was sitting beside him, said that years ago he had been jumped from behind and held down under a tiger's paw while one of his companions hit the animal with a wood axe until it

released him. Here, Sardar turned his back and lifted his shirt to show a large, dark, unmistakably pug-shaped scar.

Following animated directions, the launch turned and nosed into a shallow inlet. A frisson of expectation passed over the boat, as palpable as a cold shadow, while the mangrove foliage closed around the bow. "Well, here we are," Haldar said with glee every bit as palpable. "Let's all get out!" Dr. Sanyal frowned and gently shook his head, and, after a face-saving pause, the launch reversed and stunk back downriver. Hugging the mud banks, now at low tide, we passed very close to a large snake, which, even with its head buried in a muddy hole, was at least six feet long. Yelping in unison, Dr. Sanyal and Kushal leaned over the boat's rail for a better look. "King cobra!" Kushal exclaimed, as the snake withdrew its head with cold dignity. "You have been asking us about the tiger, but there are other dangerous creatures," Haldar said indignantly. "There are a lot of snakes inside, and in particular the cobra."

Some minutes later, the launch drew abreast of a small, shaky hut set back from the forest fringe and looped with colorful garlands — one of the numerous small shrines to Banbibi that stand along the rivers. "Our families pray to God when we go into the forest," Haldar said. "The wives, the parents — everyone cries. Our wives treat us as dead when we are gone. They eat only at night; imagining us in the forest in the day, they don't eat then. They imagine us in the boat, safe, at night — then they eat." Throughout the Sundarbans, it is common for wives to live like widows while their husbands are in the forest, forgoing the prerogatives of married women, such as colorful saris and the splash of vermillion in their hair. There are also villages of real "tiger widows," women whose husbands entered the forest and simply never came out. At the threat posed by tigers, Haldar waved a hand. "There would be no Sundarbans if there were no tiger," he said, echoing a familiar sentiment. "People will remove the wood." He added, philosophically, "I would be risking my life anyway, whatever I did."

In the settlement of Jharkhali, on Namkhana Island, we sought out the companion of the man who had been killed two days earlier by the tiger we had almost seen. His name was Monoranjan Mondol, and we met in an attractive bungalow of vaguely colonial-era style, with tightly closed green shutters. A few years earlier, two tigers had ambled into the building, and it was now little used. Mondol was a

tall, athletic-looking man, with handsome, distinguished features; he walked carefully, very erect, and with the reserve of a man who was still visibly stunned.

The sun through the green shutters formed bands of light across Mondol's face as he described how his party of three men had moored their small boat in the pleasant creek we had seen. At some point, the men noticed pugmarks on the right bank. Someone said, "There's a tiger here; let's hurry and finish." They were looking to the right but the tiger came from the left, and roared. Together, the three men rushed forward, making a noise. "But the tiger was not to be frightened," Mondol recalled. Leaping toward the victim, it caught him by the throat and simply carried him into the forest. Mondol ran after them for some thirty or forty feet and then stopped. "Such a big animal, but there was not a branch broken," he said, and even before his words were translated it was possible to catch the wonderment in his voice: not a branch, not a twig out of place.

Our last hours in the Sundarbans were passed in a narrow creek just beyond the Sundarkati Eco-Conservation Camp, in the western buffer zone. Although not under the jurisdiction of Project Tiger, Sundarkati was known to have a lot of tigers; according to Pradeep Vyas, a joint director of the Biosphere Reserve, over the past several years some twenty-five had strayed across the river into villages in the vicinity, two of which had been trapped or tranquilized recently — one, an old tiger with one hind leg, was transported to the Calcutta zoo.

We had been told of a strategic creek, at the intersection of two channels, and arrived at dawn to find a small boat moored off one of the banks, with a solitary fisherman on board. Fresh pugmarks, made in the night, circled the boat — from right bank to left, from left bank to right. Yes, said the fisherman, looking worried, he had known a tiger was around, but — asking the familiar question — what was he to do?

As the fisherman pointed to the river, our boat anchored in the channel. The right bank bore thick stands of phoenix palms, a favorite of the tiger. The sun beat down on the channel. The phoenix palms, striped with dried orangish fronds and dark shadows, were surely tiger territory. As time passed, our talk became idle, and in a low moment I encouraged Kushal to give his tiger roar, as the

fishermen and honey gatherers had done in the course of their narratives. Laughing and leaning back against the port rail, Kushal roared — "AAA-*raugh*," a sound that swallowed space rather than projected into it.

There was a brief pause, and then, from the starboard side, an answering roar.

"Something big is moving in there," someone called from the roof, but by the time I scrambled up there I saw only the briefest tremble of movement in the fronds.

"If it had been a mating call, he would have responded immediately," Dr. Sanyal said afterward. "Tiger was curious, just testing us." On four occasions, Dr. Sanyal had alluded to an incident that had taken place years earlier and obviously still haunted him, and on the last day of our voyage he told the story. In 1989, he had been summoned to a village on Basanti Island into which a tiger had strayed. Arriving at dusk with a marksman and a tranquilizing gun, he found the animal lying low in a bamboo grove. The tiger was darted, and Dr. Sanyal and his colleague loaded it onto the flatbed of a rickshaw van. In the dark, with the tiger lying between them, they began the hour-and-a-half journey across the island to the motor launch that would deliver the tiger safely across the river.

"After about an hour, I found that Tiger was coming to," Dr. Sanyal said. As the tiger tried to sit up, Dr. Sanyal asked his assistant to administer Valium. "Then he brought out his box and found there is no Valium," Dr. Sangal recounted. "So I was in a fix." A second, two-milligram dose of tranquilizer was reluctantly administered to the tiger, and they continued on. At the motor launch, the sleeping tiger began salivating heavily, and then blood came from its mouth. It had been over-tranquilized.

"Ultimately, it died," Dr. Sanyal said. He paused before continuing. "The great experience was the next day. I found hundreds of people were coming to see this tiger. I was not feeling well, because it had died. I was sitting there in a chair. Everyone who was coming and seeing the tiger was telling me, 'What is this? Could you not save this animal? It is a beautiful animal! You could have saved it.'"

"This thing we say — 'If Tiger is not there, our forest will not be there, we will not get our honey' — that is a secondary thing. But this was the direct impact: they were looking at me — 'You could have saved this beautiful animal.'"