

## A Forest of Refuge, or a Forest of Refugees?

### Field Notes on Ambivalence and Risky Work in the Sundarbans of West Bengal

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#### Refugees of Conservation:

‘Doing the jungle’ or *jongol kora* refers to venturing into the Sundarbans forest to earn one’s livelihood. It is without a doubt dangerous work. The forest is also the habitat of the Royal Bengal Tiger. Unfortunately, the tiger is pitted against the ‘jungle-doers.’ As a result, the past decades have given rise to a new landscape of conservation laws, the expansion of inviolate zones, the continuation of colonial licenses and most recently the deployment of new technologies of surveillance by the Forest Department. This new conservation regime is collectively aimed at making it harder for the Sundarbans islanders to eke out a livelihood from the forests. While these actions are wrapped in the language of preventing the ‘jungler-doers’ from risking their lives, their real intent, in accordance with and under the influence of national and international conservation lobbies, is to safeguard the tiger.

These field notes attempt to show this story as experienced by the ‘jungle-doers’ themselves. I show the choices, and non-choices, confronting a crab collector named Bimla and her son Kamlesh. For those who have historically depended on the forests, there is a complex calculus through which they weigh the work of crab collecting, and the intangible value of a particular form of livelihood, against its risks and the background violence of everyday life in the Sundarbans. Many ‘jungle-doers’ hold a similarly balanced view of the Forest Department, especially the rangers who patrol the forests, and regard it along a spectrum of strictness and sympathy. In the face of the contemporary conservation apparatus, and increased experiences of harassment, several like Bimla have decided to explore other options. They have few alternative choices of livelihood in the Sundarbans, since the underlying issues and poverty that compel crab collectors to venture into the mangrove creeks remain unaddressed. Consequently, they migrate. I spent time with Bimla during her holiday from work on an urban factory shop floor in Bangalore, and relate how depleted she is by life and living conditions in the informal economy. While death-by-tiger makes a more newsworthy story, casualties in India’s informal economy are routinized and ignored<sup>1</sup>. Bimla is in fact highly ambivalent over the relative risks of ‘doing the jungle’ and migrating. If taken at her word, Bimla and others like her are being rendered refugees of conservation efforts<sup>2</sup> to preserve the forests.

#### From the Forest to the Factory

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Breman, *At Work in the Informal Economy of India*, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Brockington, *Fortress Conservation*, (James Currey Publishers, 2002); Paige West, James Igoe, and Dan Brockington, “Parks and Peoples: the Social Impact of Protected Areas,” *Dx.Doi.org* 35, no. 1 (September 19, 2006): 251–77, doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123308.

Rush hour at Sealdah's train station in Kolkata is a sea of men with just a few bright saris, their *pallus* like petals, scattered amidst the crowd. The train towards Canning has just arrived. Hundreds of daily commuters—cooks, maids, construction workers—fill it in one sweeping wave of movement, jostling for space. They are all returning home to their villages located hours south of the city. Quickly, Bimla stores her two bulky bundles tied together by old saris on the overhead shelf, mindful it will soon fill up. Finding herself a window seat, she places another bag between her feet. With her knees acting as guards, she leans back, shuts her eyes and is fast asleep.

For Bimla, it has been a three-day, largely unbroken journey with very little sleep. She and Kamlesh, unlike most others on the train, are not daily commuters. They are on their way back home to their village in the Sundarbans for *Durgapuja*, the Bengali New Year. Having worked thirteen hour shifts, six days a week, for 18 continuous months at a plastic bottle making factory in the outskirts of Bangalore, this is a desperately awaited break. Kamlesh, about 16 years old, gets paid Rs. 9000 per month while Bimla, as a woman, gets Rs. 7000 for the same work. This leg of the trip—the train from Sealdah to Canning followed by a bus, two short public ferries, an hour-long shared van ride from the *ghat* of their island to the village bazaar, and a final 45 minute walk to their neighbourhood—is the last leg of their 3 day journey home. While it lies a mere 150 kilometres from Kolkata, reaching Bimla and Kamlesh's mud hut on the edge of the river on one of the furthest inhabited islands of the Sundarbans requires no less than five modes of transportation. As I made the journey back with Bimla on a dark night, for there is no electricity on their island, their village seemed many worlds away from the capital. That being said, Bali Island, where they live, is one of the more accessible islands in the Sundarbans.

Bimla and Kamlesh belong to the Scheduled Caste group of *Poundra Kshatriya*. Bimla's family came to the Sundarbans from Bangladesh during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Most people in her village, neighbours and relatives, are in the Sundarbans because their forefathers were political refugees from Bangladesh or ecological refugees from another part of West Bengal<sup>3</sup>. For these erstwhile refugees, the sparsely populated and inhospitable islands forested with mangroves were attractive sites for ad-hoc settlements, which, over the years, became permanent homes.

Before being compelled to start work in the factory, Bimla has spent the past 20 years collecting crabs in the surrounding river creeks of the mangrove forests. Abandoned by her husband, she began to collect crabs with other men and women as a means of supporting herself and her two children. This is also the work her father and father-in-law did before they became too frail to continue. Like most households by the river's edge, Bimla's had a relationship with and knowledge of the work of fishing, collecting crabs and gathering honey (even though she has never been honey collecting herself). She knew the forest well. She respected it and had, in turn, received from it enough to sustain her household, provide food and clothes, and offer her children a few years of schooling. However, the past few years have indelibly altered her relationship with the forest, and the livelihoods obtained from it.

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<sup>3</sup> Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, (Routledge, 2014).

## Collecting Crabs on a Life Boat

Crab collecting requires that three people, sometimes more, spend 7 to 10 days and nights at a stretch on non-motorized slender wooden boats known as *naukas*. The boat is the width of a single mattress and, at best, double that length, with tapering edges. For shelter a hood is created from bent bamboo covered with plastic. Three people sleep like sardines under the hood at night, the two on the side with their heads next to the feet of the person in the middle. During the day, the men and women on the boat use a *don* and *chara* - line and bait – to hook crabs. A forking branch with a net in between is used to scoop up the crabs as the line is pulled back into the boat. This is called a *jalti*. Under the wooden planks of the boat is a hollow space where live crabs are held captive. Soon these crabs will make their journey, via a few village middlemen or *khotimaliks*, to export houses in Baghajatin, a neighbourhood in Kolkata. At these export houses, after being inspected, weighed, graded and sorted into several different categories, they will be packed in Styrofoam boxes with holes for air and sent off on flights to China and other South East Asian countries<sup>4</sup>.

In preparation to leave the village for the forest, the *nauka* is stocked with rice, vegetables, mustard oil, spices and at least 120 litres of crucial drinking water. In winter, the boat carries *kanthas* or old saris stitched together to use as blankets. All year round it has a torch, a stick or *laathi*, and usually one spare *gamcha* or cotton towel. The few possessions that crab collectors carry onto their boat are arranged with a meticulous neatness borne of the fact that this will become home for three people for the next ten days. The most important possession is their Boat License Certificate (BLC), usually wrapped in a plastic bag, and carefully tucked away on the topmost bamboo slat of the hood of the boat. While a BLC is theoretically meant to belong to those who are out fishing, the majority of fishers<sup>5</sup> and crab collectors do not own a BLC but must rent it for exorbitant sums from ‘big men’. This initiates the first step in a long cycle of debt and dependence of fishers on brokers, commission agents, and middlemen.

Those who “do the jungle” understand each other well and the river turns into a community, albeit a transitory one, of those who work and live in the jungle. After an entire day of collecting crabs, several *naukas* anchor together in the middle of a broader river creek. This is where they will spend the night, and the nights to follow. In the evenings, crab collectors talk at length about the particular bark of a deer, a birdcall, rustling footsteps in the jungle, lurking spirits or sightings of fresh pugmarks. Cell phones, on the first few days when their batteries are still charged, play Bengali tunes—pre-recorded theatre performances or *jatras* of the epic of Ma Manusa, the snake goddess, or the more recent TV series hit *Kiranmala*. People share the hardships and successes of their day’s labour, give suggestions and ask for warnings. As in any other settlement, they too exchange green chilli peppers, borrow water and lend salt. With the smell of mustard oil in the

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<sup>4</sup> My forthcoming article titled “Crab Antics: A moral and political economy of greed in the Submerging Sundarbans Delta of West Bengal” expands on the crab value chain and the recent disruptions wrought by the “opening up of the Chinese market.”

<sup>5</sup> I use the term fishers instead of fishermen to include both men and women.

air, strangers understand one another with an intimacy at once physical, professional, and communal. Sometimes when the catch hasn't been good, there is bickering, tensions heighten and this is disliked for the rules of the jungle, [*jongoler niyam*] and the forest deity Bonbibi's preachings, requires one to work without anger, greed, jealousy or competition. Heated discussions dissipate as exhaustion weighs their voices and bodies down. Under the tarpaulin hoods of their boats, with the sound of big ships in the distance and the scratching of captured crabs trying to escape the hollow under their feet, the boat colony falls asleep. Much like the rope that twines through their boats, and that will hold them together through the night, the life of the jungle [*jongoler jeebon*] creates deep bonds. The river turns into a community of 'jungle-doers,' with feelings of relatedness with animals, birds and the river. There is a bond also between the fishers and forest rangers. After a breakfast of *panta bhaat* - rice mixed with water the night before, allowing it to ferment and develop a slight coffee-like potency – the community dissolves to begin a new day of crab collecting.

### Lingering Nostalgia, and Other Aches

“Going into the jungle is like a form of *sadbna* [meditation],” says Bimla, reminiscing about her days working as a crab collector. We are chatting as she fills up water from the hand-pump for the evening's meal. She continues, “The jungle is a sacred place.” People who ‘do the jungle’ think of themselves as beggars to the forest goddess Bonbibi, and enter the jungle with empty hands [*kbali hatien*] and pure minds [*pabitro mann*] of an ascetic. Bimla explains, with transparent pride and longing that the psychological space one enters while being in the jungle is separate from that of being in the village. Working in the jungle requires a meditative awareness of one's surrounding sights, sounds and smells. She insists that she, like most others, pursued the livelihood of crab collecting because of *peter jala*, or the burning of the stomach. Also like many others, she uses the word *aubhav* - meaning lack, need or poverty – to describe that which compelled her to go, as a beggar might, to seek whatever alms Bonbibi might offer.

The pots of water are full now and she points out, again with pride, that the water in the village is of better quality than what she used in Bangalore. Pivoting from telling me stories of the jungle, she launches into the struggles of her life as a migrant. Bimla's new life in Bangalore has been difficult. She feels lonely and tired. Her time is spent either at the factory or cooking meals in the small, tin-roofed rented space that they share with five other migrants. She describes it as dirty, very loud and cramped. She complains of persistent headaches because of the sound of buses and cars. She's lost her appetite because of the city; the same food tastes different in Bangalore. While Kamlesh goes off with the young boys after their evening shift, she is confined to their ramshackle home unable to speak the language and unfamiliar with places and people. At first Kamlesh was excited to leave the village and to be following in the footsteps of slightly older boys, but after these 18 months away he too has expressed a desire to stay on in the village or find work elsewhere.

Mother and son had hoped to save enough to build a brick home in the village. However, working away from home has unexpectedly depleted their emotions and resources alike. She fell ill with Dengue fever and Kamlesh had an appendix operation. Medical bills have claimed the little that they had managed to save and pushed them into debt. Their story fits with other such stories I heard with regard to the dangers of the informal economy in India: its unsanitary living

conditions, lack of health and safety measures, inhumane working hours, exploitative contractors, and multiple pathways into greater debt than one arrived to the city with.

In contrast to life in the factory, ‘doing the jungle’ required that she live on the boat only half of the month. The rest of her time was spent in the village, tending to her home, hanging out in the village bazaar, visiting friends and neighbours, doing wage labour on the land of others, or preparing for the next trip into the jungle. She appreciated this flexibility. It allowed her to earn a livelihood but simultaneously remain close to her children and the social and seasonal rhythms of the village—attending festivals and weddings and sowing paddy and harvesting rice.

In light of her nostalgia, and disillusionment with life in Bangalore, I asked Bimla why she left the forest for the factory in the first place. She said, “My older son insisted I should stop... people were falling prey to the tigers...” Her voice trails off and it is clear she is reeling from a bad memory. Assuming an incident with a tiger, not uncommon in the village, I muttered a few words in consolation. But, Bimla clarified, the fear elicited by the tiger was not the whole story: “The reason I left is because of the pressure from the forester [rangers]. I couldn’t afford to rent a resty<sup>6</sup> and so I would steal my way through [*churi korey*] and then they began to take our catch, they would fine us, they would tell us we were being greedy, that we had no value for our lives, that we shouldn’t take such risks...there was no joy [*anando*] anymore, only fear [*bhoye*]. They said I should do other livelihoods...that I should do chicken rearing, goat rearing, duck rearing. I told them I had no land, where was I to do this, and that it was impossible to run a household on chicken rearing [*murgi chaas*]. You think it is possible to make a living like that? Ask them to run their household like that. It was hard to stop [crab collecting] because this is all I’ve known how to do, but things got so bad, so to save my own honour and that of my son, I stopped and I left.”

Bimla clearly wishes there could be a way for her to support her household without having to leave the village. Many NGOs, forest department officials, researchers and consultants chant the mantra of “alternative livelihoods” as the solution for “forest-dependent” communities. Currently, the alternatives offered by local NGOs are designed to enhance household income through more productive agriculture or animal rearing. Indeed, Bimla herself had been offered free goats by an NGO to supplement her income. However, most crab collectors like Bimla are landless, and these interventions are seen as either irrelevant or woefully incommensurate with the financial demands of running a household. Another reason Bimla rejects the ‘alternatives’ proposed by the NGOs and the Forest Department is that they bring with them a way of life that does not appeal to her. “Doing the jungle” was accompanied by a way of being in relation to others, and the surrounding rivers and wildlife, that she took pleasure in. The basic and rather obvious fact that women like Bimla might actually have a preference for the kind of work they want to pursue is not something development NGOs seem to have taken into consideration. Crab collecting, despite its hardships, was also filled with joy or *anando*. Bimla missed it, and wanted to return to it, while also recognising that not everything about it was good.

### **Between Strictness and Sympathy**

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<sup>6</sup> Referring to a BLC. ‘Resty’ is a short form for certificate.

Bimla remembers a time, not too long ago, when forest rangers and patrolling staff were not as strict [*koda*]. She recalls with tenderness. They would come and chat while on their patrols, smoke *beedis* with the men, and ask questions about the whereabouts of tigers. They would share their food while they made small talk and asked about peoples' children. Posted in remote jungle outposts, their work was lonely and difficult. While these men had landed a highly coveted *sarkari chakri*, or government job, it required them to patrol a dangerous jungle far away from home with the omnipresent fear of cyclones, storms and bad weather. Out of goodwill, Bimla would willingly give a few crabs to these men. She felt particularly sympathetic imagining the forest rangers' distant wives and children, whom she believed must have many sleepless nights.

She boasted to me that everyone, even the rangers, wanted to try her cooking. On days when she was sick and couldn't go into the jungle, the rangers would ask after her and 'come looking for Bimla to try her food.' In Bimla's opinion, it was possible for rangers and 'jungle-doers' to be friends. After all, both these kinds of people were only trying to make a living. In pursuit of this, both her and the rangers were obliged to take similar risks. Thinking back to a time 10 to 15 years ago, she felt rangers were more sensitive to poor crab collectors like herself. Perplexed, and with sadness, she says, "in the past few years everything has become illegal [*nishaid*]...there is now a fine [*jorimana*] for anything we do."

Bimla's commentary and that of many other crab collectors I got to know reflects an astute understanding of the workings of the law. She clearly distinguishes between those who make the rules and the foot soldiers enforcing them. According to her, any fault did not lie with the rangers patrolling the forests but should be attributed to the 'sahibs' in Kolkata, the senior forest officials whom she believed were the authors of the new laws. She gives an example of this from a few years ago when the Forest Department started asking fishers and crab collectors not to collect dry firewood for their cooking on the boats. Fishers were instead encouraged to buy gas stoves. She said, laughing, "If we could afford gas stoves wouldn't we have them in our homes before getting them for the *nauka*?...We told the forest rangers this, but they said what can they do, their bosses [*sahibs*] have told them that it has to be this way." A keen appreciation of the various levels of power among the crab collectors prevented them from demonizing the forest rangers, and enabled their relationship to oscillate between strictness and sympathy. Even the superior *sahibs*, I might add, were following orders. They do not only or always act from the desire to create difficulties in the already precarious lives of fishers. However, they are politically and economically tied to the national and international conservation lobbies who are focused on protecting the tiger and who, from a distance, were convinced that this could only happen by keeping people like Bimla out of the forests.

### **The varying moral valences of risk**

Another dimension of the Forest Department's rhetoric to keep out the fishers from the mangrove creeks is the risks of tiger attacks. The long vignette from Bimla above, where she shares her reasons for quitting the forest, echoes the typical language that paints fishers as having "no value for their lives" and in need of a caring state to prevent them from taking unnecessary risks. Where fishers and rangers used to find common cause in the shared risks of their environment, now the Forest Department's elites - and increasingly the rank-and-file - mobilise those same risks against the fishers.

From the fishers' perspective, this argument falls flat. It is not only the jungle that is dangerous. Deaths due to wildlife, especially those caused by charismatic mega-fauna, are sensationalised in the media, while risks that pose a greater threat are routinized. Most regions in the Sundarbans, home to 4.5 million people as of the 2011 census, still lack a hospital. Bali Island, where I was based, an island home to 40,000 people, didn't have a single primary health care centre. In this context, easily preventable problems often escalate to life-threatening injuries and even death. Snakes cause the most deaths in the region<sup>7</sup>, as it takes too long to get to a hospital that can administer anti-venom. None of the densely populated Southern islands have electricity. Access to drinking water is scarce. In addition to the quiet violence of underdevelopment, the Bay of Bengal delta is well known for its environmental precarity: storms, cyclones and tidal surges ravage the region, and destroy homes and human life periodically<sup>8</sup>.

From the point of view of the State and NGOs, certain work is considered and paraded to be more dangerous than other work. Different moral valences are attached to certain types of risky behaviour and crab collectors are told that by venturing into the forest they don't value their own lives. For Bimla, everyday life in the Sundarbans is risky, and the factory floor is little better. In her opinion, the forests are no more dangerous than her life in a slum in the outskirts of Bangalore.

### **Laws, Licences and Illegality Incorporated**

From Bimla's descriptions of life within the forest's innumerable creeks, it is crucial to zoom out to appreciate the legal landscape of the forest. On Google Maps, this landscape looks like long gnarled fingers stretching out into the sea. If mapped in terms of its legal geography, it appears more like a bull's eye of artificial entities. The Wildlife Protection Act of India, passed in 1972, is the knife that carved this seemingly pristine deltaic expanse into distinct zones. The largest area is called the Core Area, where in theory no human activity is permitted, whether tourism or fishing. The second largest area is the Sajnekhali Wildlife Sanctuary, where tourist boats are allowed but fishing is not permitted. The smallest area, bordering the Bangladesh-India border, is the Buffer Area, and is the only slice of the forest where fishers, crab collectors and honey collectors are legally allowed to obtain a livelihood<sup>9</sup>.

“Interloping” in the forest now takes two forms. Close to half a million fishers, who live in villages next to the Buffer Area, venture in without a BLC because they cannot afford to rent one. These are fishers who often come and go [*jawa asha*] from the jungle on a daily basis. They try to hide from patrol boats but are frequently caught and harassed. Often their fishing nets or crab collecting lines are confiscated. Their catch can be seized and in some instances their boats are confiscated. Forest rangers might be sympathetic to the plight of fishers, but they are also obliged to do their jobs. New technologies introduced by the Forest Department, especially e-

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<sup>7</sup> Aditya Ghosh, *Sustainability Conflicts in Coastal India*, (Springer, 2017), doi:10.1007/978-3-319-63892-8.

<sup>8</sup> Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*.

<sup>9</sup> Santanu Chacraverti, “The Sundarbans Fishers: Coping in an Overly Stressed Mangrove Estuary,” ICSF, January 28, 2015.

patrolling apps and drones in recent years, are leading to a breakdown of certain social relationships between fishers and rangers, replacing sympathy with non-human forms of governmentality.

This form of interloping is not an option for Bimla. For her and others on neighbouring islands, the journey to the Buffer Area takes between 9 to 14 hours on their fragile *naukas*, depending on the winds, weather and tides. This is the reason why almost nobody from Bali Island goes to the Buffer Area to fish. Instead, these fishers would go to the jungle directly across from their homes, a part of the forest which is legally out of bounds to them. Even so, they rent someone else's BLC. With a BLC, they are fined and often harassed but allowed to fish. Without a BLC, their boat and fishing line are more likely to be confiscated. Crab collectors have an ambivalent relationship with the law, acting both as law abiders (in obtaining a BLC) and law-breakers (going with the BLC into the Core Area).

Both forms of interloping I've mentioned, whether going into the Buffer Area without a BLC or going into the Core Area with one, are illegal. The BLC therefore functions in practice as a means for the Forest Department to regulate how many fishers are trespassing into the Core Area. The Forest Department seems to have incorporated illegality as a way of generating revenue for themselves. When one gets caught in the Core Area with a BLC, the patrol officer will levy a fine. The first time one is caught the fine is Rs. 500, the second time it is Rs. 300, and the third time it increases to Rs. 1150. If a boat is caught too many times, the BLC is confiscated. Once the BLC is confiscated, the fisher has to go to the Range Office—usually an entire day's trip away from the village—to retrieve the license. Often the ranger will ask them to come back another day and, whenever the BLC is finally offered, another fine has to be paid to obtain it. These fines come on top of the gross injustice that the BLCs do not belong to genuine fishers in the first place. In any case, since only 924 valid BLCs are circulating today, the system is broken. Ultimately, the enforcement of the colonial system of BLCs, and various fines that accompany it, are tools through which fishers are stopped, searched and harassed by the Forest Department. It is a means of instilling fear. It is this fear of licences, fines and surveillance that force Bimla, and many like her, to leave the Sundarbans to factories far away from home.

The Forest Department conceives of these fines as a deterrent to illegal fishing. However, both they and the fishers know that the fine amounts, though not insignificant, are too small to prevent fishers from future trespassing. What could then be the purpose of these fines? They do not contribute to conservation, since, from the conservationists' standpoint, they are no compensation for entering the inviolate Core Area and inflicting unspecified "damages" that the crab collectors are charged with inflicting on the fragile eco-system. The fines perhaps generate some revenue for the Forest Department, though this revenue is miniscule compared to the funding that the state and central governments provide towards forest conservation in a 'critical tiger habitat.'

Conservation and wildlife protection of the region is an essential goal which may, in small ways, be furthered by regulating artisanal fishers. But the Forest Department is selective in its regime of protection. From whom does the forest need saving? While local fishers in non-motorized boats are kept out, luxury cruise ships, cargo ships transporting fly ash, and thousands of motorized tourist boats meander through the same rivers. Not far away, commercial trawlers



abound and often trespass into the inviolate zones, causing more damage in a day than is possible in months of fishing via a line and bait. In Bangladesh, the government has promised to build a coal plant in the Sundarbans. Most worryingly, sea levels are rising. Islands are slowly submerging<sup>10</sup>. The Sundarbans forests and its unique wildlife is threatened, truly so, by a whole range of forces—human, non-human, short-term and long-term, predictable and uncertain—and yet curiously the burden of blame is borne by the weakest and poorest of the region.

### **Conclusion: Ambivalences and the difficulties of choice**

Breaking into intermittent sobs, using her sari *pallu* to wipe her tears, Bimla expresses how trapped she feels by a lack of dignified choices. She doesn't entirely grasp the reasons why there is such a sophisticated and institutionalised effort to keep her—and others like her—out of the forests. With exasperation, she says, “We are doing no harm to the jungle. After all, everything I was able to do for myself, for my children, was because of *Maa'r khamor* [Bonbibi's storehouse – a reference to the jungle]. I respect it. I have no land. My household depends on crabs and fish, why would I do the forest any harm. I was going out of need [*aubhav*]. But then I started feeling scared of the forester [rangers], I felt more scared about the forester than the tiger... They began to talk badly... and we heard stories of people getting beaten and it was true. We started feeling such fear. There was no joy [*anando*] left anymore.”

The choice between the factory and the forest, between different kinds of risks and different forms of disrespect, are hard ones. Bimla's story attempts to capture the omnipresence of ambivalence that surrounds choosing between types of equally risky lives. In telling it, I wish to spur reflection on the notion of choice for those on the literal and metaphorical margins of society whose lives, in many ways are, devoid of the opportunity to truly exercise it. Yet they constantly exercise choice and in doing so one is made aware of their rich moral thought-worlds, their very own reflections on relationships, hardships, doubts, fears and their aspirations for a decent life in the multiple worlds—the village, the forest and the factory—that they inhabit.

Bimla can remain in the village, and is drawn to the nostalgia of a particular life-world, but must subject herself to forms of disrespect [*nirjatan*] and undignified labour within an evermore policed forest. A system of archaic licences, paternalistic rhetoric, and harassment have forced Bimla and others like her to leave their homes. Her move from the forest, with its webs of meaning, to the factory, where she leads a deracinated existence, is not a new story. What is under-acknowledged is that life in India's informal economy is equally risky, and that for Bimla and Kamlesh, the 13-hour shifts in the factory shop-floor and their cramped tin-shed home is a hollowed-out, unflinchingly hard, and undesired form of life. Sundarbans islanders like Bimla, to

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<sup>10</sup> Sugata Hazra, Tuhin Ghosh, Rajashree Dasgupta, and Gautam Sen. 2002. “Sea Level and Associated Changes in the Sundarbans.” *Science and Culture* (ISSN 0036-8156), Vol 68, no9-12, 2002, p 309-321.

whom politics and ecological disaster have already bequeathed an inheritance of displacement, are being converted into refugees all over again, this time in the name of conservation.

**BOX: (to be placed in the text somewhere)**

[Boat Licence Certificates (BLCs) required for ‘legal’ fishing in the Sundarbans ought to be in the possession of genuine fishers and crab collectors, instead fishers have to rent them from others who have no relationship to the livelihood anymore, at an exorbitant cost, ranging from Rs. 35000-40,000 per season. BLCs were given out during the colonial period and ever since no successful efforts have been made to change this completely broken licence-permit system, despite recent efforts toward issuing fresh ones. The entire system of BLCs—from the very fact of who owns them, to the cost of renting them out, their use and confiscation—remains a violation of both conservation laws and those that are meant to protect people who ‘do the jungle.’ They protect neither the forest, nor the tiger, but are a relic of colonial governmentality passed on to the post colony.]

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