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## THE KAMOT GANGA PUJA; SHARKS OF SUNDARBAN

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### ABSTRACT

There are innumerable undocumented shark (locally called Kamot) bite incidents on the women of Sundarban, but there is no artistic or cultural portrayal of sharks of the region in any form. This lack of representation creates lack of knowledge about this conflict -- and its effects on the women as well as the sharks. In an effort to remedy this situation, a unique Ganga Debi puja was held in the Sundarbans, where a shark was created as her vahana, and with a girl child of the Sundarbans on her lap. This is a narrative documentation of that puja, it's reasons and effects, and the day leading up to it.

### KEYWORDS

Sundarban sharks; Idol worship; Human-animal conflict; Anthrozoology; Human-shark relations; Multispecies ethnography

### BIO

I am a marine social scientist; my work is the holistic study of cultural and naturalscapes shaped by physical and symbolic interactions of humans with the marine environment and life forms. I pursue not only creating academic knowledge but to spread it through various mediums like painting, documentary, public speaking and public media presentations. I recently completed my last PhD in Marine Anthropology, where I investigated the networks and affective relations among humans and great white sharks encountering each other through cage diving in New Zealand, 1,600 km from Antarctica.

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## Introduction

A unique puja (the act of worship) was held in the Sundarbans (West Bengal, India) in the hope to bring attention to the conflict between the women and the large predatory sharks of the region. The Sundarbans is the largest mangrove forest in the world and home to the Royal Bengal Tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*). The men of the villages go to the forest for honey, wood, crab and other resources, and are regularly attacked by tigers. However, another conflict in the region -- that between humans and the kamots (Local term for sharks) -- finds scarce academic mention. Although there are stories of shark attacks in the region for more than a 100 years, they seemed to have increased about 40 years ago when the *Meen* (prawn larva) industry proliferated in the Sundarbans. The men used to fish from the boats and go to the forest, while the women got into the river to catch *Meen*; that's where the shark bite incidents happened.

My anthropological investigation to document the reasons and effects of these bites on the humans and the sharks revealed the lack of knowledge about this conflict. Besides, I found that there was no representation of the kamot in local art, folklore or the local culture of worship, even though there were ample depictions of the other two major predators, tigers and crocodiles. This was baffling, because most cultures that have large predators around them often present them in artistic, spiritual and architectural images and, thereby, in academic discourse. Researchers have investigated lives shared with tigers, hyenas, and even crocodiles (Aiyadurai 2016; Baynes-Rock & Thomas 2015; Pooley 2016), there has also been limited social scientific investigation on sharks at the global stage (Neff 2015; Aich in press). Even in India, most large predators who occasionally prey on humans have generally been represented in some way or the other -- from Goddess Durga's lion to the crocodile of Khodiyar Maa and the tigers of Bonodebi in the Sundarbans. Then why not the kamot?

The glaring lack of knowledge about this conflict has created some predicaments. Firstly, the stories of the humans, particularly the women, who suffered from these devastating shark bites do not find voice in the rest of the country, let alone the world. This means they do not receive much global or national support. Secondly, not many people get to know about the large sharks roaming these waters, which means the efforts to conserve them are also limited. Furthermore, the younger generation of Sundarban has close to no knowledge about these sharks and, hence, are in no position to sustain their conservation. Finally, there is the issue of the global knowledge that can be gained from studying this conflict. My correspondence with officials of the International Shark Attack File -- which is an exhaustive global database of all known shark attacks -- revealed that even they had very little knowledge about the extent of the kamot attacks (personal email correspondence, 2020).

The Sundarban Tiger Widows Association is my host group in the Sundarbans. This is a group of dedicated men and women working to do good for the local community, especially the women who have suffered animal attacks or have lost spouses to the kamot. On a field trip to the Sundarbans in early January 2020, while discussing with the team, it occurred to us that we must do something to bring attention to this human-animal conflict. One part of it is certainly writing about it, which I am currently doing. But there has to be a way to raise awareness about this among the local population. Then it dawned on us that if there is no iconic portrayal of the sharks of Ganga in art and culture, can an idol with the kamot be created? Usually, the Ganga Debi has the Makara or crocodile, or even dolphins as her vahana (animal totem). Why not create an incarnation of Ma Ganga with a kamot vahana and the women of Sundarban as her child? After all, culture is an ever-evolving process, and the kamot has more sociological relevance in the community than the Makara. Maybe this way, we can involve the kamot victims and bring more attention to their plight, and that of the sharks in the region. This idol would serve as a reminder to the next generation that these sharks are still in the waters. But the kids can be taught to respect and protect them, instead of irrationally fearing them. When we decided to make the idol, local experts felt that it would be best to include the Makara in the idol too, along with the kamot, as locals associate Ganga Debi with the Makara first. Finally, the little girl represented in the idol would represent the women of Sundarbans. Accordingly, my brother a skilled graphic artist, Raj Kamal helped us design the idol.

For a while I struggled with the traditional dictum of the passive observant anthropologist in the field, and not to cross the line between activism and ethnography. As I was pondering this, my friend (anthropologist and artist) Soosan Lucas reminded me- my job there at that time was to tell stories of the women and the sharks who have not been heard before, my sense of identity was less relevant than the work at hand, and this endeavour was too important a task, not to support. That is what I did, and I will

leave it to my informed readers to make up their mind on the matter. So, on March 14, at 11 in the morning, the Ma Ganga Puja was to take place at Swatsangha Ashram Kheyaghat, Gosaba (the entry point, and major settlement of Sundarbans). We invited members of the Press, representatives of the Zoological Survey of India and some of my friends to join us on that day from Kolkata. I sponsored the puja with some money I had received from an advance of my book, and my friends and family chipped in as well. Ashim, the secretary of the Sundarban Tiger Widows Association, was entrusted with making all the arrangements in Gosaba. A local artisan was hired to make the idol and I was to reach Gosaba two days before the puja.



**PHOTO 1:** In 1996, a 9–10-foot shark attacked this woman, while she was catching *Meen* one early morning. The attack was so intense, the shark breached itself on the riverbank pursuing her. She fought it off, but in the process suffered devastating bites on her leg and hands.



**PHOTO 2:** On March 12, I reached Gosaba to help in the final phase of building the idol. As I reached in the evening, Ashim and I walked the brisk 10 minutes from where I was staying to Jayita and Goutam's house (members of Tiger widow team). As the smell of the muddy flowers beckoned, I was going to meet her for the first time. Her skin made of clay, sitting on a plinth with her child on her left and beneath her, her shark.



**PHOTO 3:** That night, I was invited to a nearby village, to be part of a celebration of ‘Dol Purnima’ (the full moon night celebration of the festival of colours in Bengal). On the back of a motorcycle, we travelled on the windy dark roads, where a tiger was found hiding only five years ago, till we reached the large field. Celebrations were on in full swing; the music of the harmonium and the smell of fried fish filled the air. The colours of the bright sarees and dresses cut through the darkness as the villagers enjoyed song, dance, and laughter.



**PHOTO 4:** As daylight broke the next morning, I walked up to Jayita’s house. No matter what hardship, the beauty of Sundarban is all forgiving. As an ethnographer, knowledge here is shaped by empirical data as much as sensory experience. I stood there in the light with the smell of the muddy soil and leaves, flowers, and each pond which smells and looks different because of the flowers and leaves that swim in it.



**PHOTO 5:** The idol was being prepared for painting. But I had to be on my way soon, for I could not be late for some pre-set interviews with local experts.



**PHOTO 6:** I came back as the evening fell and saw that a lot of the painting was left. We worked through the night, with cups of hot water Jayita gave me for my coffee, while Goutam's father told me stories of tigers all across the forest and ones that visited their village even a few years back. I sat on the ground and used the brush to put a final layer of green on the shark. Initially, I had thought of keeping the shark grey, its natural colour. But I realized that the waters of the river here are mucky and green, and the sharks represented that water, so, they needed to be a layer of green too. Besides, the child in Ma Ganga's arms was still quite pale (in the tradition of idol worship in India). I requested that her skin be bronzed a bit, in keeping with the tanned skin the women in the region have owing to living and working in the harsh sun and water.



**PHOTO 7:** She was ready the next morning. I went and sat with my shark made out of clay, her cold skin still wet to the touch swimming beneath the waves of her mother, the Ganga. She was not a monster, she preceded us by millions of years, and she symbolized power and balance of the natural world around us.



**PHOTO 8:** Our puja was supposed to be at 11 am, time was running out. We lifted the heavy and still wet idol and placed her gently on a van rickshaw to be taken to the mondop (worship area). Ashim stood and I sat at the corner, holding her delicately as the vehicle lazily travelled from Joyeta's house to the ghat (Staircase to a river). We had to be careful about each little bump on the road.



**PHOTO 9:** As we reached the mondop on the Satsang Ghat, life went on as usual there with people crossing the river with a one-rupee toll per head, and two if they had a motorcycle. The mondop was just three empty walls with no roof, next to the big Ganga Debi mandir. I climbed on the walls and put a big blue tarpaulin where the ceiling was supposed to be, fixing it with bricks. A few more bricks were laid on the ground, and then some newspaper, and the heavy idol was finally placed on top.



**PHOTO 10:** Ma Ganga in her usual form with the Makara as her animal totem.



**PHOTO 11:** Women who have suffered from kamot bites and those who lost spouses to Kamot attacks were invited from all the islands to be part of the celebration.



**PHOTO 12:** The purohit (priest) came and asked, “Sir, who is this other female on the lap of Ma Ganga?” I replied, “She is the quintessential woman of the Sundarbans. The sharks and the women are both MaGanga’s children, and we are worshiping both.” Concerned, he said, “Sir, if people ask, please tell them it’s a water fairy, because we cannot worship a woman?” I did not reply any further, even if all my instincts wanted to, but I knew the women would know who it was in the idols lap.





**PHOTO 13:** There was still a lot of work to be done; fruits to be cut; sweets to be purchased. All of us were working together in a rush.... Suddenly, everything came to a halt when the purohit lit the Yagna (ritual fire). The flames burned at their own rhythm, the ghee flaring them up, as if trying to wash away the peoples' misery with cleansing fire. With chanting mantras, the mondop was bathed in blue light through the tarpaulin. The women sat silently, some with closed and some moist eyes.



**PHOTO 14:** Chokkhu daan (giving vision to the goddess), a significant part of idol worship.



**PHOTO 15:** The fire united the stories of the idol, the humans and the sharks.



**PHOTO 16:** Members of the press came to cover the story, and my friend Suparna Sen a fashion designer came with sarees for the women and supported the project financially too.



**PHOTO 17:** The next generation of young women taking in the stories and power in the room.



**PHOTO 18:** The puja ended, and fruits, sweets and the saris were distributed among the women.



**PHOTO 19:** This puja was possible because women of different ages and socio-economic standing, from different corners of the world, came together to celebrate each other. These women connected beyond age, continents, skin tone -- all vessels of the new, just like Ma Ganga. Ma Ganga in her idol form, loving and protecting her daughters and my beloved sharks. Both of whom are just trying to survive in these murky waters. If nothing, this puja helped these women feel they were being heard.



**PHOTO 20:** The fire stopped burning; in the end remained the muddy soil of the room, and below Ma Ganga's feet, her green shark.

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