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Counting Tigers, Discounting Victims of Tiger Attacks

By: Megnaa Mehta

When people die in tiger attacks in the Sundarbans, the humane response would be to compensate their families. Instead, we see an opaque bureaucracy splitting hairs to deny justice to some of the poorest women in the country, who, unsurprisingly, happen to belong to the lowest caste groups.

On 28 July 2023, in a village named Satjelia, bordering the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, 70 women sat crammed on the floor of a room that had been partially constructed. More women were trickling in from far flung islands spread across the South 24 Parganas district. The women ranged from as young as 20 to elderly 80 year olds.

Some knew others; others were meeting for the first time. They were Muslim, Hindu, and adivasi. The majority belonged to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups—Poundra Khoitra, Namasudra, Raj Bongshi, Bhumij, and Munda. What they had in common was that their husbands had been killed by tigers while “doing the jungle”—that is, fishing, and collecting crabs or honey in the mangrove creeks opposite their homes.

Sundarbans tigers regularly attack humans. Many Sundarbans residents who “do the jungle” have become “tiger-food.” (Jalais 2010). Some of the elderly women had lost their husbands in accidents when mangrove trees were felled during annual timber coupes organised by the forest department several decades ago. These coupes were put to an end in 2000. Some women had lost their husbands who had gone to collect crabs as recently as in the last year. Not a single woman gathered there had received the compensation stipulated under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

A notification issued by the Forest Department of West Bengal in 2021 (dated 26 February, Memo No. I/123199/2021) stipulates that any death due to a wild animal is eligible for a compensation of Rs. 500,000. No individual life should be worth only Rs. 500,000. Yet in places such as the Sundarbans, where life is often worth less than a dollar, this is a very significant amount that can alleviate the unimaginable financial distress and suffering faced by families that have lost their kin to a tiger.

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According to the 2021-2022 tiger estimation census, the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (STR)—a global conservation hotspot—has 96 adult tigers. This is the largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world, and the only such forest home to Bengal tigers. Squeezed between the Bay of Bengal on the south and the expanding metropolis of Kolkata on the north, hugging numerous densely populated villages of the Sundarbans, are around 52 uninhabited islands with mangroves and sandbanks that make up the habitat of the Royal Bengal Tiger.

Tigers ought to be saved. A century ago, they might have been considered “vermin” and in need of extermination. But safeguarding their habitat is uncontested in the 21st century. These tigers inspire awe and wonder in ordinary people, rich or poor, and also in conservationists, wildlife enthusiasts, and ethnologists. Tigers are on the whole fascinating, and the Sundarbans tigers are unique. Most scientists who have dedicated their lives to understanding the behaviour of these tigers living in the brackish water ecology of the mangroves would agree they are still a mystery.

For Sundarbans residents, the dominant emotion, besides fascination and reverence, is fear. One can be fascinated by tigers if they are being observed through an expensive zoom lens, at a safe distance. But if one enters the mangrove creeks of the Sundarbans on a nauka, a slender wooden canoe, then one becomes aware of the immeasurable danger. Humans are meat. All those who “protect” the tigers (the forest department), or study them (zoologists, ecologists, conservationists, and scientists), or observe them for pleasure (tourists, wildlife enthusiasts, and photographers) do not enter the Sundarbans on a nauka. They do it from the safety of large, tall motorised boats. The forest department rangers, when patrolling the forests on small, motorised boats, do so armed with rifles for self-defence.



There is immense interest in safeguarding these tigers at a time when the climate crisis is causing the loss of biodiversity. Conservation campaigns over the past two decades have made residents of the region aware of the uniqueness of their landscape and the importance of conserving the tiger. Nevertheless, even before this, the tiger played an important part in the rituals and religious life of the people of the Sundarbans. Dakhin Rai, a half-human, half-tiger, shape-shifting demon, is ever present in the psyche of every resident in the region. Dakhin Rai is feared and revered, and it is believed that the greedy will be punished by a tiger attack. Bonbibi, the deity who protects those who enter the Sundarbans forests, cautions against greed. Historically and in contemporary Sundarbans, ‘tiger-charmers’ have known how to converse with tigers.¹

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Everyday rituals and rules on how to propitiate the forest deity and the tiger demon are part of the lives of those who “do the jungle”. Sundarbans residents accept that there is a food chain and the tiger is a predator in it. I asked Parimal Mondol, who has been collecting crabs for 20 years in the Sundarbans, about tiger attacks. He said, “You see, the tiger has to eat something too (kichu to khetein hobey). You and I kill fish to eat it; we kill chicken; we kill goats. In the same way, the tiger also has to eat. This is the circle of life.”

But what about the distress it causes families? I countered. “It is a huge risk, some people have the courage to do this work, others don’t,” he continued. “Many have left and are working outside. But then it is also a huge risk to go to work in Kerala and Bangalore. People are dying there too. What alternative do we have?”

Mondol asked if I had seen the images of a recent train accident in Orissa. A passenger train, the Coromandel Express, had collided with a goods train, killing 294 people in June 2023. Several of them were from West Bengal and a family of three brothers, all of whom died, was from the Sundarbans. Several Sundarbans residents have left their villages to work in factories and on construction sites, only to realise that the informal economy also comes with several life-threatening risks. Despite this, tiger attacks are the danger that is highlighted, and people are denied access because of it being a dangerous forest. This dispossession is couched in a paternalistic veneer of “protecting” their lives and “protecting” the forest (Sivaramakrishnan 2015). If only, Sundarban men and women could be denied access to work because of the “dangers” and “risks” entailed in manual scavenging, working in brick kilns, dealing with biowaste or in the mining industry. Unfortunately, it is exactly these sectors that migrants are being pushed into as they are dispossessed from their forests.

How many human lives has the tiger taken in the Sundarbans?

The exact numbers are unknown. Like the behaviour of the tiger, this too is a mystery. Unlike the behaviour of the tiger, however, which scientists have been trying to understand, the numbers are purposefully hidden. In 1992, Kalyan Chakrabarti, who had worked in the Sundarbans as part of the forest department, wrote in his book that there were approximately 36 deaths every year, but that the unofficial number might be closer to 100. In some estimates, 3,000 men and women have been killed by tigers in the Sundarbans in the past five decades. Some elderly people of the region believe that the number is 6,000 or more.

In the past few years, the official count of the Forest Department shows two or three deaths a year. Unofficial numbers, tallied by unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and activist groups, put it at anything between 10 and 25 deaths a year. A major part of the STR, comprising the “core area” and “sanctuary”, is officially out of bounds to fishermen, and honey and crab collectors. So, deaths in this forest do not “officially” exist. By rendering the livelihoods of these people illegal, an apparatus has been created where even their deaths are not counted.

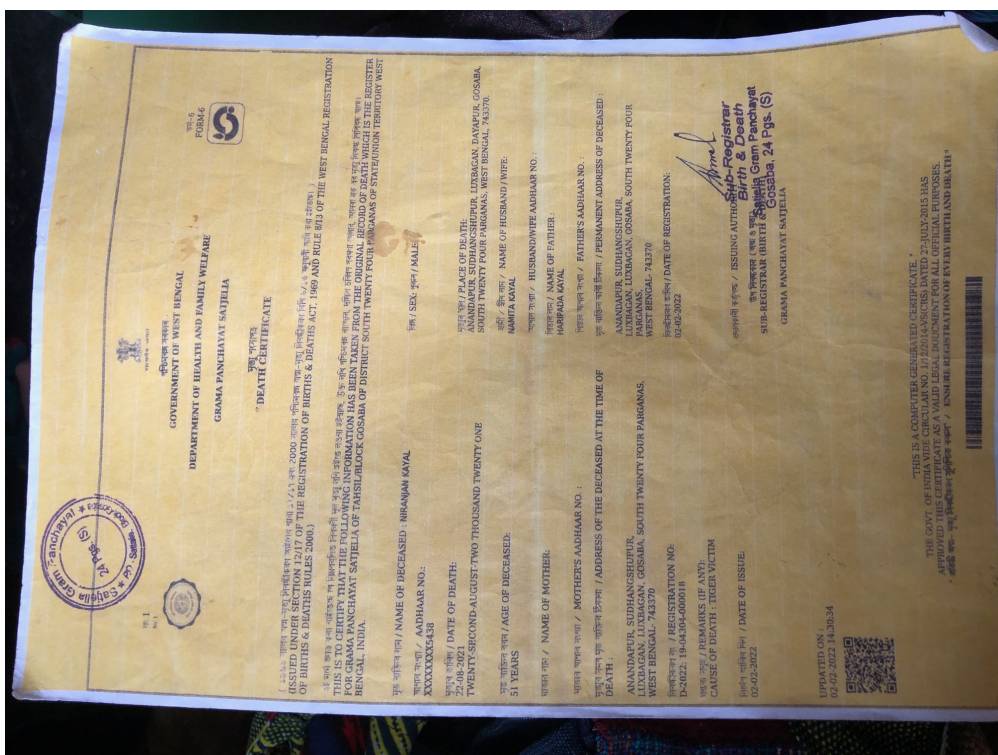
While applying for ... compensation, the West Bengal forest department requires widows to produce a series of documents, including a police report, a post-mortem report, and a death certificate.

For decades, some unions, NGOs, rights activists, and local organisations have been trying to compile lists of the families who have been affected by tiger attacks. They have been drawing attention to the injustice of not paying compensation to the families of those who died in tiger attacks even though it is stipulated in the Wildlife Protection Act. A lack of funds, an opaque bureaucracy, and a non-co-operative Forest Department—which is scared to reveal the actual number of lives lost to tiger attacks—has meant that these initiatives have not made much progress.

The meeting with more than 70 women who had lost their husbands in Satjelia was the first of its kind. It was a congregation of the Sundarban Byaghrobidhoba Samiti, or the Sundarbans Tiger Widows Collective, and was facilitated by the Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum, the West Bengal fishers’ union that is a part of the National Platform for Small Scale Fishworkers (NPSSFW), which had been raising funds to build a resource centre for the widows. The resource centre is still incomplete, but this was one of the inaugural meetings in which the women were given information about the law, their entitlements and rights, and the steps they ought to take to get what was their due.

Some of the husbands had been enrolled in a life insurance scheme. In addition to the Wildlife Protection Act compensation, they were entitled to Rs. 100,000 through the Janata Personal Accident Insurance Policy from the Diamond Harbour office of United India Insurance Co. Ltd. The insurance company has been refusing to pay claims, saying that it will do so after the Forest Department releases the compensation.

At the meeting, each of the women present, had different problems, the majority of which entailed the challenges of navigating the complexity of the Forest and Fishery Department’s bureaucracy. Shobita, a 28-year-old woman, had lost her husband to a tiger attack two years ago. Along with two other men, he had been collecting crabs in Pirkhali II, an area directly across from her home but one that was out of bounds to fishermen and crab collectors after the Wildlife Protection Act of 1973. With two daughters and a son who was born a few months after her husband’s death, and only 8 cuttachs of land around her homestead, Shobita finds it an uphill task to bring up her children and run her household.



To add to the woes of the tiger widows, the Group Personal Accident Insurance Scheme (GPAIS) for West Bengal has been discontinued since December 2017. In February 2018, the Joint Commissioner, Fisheries, Government of India had instructed the Department of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal, to converge the state-level GPAIS with the central scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY). However, no such steps were taken. As of 2021, the position of the Additional Director of Fisheries (Marine), South 24 Parganas has ceased to exist. This has made it next to impossible for the tiger widows to get their dues under this scheme.

The compensation amount has steadily gone up over the years and varies from state to state, with different state governments promising up to Rs. 10 lakh—Karnataka tops the list, offering Rs. 17 lakh. While applying for this compensation, the West Bengal forest department requires the women to produce a series of documents, including a police report, a post-mortem report, and a death certificate. Shobita, as well as hundreds of other widows, found the police station refusing to make a report of the incident (also known as a “General Diary”, or GD).

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In Shobita’s case, the two men on the boat tried to follow the tiger but were unable to retrieve her husband’s body, which made obtaining a post-mortem certificate impossible. This also made it hard for her to obtain a death certificate. And when she eventually managed to obtain one, the cause of death was not spelled out. Shobita has spent more than a year going from one office to another, at times with her son, with no end in sight. The documents that are required are impossible to obtain but the prospect that the compensation amount could transform the opportunities of her children motivates Shobita to keep trying.

Rubiah Sardar’s husband had a fisherman’s identity card issued by the fisheries department. As a result of it, she is eligible for compensation from the Wildlife Protection Act and the fisheries department. In her case, this will add up to about Rs. 700,000. However, the paperwork that has to be done to obtain this is, almost as if by design, impossible to do.

The form that needs to be filled out for the compensation requires six signatures. These are from the gram pradhan; the panchayat samiti head; the fisheries extension officer; the officer-in-charge at the police station; and the block development officer. It is almost impossible for most of these ordinary residents, the majority of whom are illiterate, to meet these officers, let alone obtain their signatures. Despite the odds, many women spend months and years chasing the compensation amount. Some of the women in their 70s

had waited almost all their life for justice—both in the form of a compensation and a simple acknowledgement of their loss.

Earlier this year, 23 women who had lost their husbands to tiger attacks took the issue of non-payment of compensation before the West Bengal State Commission for Women. Their complaints were forwarded to the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve authority. The STR responded in writing before the Women’s Commission that seven such applicants were denied compensation because there had been an “illegal entry” to the forest. Even those who had valid [Boat License Certificates](#) (BLC) and Forest Permits are denied compensation on the grounds that the bodies were found in the core area.

A recent court order is of interest regarding the issue of compensation. On 4th October 2023, a Single Judge Bench of the Calcutta High Court ordered the Forest Department of West Bengal to pay ex gratia compensation to Shantibala Naskar from Kultali.²

The Forest Department had resisted the claim of the petitioner Shantibala, whose husband Lakhai Naskar had fallen prey to a tiger while fishing in the Sundarbans in November 2021, on two counts: firstly, the death had not been noted by the forest department in their official registry, and secondly because Lakhai was, purportedly, fishing in the core-area of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve without a valid licence or BLC when the tiger-attack that led to his death had occurred.

However, the court refuted both the contentions of the Forest Department, stating that neither the government order nor the memo of communication “distinguishes between such demise in the core areas or the buffer areas of the forest”, and adding, further, that, “it cannot be the law that the family of the poor victim in such cases will be deprived of compensation merely for transgression of law as perceived by the Forest authorities.” In effect, this judgment has established that as long as the criteria of submitting a copy of a government-issued document (such as, in the case of Shantibala Naskar, a postmortem report) establishing that the death has occurred due to the attack of a wild animal, the forest department is duty-bound to pay the due ex gratia compensation amount. It remains to be seen if this legal position will be upheld and whether the Forest Department will indeed ensure that tiger widows like Shantibala Naskar get their due ex gratia compensation.

So far, the entire process of obtaining compensation is dehumanising. Police stations are told to turn a blind eye to the widows. Death certificates are impossible to obtain without a registered police report. The forest department often sends rangers to investigate the death and see if the body can be retrieved, but they are careful not to leave a paper trail. There are a complex set of tactics employed by the forest department and conservation NGOs to hide traces of these deaths. We know the exact number of tigers in the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, but no one knows the exact number of human deaths that were caused by these tigers in the South 24 Parganas.

What would it take to spend a sliver of the huge budget received by Project Tiger toward compensation ... to help the households of tiger victims?

There is no denying that tigers ought to be saved. But what if these tigers are attacking humans? Should there not be an acknowledgement of the lives of those belonging to the lowest caste groups that are being sacrificed almost knowingly for the survival and sustenance of the tiger? What is the basis of this investment in counting tigers and discounting the deaths caused by tigers, if not a politics of life that disregards the lives of the poorest, lowest caste and most marginalised? Why is it so difficult for us to acknowledge the conflicts and compromises that are made in shared spaces like the Sundarbans where people live and work alongside predatory wildlife?

What would it take to acknowledge the deaths of those who died in tiger attacks, grieve them, and honour the everyday courage that their livelihoods demand? What would it take to spend a sliver of the huge budget received by Project Tiger for compensation in the event of attacks by wild animals to help the households of tiger victims?

What is a very small amount of money for the centrally sponsored scheme of Project Tiger will make a very significant difference to the lives of the children of the victim families. As Project Tiger turns 50 this year, this culture of hiding deaths, discounting them, and denying compensation to some of the poorest and most distressed households in the country ought to change. Can 21st century conservation of the tiger not accompany a politics that counts poor lives as lives too?

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Footnotes:

1 See “The Tiger-Charmers of the Sundarbans” by Annu Jalais in The India Forum for a detailed understanding of the relationship between tigers and Sundarbans residents across time.

2 This is in accordance with Government Order No. 7386/CS/SM-991/19(III)(Pt.), dated 08.03.2021 issued by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Head of Forest Forces, read with Memo No. i/123199/2021, dated 26.02.2021 in File No. DOFR-14016(11)/2/2020-CCF(DOFR)-DOF issued by the Forest Department of West Bengal.

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