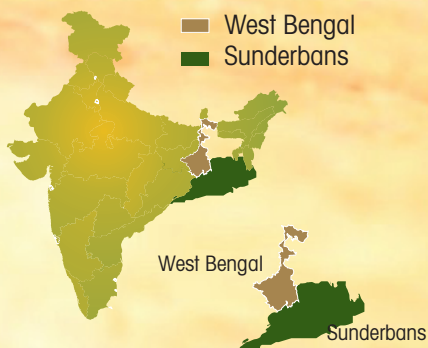


A large, detailed image of a tiger swimming in water, with its head and front paws visible above the surface, creating a splash. The tiger's orange and black stripes are prominent.

Thrilling Tiger Tales



The Royal Bengal Tiger, which is at home in the Sunderbans, the delta formed by Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers, is the largest tiger in the world. One of the best ways to observe and to get close to this magnificent, year fearsome, animal is by taking a boat ride in the delta.

Anupam Chanda

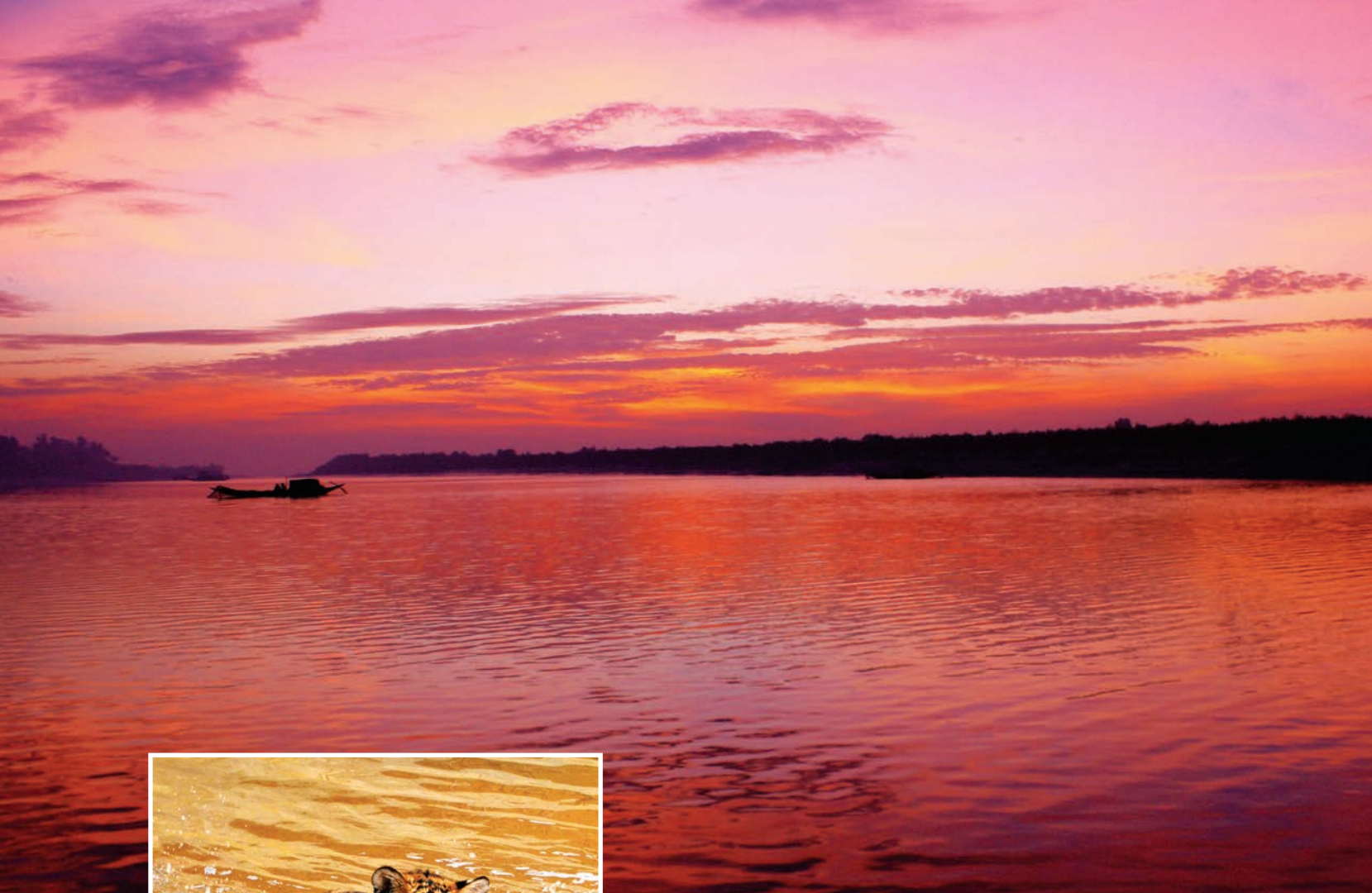


By the time the initial rush of getting on a boat headed towards Sunderbans subsided, we were treading down the middle of the Matla river headed for the interiors of the self-sustaining ecosystem, a world heritage site, the largest delta on earth, a biosphere reserve, and the biggest mangrove tiger habitat comprising 104 islands covering an area of 3,500 sq kms. Cloudy skies, choppy waters, excited faces, a crowded deck, buoyant spirits, bright dresses, a

fresh river breeze, fried prawns and loads of excitement. Barely two hours after having set sail, we were into wide spaces. With the low tide, the engine was on a smooth chug as the coastlines got thinner. Soon we were crossing the confluence territory where as many as five, seven and sometimes even eleven huge rivers met. No coastline, eye balled water world, frequent movement between bow & stern trying to figure coordinates, tourists crowding the deck. The only man at ease was the 42 year old

boatman Tarok Mondal. Turned out quite a sport, engaged in multitasking from the beginning, a smiling captain of the ship, in complete control.

Mondal turned out to be quite a guy as he revealed slowly, post a late lavish crab curry lunch, sailing into the dark blue horizon towards the Bay of Bengal. Mondal is boatman for three months, and dividing the rest of his year as a honey collector, a wood cutter and also an occasional farmer. Offering prayers to Bonbibbi (forest Goddess) has



to only 9 in 2008. Though forest department has its explanations, experts believe rising salinity is perhaps the common thread linking both the predator & prey in this mystic mangrove hideout. As Himalayan glaciers recede rapidly due to global warming and the rate of retreat in the last

Though this is not linked to salinity there's no doubt that the entire ecosystem is under a severe threat. The rise in water temperature, combined with fish & shrimp diseases could spell doom for the entire system with several local species vanishing in no time. The only way to save the ecosystem is to ensure a proper protection of the mangrove cover.

Zippering along a mangrove-lined creek not wider than a couple of 20 feet homemade skiffs in the purple after dusk, we reached another sort of a semi confluence of several creeks. Killing the engine & dropping the heavy iron anchor, Mondal said this would be our halt for the night. The dusky sky, laden with dramatic colours and with outlines of a few more boats at a distance, small fishing dingies returning home against the horizon, soundless except the waves chopping against the boats, carrying glowing kerosene lantern on the deck.

Our boat itself was a modest vessel. It had separate sleeping cabins, dining space, tail & attached toilets, kitchen and a huge deck. I later learnt it takes 6 months to build one and costs about a million rupees. But even a single good season can allow a break even for a new boat. As we settled on the deck for

become a daily ritual for him. His house in Himalganj is under construction after being washed away by the cyclone Aila in May 2009. And for him venturing into the forests for wood to build the roof of his house is almost risking life everyday, but he falls back on his prayers. "I have to complete the construction before the monsoon arrives," says Mondal as his voice cracks.

But going into the lush forests is not something very popular with the residents of the Sunderbans. Mondal was no different. Fear of the tiger was visible in his eyes. Dipak Saha, the Sunderban Tiger Reserve guide on board with us, revealed that in 2010 alone 27 incidents of tiger straying were reported from the Sunderbans compared

three decades was over three times higher than the rate in earlier years. The retreat of glaciers has implications for downstream riverflows which is reflected through rising salinity in Sunderbans, which forces tigers to stray from their habitat, in search of sweet water. Of the 104 islands in the delta, 48 are left with forest cover only on their fringes and a tiger needs to ambush its prey before killing it. Due to less forest cover tigers are finding it difficult to hunt and are straying into villages for easy prey.

Experts say rise in salinity will further degrade the coastal water quality and reduce the overall system productivity. Birds commonly known as waders like eastern curlew whimbrel and sandpipers can't be sighted post the Aila cyclone.



“Sunderbans is a demanding home for those who live there. It requires much to survive, regardless of gender. Their lives are shrouded mostly around prayers to Bonobibi, humility and gratitude, ingenuity, and tolerance. Yet they do not have the power of the goddess”



the evening we met Sheikh Pradip, our chef, for the first time. A localite from Ghoramara island, quite an expert in prawn curry & mutton kassa, he narrated some amazing facts over dinner. “For the people of the Sunderbans, adaptation is critical for survival. For even if we don’t produce any carbon for the next 100 years, temperature and sea level will continue to rise, inundating the islands and forcing the islanders to migrate,” he told us. Drunk silly though, our evening ended with one question - will we continue to disown them and look the other way ? Or will we demand that they get their rightful dues ? Before we could get to what’s that dinner was served & right after we resorted to our cold swaying beds obediently and drifted off thinking how far away were we from the civilisation, floating on a wobbly boat at midnight in the heart of a tiger infested dense and pitch-black jungle.

Sunderbans is a demanding home for



those who live there. It requires much to survive, regardless of gender. Their lives are shrouded mostly around prayers to Bonobibi, humility and gratitude, ingenuity, and tolerance. Yet they do not have the power of the goddess. The women of the Sunderbans are practically unknown outside their direct social

relationships. Women here manage the household as usual and often help the family survive financially. Some of them cultivate on family plots while others fish. Prawn fishing is a particularly dangerous job. Women and children move through the waters waist or neck deep, dragging nets behind them to catch their prey.



Each year there are cases of women and children lost to crocodiles and tigers but the battle to survive rages on. Sunderbans women tend to marry early, sometimes as early as twelve but when they lose husbands from tiger attacks, particularly if their husbands were not permitted to enter the forest to take fish/honey/wood, they often are forced out of their homes with their children and made to live in widow villages. Here they become sole providers for their families and take on the roles traditionally taken by the men - wood cutting, honey collecting, and fishing. Healthcare irrespective of socio-economic background is dependent on quacks for treatment over the rural healthcare providers for a number of reasons varying from geographical hazards to cost effectiveness. They are

extremely popular for their proximity and patient's easy availability. Chronic poverty and most importantly a weak public healthcare system forces majority of the population to depend & believe in alternate methods of healthcare.

This huge delta is a geomorphological and hydrological fascination. Few areas in the world undergo the transformation visited upon this place by the gods who are endemic to it. Water plays mud into different shapes, sculpting it into new islands and reforming the old. These drowned lands and everything that live in them have adjusted to tides that rise twice daily to a height of 6-9 feet. Cyclone activity is more intense here than anywhere else in the world. Tidal waves 250-feet-high rise up the Bay of Bengal, funnelling their way up the channels to

disintegrate entire villages built on mud and made of mud - villages that are surrounded and protected from rising waters by mere 20-foot embankments. Both sides of the Sunderbans experience 4-8 cyclonic depressions every year which makes it unique with its human and animal habitants.

The 300 tigers that live here are part of the Sunderbans mystery. It is here in these thick mass of tree roots, writhing mud, and hungry water that tigers stalk humans as prey. The Sunderbans is famous for its tiger attacks and is one of the only areas in the world where 'man eaters' exist in their natural habitat in close proximity to humans. Although the Indian government says only a handful of the Sunderbans tigers are actually man-eaters, attacks are regular



“The 300 tigers that live here are part of the Sunderbans mystery. It is here in these thick mass of tree roots, writhing mud, and hungry water that tigers stalk humans as prey. The Sunderbans is famous for its tiger attacks and is one of the only areas in the world where ‘man eaters’ exist in their natural habitat in close proximity to humans”

on locals venturing alone in the forests. The reason these tigers kill humans is unclear. One theory is that the salinity of the environment somehow gives the tigers the taste for human blood. Another is that the ingestion of so much salt damages a tigers liver and kidneys, making it irritable. More likely, the tiger has become accustomed to the taste of human flesh as a result of the cyclones and floods which carry dead bodies down the water channels or strewn about to decompose. Sunderbans tigers are like no other. They attack in the mornings and evenings between the hours when people enter and leave the forest. They swim, hunting in the water, hiding among mangrove roots as fishing boats pass until they spot an opportunity to approach from behind. Despite their size and weight, they stealthily sneak up on their victims from behind, typically grabbing them at the nape of the neck. When killing a deer, they embed their canines into four spaces in the vertebrae, a near lock-and-key fit. This method of killing is almost immediate. Stories run in the region that tigers take their prey with no trace. Men on small fishing boats hear a splash only to discover that one of their crew is missing. Perhaps they get glimpses of the wet tiger slinking up the mud bank of the shore dragging its meal by the neck. Tigers have been known to swim out to larger boats and leap aboard. Those on board may begin



to call out ‘Ma’ or mother, a word meant to hail the goddess Bonobibi but legend has it that the echoes of someone’s scream at facing a tiger is also devoured by the tiger. No one hears the scream as the tiger takes its prey.

Dawn was an unforgettable experience with primary colours raging non-stop losing battles with their fast evolving secondary counterparts, with the complete colour wheel on an intrepid kaleidoscope display, not to be missed in a place as breathtaking as this. The morning brought new thrills as we spotted wildlife at multiple spots making our trip a worthwhile one. As the day moved on the boat reached the jetty marking the end of our floating celebration. Mondal handed me several of his business cards as I left the boat, asking me tell my friends to come and

see the Sunderbans as long as it’s there. His voice was solemn and determined. For the first time I saw the purple crescents beneath his eyes, heard the fatigue in his voice but even so, he was smiling. ■

How to Go

Nearest Airport / Railway Station : Kolkata. From Kolkata, you can take a car/bus to Canning or Gothkhali about 50 km away. You can also take a train to Canning, which is a 45 minute journey. From the station, the boat agent will pick you up & take you to the jetty merely 10 minutes away. Option of either staying in the boat over night or boat cruise throughout the day & night halt at Sunderban Tiger Camp Jungle Resort. Ideal for a 2 night, 3 day trip.