

Caste as Ecology: The Mangrove Archive, Slow Violence and the Labouring Dalit Body in the Sundarbans Stories of Shyamal Kumar Pramanik

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Abstract

The Sundarbans has been written, mapped, legislated and lamented into international visibility, yet almost never from the vantage of caste. This article reads five short stories by the Bangla Dalit writer Shyamal Kumar Pramanik— “In Dakshin Rai’s Land,” “Bhajahari and His Family,” “Champaburi, or the Story of a Village,” “Homeland” and “Life in the Forest”—to argue that in his fiction caste is not a social variable located within an environment but the mechanism by which that environment is distributed, priced, permitted and made lethal. Reading these stories together through Ritam Dutta’s “Dalit Botany,” Ritam Dutta and Indranil Banerjee’s “Eco-Delirium,” Rob Nixon’s slow violence and Mukul Sharma’s eco-casteism, the article shows how the mangrove functions at once as pedagogy, archive and tribunal; how the Brahmin’s mantra and the state’s conservation permit operate as structurally identical instruments of extraction; and how Marichjhapi marks the point at which green law turns lethal. It contends further that Pramanik’s is an eco-delirious realism in which the unseen tiger, the sudden storm and the pugmark in the silt register the unassimilable excess of a caste-stratified environment.

Keywords: Bangla Dalit Literature, Sundarbans, Dalit Ecologies, Slow Violence, Eco-Delirium, Shyamal Kumar Pramanik

INTRODUCTION

When Motibala discovers that her two children are no longer in the boat tethered to the garjan tree, the narration of “Bhajahari and His Family” refuses to give us a body. It gives us a print. “Finally, Motibala came across the tiger’s pugmarks on the shallow. Motibala let out a wail. She had no trouble making out what had happened” (Pramanik 2024, 37). The restraint of this sentence deserves to be dwelt upon, because it establishes the representational protocol that governs every story examined here. In the Dalit Sundarbans of Shyamal Kumar Pramanik’s fiction there is no corpse to carry, no inquest to convene, no compensation to claim. There is a track in the tidal mud, and a woman who deciphers it with the fluency of a specialist. Grief, in this world, is a species of ecological literacy; mourning is a forensic act performed upon silt.

That pugmark organises the argument advanced below. My contention is that in Pramanik’s Sundarbans fiction caste is not a social variable that happens to be situated within an environment; it is the mechanism by which the environment is distributed, priced, permitted and made lethal. Caste decides who enters the mangrove, at what fee, under whose guarantee, and with what probability of return. It decides, no less, whose death the environment records and whose it does not. To read the Sundarbans through Bangla Dalit fiction is therefore not to append a sociology to a landscape already amply described by geographers, anthropologists and novelists. It is to discover that the landscape itself has been stratified all along, and that its stratification is legible only from below.

The article reads five stories from *Selected Writings of Shyamal Kumar Pramanik: Dalit Literature from Bangla*, edited and translated by Sayantan Dasgupta (Pramanik 2024): “In Dakshin Rai’s Land,” “Bhajahari and His Family,” “Champaburi, or the Story of a Village,” “Homeland” and “Life in the Forest.”¹ They are treated not as discrete case studies but as one cumulative corpus in which a village economy, a family, an old woman’s life, a refugee itinerary and an exile’s forest memory illuminate one another. The theoretical scaffolding is deliberately lean. Ritam Dutta’s concept of “Dalit Botany,” which understands the forest as a pedagogical and ethical system in which plants act as epistemic agents, supplies the vocabulary for Pramanik’s vegetal reciprocity (Dutta 2025). Ritam Dutta and Indranil Banerjee’s “Eco-Delirium” supplies the account of a realism that has mutated under conditions of environmental excess, in which paranoia, fragmentation and affective disturbance are not failures of representation but forms of it (Dutta and Banerjee 2026). Rob Nixon’s slow violence (2011) and Mukul Sharma’s eco-casteism (2017, 2022) then do the specifically South Asian work, naming what Dutta’s vegetal ontology alone cannot: that the attritional destruction of the delta is caste-distributed, and that the “natural order” invoked to defend it is a Brahmanical one.

What emerges, I shall argue, is a tripartite structure of extraction. Three instruments govern the Dalit relation to the mangrove: the *mantra* sold by the Brahmin, the *permit* issued by the Forest Department, and the *price* set by the *mahajan* who arrives from the city to buy mohua flowers and kendu leaves. Each is a technology for converting ecological risk into caste profit. Each appears in a different story, and the stories are only fully intelligible when read against one another, because Pramanik distributes the machinery of the delta across his corpus the way the delta distributes its hazards across its islands.

LITERATURE REVIEW: READING THE SUNDARBANS AGAINST THE GRAIN OF CASTE

The Cosmopolitan Tiger and Its Critics

The Sundarbans entered world literary consciousness chiefly through Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, a novel that did for the Bengal delta what no work of Bengali fiction in English translation had managed: it made the tide country a global ecological emblem and, in the figure of the illiterate boatman Fokir, offered

a powerful portrait of subaltern ecological knowledge pitted against metropolitan science (Ghosh 2004). The novel's recuperation of the 1979 Marichjhapi massacre was, and remains, an act of considerable ethical courage, restoring to Anglophone readership an episode that Indian historiography had largely consigned to silence. Yet the very success of *The Hungry Tide* has shaped a scholarly field in ways that warrant scrutiny. The delta arrives already mediated: by Kanai Dutt Roy's bhadralok scepticism, by Piya Roy's cetological expertise, by Nirmal Bose's notebook. Subaltern ecological knowledge is *presented*, but it is presented *to* someone, and the someone is invariably an upper-caste cosmopolitan.

Anthropology has been far more attentive. Annu Jalais's *Forest of Tigers* remains the indispensable ethnography, and its central distinction—between the “local” tiger with whom islanders claim a parallel history, and the “cosmopolitan” tiger manufactured by the state, conservation NGOs and urban publics—provides the single most useful concept available for reading Pramanik (Jalais 2010). Islanders in Jalais's account understand themselves as “tiger food,” expendable citizens set against a species promoted to first-class status, and they read Marichjhapi as the moment the cosmopolitan tiger arrived, armed with state protection. Ranjan Chakrabarti's environmental history traces the same asymmetry across two centuries, showing how colonial revenue imperatives and then Project Tiger converted the Sundarbans into a local theatre for a global campaign driven by the science and politics of international capitalism (Chakrabarti 2009). Ross Mallick's archival work on Marichjhapi demonstrated, well before Ghosh's novel, that conservation functioned as the alibi for what he terms a massacre of “Untouchable refugees” (Mallick 1999, 104). Willem van Schendel situated the same episode within the longer political economy of the Bengal borderland (van Schendel 2005), and Deep Halder's oral history assembled the survivors' testimony into an archive the state had refused to keep (Halder 2019).

A second, more recent current situates the delta within the Anthropocene. Jason Cons reads the southwest delta as a “temporal chokepoint,” a zone where futures proliferate and are simultaneously blocked (Cons 2021); Aditya Ghosh documents the sustainability conflicts generated by cyclones, salinity ingress and the development discourse that manages them (Ghosh 2017); and Kalpita Bhar Paul develops an ecophenomenology of the Sundarbans oriented toward a community-based ethic (Paul 2025). Debojyoti Das's postcolonial ecocriticism provides the frame, insisting that the Anthropocene cannot be thought from the metropole alone (Das 2018). What unites these interventions is an analytic object—delta, tide country, mangrove—whose internal social stratification is either flattened under the category “islander” or acknowledged ethnographically but never theorised as constitutive.

Dalit Ecologies and the Caste of Nature

The second axis runs in a different direction. Mukul Sharma's *Caste and Nature* is the field's foundational text, and its central claim is stark: that caste and nature are intimately connected, that the supremacy of a “natural order” is affirmed across the major spheres of caste society—life, labour, livelihood, food, animal and space—and that this naturalism is, in practice, synonymous with conservative savarna belief (Sharma 2017; Sharma 2022). Sharma's argument is emphatically not that Dalits possess a purer ecology; he refuses to valorise the Dalit standpoint. It is rather that Indian environmentalism has been unable to see caste because its own conceptual vocabulary—purity, wilderness, sacred grove, pristine forest—is Brahmanical through and through. Ilangkumaran Prasad consolidates the field under the heading “Dalit ecologies,” defining it as the study of Dalit articulations with their environment and of “eco-casteism,” the inequities of exclusion from natural resources and of disproportionate exposure to pollution and waste (Prasad 2022, 98). Prasad's genealogy runs from the Mahad Satyagraha through the Dalit Panthers manifestos to contemporary struggles over land, water and commons, and it insists—following Sharma—that the environmentalism of the poor, as conventionally conceived, is an environmentalism of the Adivasi, from which Dalits are routinely excluded. Nirmal Kumar Mahato's work on Adivasi ecological labour in the

Jungle Mahals extends the argument on the adjacent terrain, showing how a moral economy of mutual dependence between humans and non-humans is dismantled by forest law, and how communities nonetheless reconstitute themselves as custodians in the face of alienation (Mahato 2025; see also Mahato 2020).

To this caste analysis must be added a temporal one, and here Rob Nixon is indispensable. His foundational definition supplies the vocabulary without which Pramanik's slowest narratives cannot be described:

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and erupts into instant sensational visibility. (Nixon 2011, 2)

Nixon's account is a theory of attention: the political question is what gets to count as an event, and who gets to decide. Read alongside Sharma, the concept acquires the specificity it lacks in its original, largely African and Latin American, examples. In the Sundarbans the attrition is not randomly distributed; it is allocated by caste, and the institutions that might render it legible—the Forest Department, the district administration, the metropolitan press—have no constituency among those it afflicts. Slow violence, in the delta, is slow *because* it is caste-distributed.

Two limitations qualify this otherwise robust literature for present purposes. First, its empirical centre of gravity is peninsular and northern India—Maharashtra, Punjab, Delhi, the Jungle Mahals. The Bengal delta, with its brackish soils, its tidal commons and its caste-ordered villages of Pod, Bagdi, Bauri and Kaibarta,² is largely absent. Second, it is predominantly sociological and archival. It has not, by and large, been in sustained conversation with literature as literature.

Bangla Dalit Literature and the Environmental Turn

Bangla Dalit literary studies, meanwhile, has flourished precisely where the ecological has been thinnest; its founding concerns are caste, Partition, education, gender and the politics of recognition. Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis's account of how the "absence" of Bengali Dalit literature was constructed by Brahmanical institutions remains the sharpest statement of the field's stakes (Paunksnis 2021), and Sipra Mukherjee's survey of writing from the margins of Bengal established the corpus's thematic coordinates—humiliation, assertion, conversion (Mukherjee 2016; see also Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 2016). Toral Gajarawala's theorisation of Dalit realism as a mode refusing both the elegiac past and the utopian future supplies the formal vocabulary most useful here (Gajarawala 2014), while the historical backdrop—the decline of the Scheduled Caste movement after Partition, the Left Front's substitution of class for caste—has been decisively documented (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2016). What has been missing is an environmental register. Sayantan Dasgupta's introduction to the Pramanik collection gestures repeatedly toward it, noting that "the Sundarbans figure as an important setting for many of Shyamal Kumar Pramanik's stories" and that these stories "go far beyond the touristic portrayal of the Sundarbans as tiger country" (Dasgupta 2024, 7–8), but the introduction is a survey rather than a sustained ecocritical argument.

Two recent interventions have begun to close the gap, and this article positions itself between them. Ritam Dutta's "Dalit Botany" reads Pramanik's "Life in the Forest" and "In Dakshin Rai's Land" through Michael Marder's plant-thinking, proposing that the mangrove operates as a "sentient and active

participant in Dalit life in which trees are pedagogical agents” (Dutta 2025, 2; Marder 2013). It is a genuine advance, and this article builds directly upon it. Yet its philosophical commitments carry a risk: the more thoroughly the vegetal is granted agency, the more caste recedes into the condition of a generalised subaltern precarity. Umesh Patra and Shubhadeep Jana, reading the Singha and Acharya anthology, take the complementary position, foregrounding “ecological precarity” in Bangla Dalit short fiction (Patra and Jana 2026). But their framework treats ecology as plight—as what happens *to* Dalits—rather than as what caste *does*. Neither, finally, brings the state and its conservation apparatus into sustained conversation with the Brahminical and market apparatuses that govern the same forest.

Dalit Botanics and Eco-Delirium: A Framework from the Margins

The framework adopted here is therefore deliberately composite, and its components are held subordinate to the texts. Dutta’s “Dalit Botanics” is the more capacious of the two principal terms:

“Dalit Botanics” explains vegetal life not as metaphor but as a co-agent in survival, ethics and resistance. It expands from what I term “Dalit Vegetal Poetics,” the aesthetic and affective register through which plant life enters Dalit storytelling as memory, labour and mourning. (Dutta 2025, 2)

The concept does crucial work in naming the forest as teacher rather than backdrop, and in insisting that vegetal reciprocity in a caste society is “already broken by caste” (Dutta 2025, 3). But it is Dutta and Banerjee’s “Eco-Delirium” that supplies the missing account of form:

Eco-Delirium may be defined as a historically specific mode of realism arising under conditions in which environmental reality becomes systemically excessive relative to human capacities of perception, cognition, and narrative form. It names the literary registration of ecological conditions—nuclear fallout, toxic exposure, infrastructural risk, climatic instability—materially real but experientially elusive, statistically knowable yet affectively unassimilable. (Dutta and Banerjee 2026, 3)

Eco-Delirium was formulated for the late Cold War Atlantic, through Pynchon and DeLillo, and its diagnostic features were derived from nuclear and chemical hazard. Its transposition to the Bengal delta requires one adjustment, and it is not trivial: the excess it names is not primarily scalar or informational but *distributive*. The delta’s hazards are not imperceptible because they are too large to see. They are imperceptible because the institutions that might render them legible have no interest in the people they afflict. Nixon’s slow violence, read through Sharma, supplies precisely this political supplement. In the Sundarbans, attrition is not merely dispersed; it is allocated. What follows is an attempt to hold these three frameworks—Dalit Botanics, Eco-Delirium and caste-distributed slow violence—in subordination to Pramanik’s sentences rather than the reverse.

The Mantra Market: Caste as Ecological Brokerage

“In Dakshin Rai’s Land” opens with a Brahmin asleep and a nightmare.³ Narahari Ghoshal has prospered by two trades: moneylending, at rates that convert a drought year into permanent dispossession, and the sale of mantras. The two are not merely juxtaposed; they are the same transaction conducted in different currencies. When Mona Das, a honey-collector preparing for the Sundarbans, comes to buy the final mantra in the catalogue, the terms are explicit:

Falling flat at Narahari Ghoshal’s feet, Mona Das pleaded, “You must teach me the mantra today, thakurmoshai! We will go looking for honey in the Sundarbans next Sunday.” ... “I’ll teach you the mantra all right, but have you brought the fee? One hundred and one rupees you will need to pay me. Not a paisa less!” ... “That’s all

right, Thakur. I won't pay you a paisa less. Here's the money." (Pramanik 2024, 41)

One hundred and one rupees is the price of a Dalit body's provisional immunity. The mantra itself is comic, and the comedy is deliberate: "Aung baung taung / Mavericks on song Goddess Kali is with us / The tiger can make no fuss!" (Pramanik 2024, 42). Pramanik does not invite the reader to sneer at Mona Das; he invites the reader to understand that the purchase is rational. Mona Das is a professional who has already bought every other mantra on the list, and who leads a crew—Haru, Nakul, Nidhiram—that expects him to have made provision. To enter the mangrove without the guarantee is not brave. It is unliveable. This is what Dutta and Banerjee mean when they insist, against the older demystifying model of critique, that fantasy is not opposed to reality but "structures it by organizing how subjects sustain their lived relation to social conditions" (Dutta and Banerjee 2026, 7). The mantra is the psychic infrastructure of a labour market.

What makes the story politically acute is that Pramanik does not leave the village in a state of credulous unanimity. The Dom and Bagdi colonies maintain a counter-memory: "We have worshipped our gods in our temples ourselves since time immemorial" (Pramanik 2024, 41). Radhanath Bagdi, a schoolteacher and member of the Bagdi Rationalist Society, recalls that "our ancestors, too, used to worship Ma Sitla themselves only a few generations back" (Pramanik 2024, 41). The villagers know precisely what Ghoshal is. They distrust him; they loathe his agent, the hunchbacked Pachu Bairagi. And yet they pay. Pramanik's insight here is a mature one, and it anticipates Sharma's central claim about the "natural order": hegemony does not require belief, only the absence of a viable alternative. There is no forest office in this village. There is no wildlife warden, no ranger, no boat licence. Ghoshal *is* the permitting authority. Caste performs the work of the state in the interior Sundarbans; in the next story we shall see the state performing the work of caste at its periphery.

The story's denouement stages the collapse of the mantra economy. Ghoshal's only son, Bhola, joins a hunting party; Mona Das, confident in his purchase, takes the boy's hand and leads him into the jungle. Then the delta asserts itself:

"It's not a good day, sir. Do you see how the jungle seems so quiet?" ... They now entered the jungle. A storm soon came up. The trees of the forest began to sway dangerously. The river frothed and hissed like a cobra. Then it began to lash repeatedly against the shore like thousands of thrashing Vasuki snakes. Ramhari Majhi's boat broke free of its tether and dived into the foaming lather of the river. It was soon swallowed up by the waves and was nowhere to be seen. (Pramanik 2024, 44)

The simile is worth noting: the river behaves like a serpent, and serpents are what the mantras were supposed to have pacified. Ecological excess here does not merely exceed the mantra; it exposes the mantra as a financial instrument denominated in a currency the forest does not accept. When Bhola is discovered missing, Mona Das "knew the true nature of the jungle" (Pramanik 2024, 45), and his knowledge is the knowledge of a man who has understood that he has been sold nothing. The story's closing movement is extraordinary in its economy. Ghoshal confesses; his family leaves for the city; and in the interim there occurs the sentence on which the entire caste-ecology of the story turns: "Mona Das just kept looking at Narahari Ghoshal unblinkingly. Who knew what his gaze meant!" (Pramanik 2024, 45). Dasgupta is right to read this gaze as one that "incriminates, tries, and condemns" (Dasgupta 2024, 8). I would add that it is also an ecological judgement. The forest has taken the Brahmin's son. The forest has thereby adjudicated the mantra market. Caste hierarchy, in Pramanik, is not overturned by political

organisation here; it is audited by a mangrove that keeps its own books.

Honey, Hunger and the Reciprocity of the Mangrove

“Bhajahari and His Family” relocates the argument from brokerage to production. Kishorinagar is not picturesque; Pramanik’s first paragraph dismantles its own name—“the young city,” a settlement that is neither young nor a city—before establishing its genealogy: “The village was created 150 years ago by clearing the jungles of the Sundarbans” (Pramanik 2024, 32). This single clause contains the entire political economy of the delta. The arable land was produced by Dalit labour upon mangrove; it was subsequently alienated from its producers; and the survivors were pushed back into the very forest they had cleared. The story states the sequence with documentary flatness: “When the jungle was cleared, everyone had enough land. It was not so any more. Families had got larger. As the holdings got divided further and further, things came to a point that some families had land only in name” (Pramanik 2024, 35).

What follows is the most complete statement in the corpus of the mangrove as productive commons:

Beyond that field, there was another field. Beyond that, the river. And then, the jungle. The jungle that sustained them in times of severe want. The bees made their hives on the branches of the sundari trees. You broke the hive and the honey was yours. The honey money could be earned that way. But beehives are more difficult to locate these days. Most of the villagers lived in dreadful want. Almost everyone went to the jungle looking for beehives to harvest. Moreover, this was such a Godforsaken place that you did not get customers who could pay you well. The honey fetched only half the price it did elsewhere. (Pramanik 2024, 35)

Read through Dutta’s *Dalit Botanics*, this is vegetal pedagogy in its most literal form: the sundari tree teaches by giving and by withholding. But the passage also contains the market. The honey “fetched only half the price it did elsewhere”—the delta’s remoteness is not neutral geography but a discount applied to Dalit labour. Here Nixon’s slow violence becomes precise rather than merely evocative. Nothing spectacular has happened to Kishorinagar: no flood, no cyclone, no massacre. What has happened is subdivision of holdings, a decline in hive density, and a price differential. Nixon’s call to “engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (Nixon 2011, 2) describes the story’s structure exactly. Pramanik’s narrative time is itself accretive: a grandmother’s hunger, a shopkeeper’s refusal of credit, a remembered mango orchard, a granddaughter stitched into an embroidered quilt she will never own.

The most remarkable instance of slow violence in the story, however, is hydrological. Describing the journey to the nearest market town at Canning, the narration observes: “The depth of the Matla was no longer what it used to be. The shallows were now visible during low tide. Boats often got trapped in those shallows” (Pramanik 2024, 32). This is deltaic siltation and channel decay rendered not as data but as biographical time; the river is a member of the household whose health is failing. When Cons names the delta a temporal chokepoint, he names a structure Pramanik has already inscribed in a villager’s commute (Cons 2021). And when Ghosh complains that the modern novel cannot accommodate events of planetary scale, Pramanik offers a rejoinder: the delta’s planetary scale arrives in the realist sentence sideways, as a boat that grounds (Ghosh 2016).

“Life in the Forest” completes this triptych by displacing it.⁴ The story is set in Dandakaranya, among East Bengali refugees forcibly rehabilitated by the Indian state, and it is Dutta’s principal exhibit for *Dalit Botanics*. Its central passage states the reciprocity that the concept names:

When the hot summer wind blew, the delicate mohua flowers would drop off onto the ground. The village women would collect these mohua flowers and take them home. And the men and women would go out together and collect kendu leaves. The mahajans would come from the city and would buy these from the villagers. This was how the jungle continued to fend for them. And they, too, helped to sustain the jungle. (Pramanik 2024, 97)

Dutta reads the final sentence as an instance of what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls the grammar of animacy, a reciprocity of mutual sustenance (Dutta 2025, 7). I would press the reading in a different direction. The reciprocity is real and it is asymmetric, and the asymmetry has a caste signature. The forest feeds the villagers; the *mahajan* arrives from the city to buy what they have gathered. The jungle “fends for them”; the market extracts. This is not a closed economy of mutual care but a hinge between a subsistence ecology and an urban commodity chain. Dutta himself identifies the biopolitical crux when he observes that “the state is actively engaged when a tiger shows up” but “completely passive in dealing with the precarious labour of mohua and kendu collection” (Dutta 2025, 6). Pramanik dramatises the point in a single line of dialogue—“The Forest Officer must be informed. The tiger must be caught” (Pramanik 2024, 98)—and the sentence should be read as a theory of governance. What the state recognises as an emergency is the predator. What it does not recognise is the labour. Caste and caste-adjacent precarity determine, in other words, what counts as a catastrophe.

The story also contains the corpus’s most condensed genealogy of Dalit ecological loss, delivered in three sentences of reported speech: “His paternal grandfather had gone to the Sundarbans jungle to collect honey. He had never returned. The villagers had said that Mother Vishalakshi had taken him” (Pramanik 2024, 99). The Sundarbans is here not a setting but an ancestral archive, and the archive’s entry is a disappearance euphemised into divine appetite. Madhab Mandal’s Dandakaranya is its photographic negative: “In this wretched land, water is more precious than gold or diamonds or any precious stones” (Pramanik 2024, 96). Against his lost delta—“there were so many rivers in the land where I was born. Water everywhere. Deep rivers all around” (Pramanik 2024, 96)—the plateau’s scarcity is a permanent accusation. And yet the ethics the villagers derive from the forest is not despair but a grim calculus of risk: “We live in constant fear of death; it’s no use being scared of it. Losing one’s life while fighting to survive is better than to die of hunger” (Pramanik 2024, 99). This is not the environmentalism of the poor as Guha and Gadgil conceived it, a prudent predation exercised by “ecosystem people” embedded in a moral ecology (Guha and Gadgil 1992). It is the calculus of workers. And it is precisely the calculus that Ramachandra Guha warned would be unavailable to an American-style wilderness preservationism imported into the third world, where the poor bear the first costs of environmental degradation and receive the last share of its repair (Guha 1989).

Geyo and Kyaora: The Slow Ruination of Champaburi

“Champaburi, or the Story of a Village” performs a different formal operation. Written in the Poundra register of the Ramnagar area of South 24 Parganas,⁵ it opens with a topography that is simultaneously ecological and caste-cartographic:

A Jola family lives in the eastern quarter of our Sukdupur village. Not quite a “family” actually! An old woman is the only member of the family who is still alive. Her name is Champa Buri, the Old Champa. A big river borders our village on the western side. To the north of our village lies a canal. A jungle straddles both banks of the canal. It is made up mostly of geyo and kyaora trees. (Pramanik 2024, 47)

The specificity of the flora matters. *Excoecaria agallocha* and *Ceriops decandra* are not decorative; they are the mangrove species that occupy the marginal, saline, frequently inundated fringe—the parts of the delta that no one else wants. The Jola family lives at the eastern quarter, the last quarter before the forest. Caste and ecology coincide: the village's spatial order is a salinity gradient, and the most marginalised community occupies the least arable margin. Champa Buri's entire material existence is a foraging radius: she begs a few handfuls of rice, and “then she would gather a few twigs and leaves from the jungle and light a fire” (Pramanik 2024, 47). Fuel is her last commons. Sharma's insistence that Dalit experience of the environment is saturated by the idioms of pollution, impurity and dirt finds here its starkest corollary: for the poorest Dalit woman in Pramanik's corpus, the environment is reduced to combustible waste (Sharma 2017).

The story then unfolds a genealogy of ruination across four lives and three geographies. Champa's father, Fakir Sheikh, is killed by a cobra on the amabasya path returning from the Koraihere haat, because he must walk four hours through forest to reach a market that will buy his timber. Her mother, Ameena, dies begging. Champa elopes with Nagen of the Bagdi colony; Nagen is killed in a Partition riot in Kolkata; Champa is pushed into a red-light district by an acquaintance, contracts a wasting illness, loses her son in a park, and returns to Sukdupur to die. Pramanik narrates this in the same flat register throughout, refusing every available occasion for pathos. The refusal is the point. Nixon's slow violence is dispersed across time and space precisely so that it cannot be narrated as an event; Pramanik's formal solution is to refuse eventhood altogether, to let the accumulation of losses constitute the plot.

The story contains, however, one explicitly historiographic intervention, and it is ecologically significant. Recalling an anti-caste agitation some seventy or eighty years earlier, the narrator records that the Pods “began to claim that they were actually Aryans” and took up the sacred thread, and that the Bagdis made the identical claim. Sindu Bairagi dissents:

Sindu Bairagi would often say—we all used to be Buddhists. True, we have become Hindus now, but we remain where we were in the caste hierarchy. The Hindus despise us. They oppress us. Who knows how and why we became Hindus? (Pramanik 2024, 48)

The claim to Aryan descent is, in the delta's idiom, a claim to the land; it is an attempt to convert autochthonous clearance-labour into inherited entitlement. The counter-claim to Buddhist ancestry is a claim to a pre-caste ecology, a remembered past in which the forest was worked without ritual mediation and without a Brahmin taking a cut. Pramanik, himself a Poundra who has written a history of the Poundra country,⁶ is here doing something more sophisticated than recovering a glorious past; he is demonstrating that caste in the delta is recent, contested, and politically manufactured (Pramanik 2024, 169).

The story's closing lines are the corpus's bleakest and its most formally exact: “She had endured so much sorrow that her heart had turned to stone by now. She had only one entreaty to her Bhagban, to her Allah—‘Take me now, O Bhagban, O Allah!’” (Pramanik 2024, 51). The doubled invocation is retained by the translator for good reason, and it should not be read as syncretic piety. Champa's god has failed to appear in her hour of need, in either of his names. The entreaty is a formal verdict on the village's entire cosmological apparatus—the Sitala pujas, the Dewan Gazi fair, the Amayan Gaan—none of which delivered her. Where “In Dakshin Rai's Land” ends with the forest auditing the Brahmin, “Champaburi” ends with the forest's last tenant waiting for a death that no deity will expedite. Slow violence, in its final phase, is indistinguishable from abandonment.

Marichjhapi: When Conservation Becomes the Weapon

“Homeland” is the corpus's political centre. Structured as an interview between a Bengali journalist and Dr

Biswas, a Namashudra physician now settled in Nagpur, it traces a refugee itinerary that reads as a litany of the postcolonial state's failures: East Bengal, then a village near Guwahati destroyed by the Bongal Kheda movement; then a Belegghata bustee governed by goondas; then Dandakaranya; then the Sundarbans;⁷ then Dandakaranya again. Its refrain—"We want our own homeland, a homeland we can call our own" (Pramanik 2024, 88)—is repeated until it ceases to be a demand and becomes a diagnosis.

The Sundarbans enters this story, uniquely in the corpus, as an *offer*:

A group of people from your Bengal came to us and asked us why we should continue to live in exile in this jungle in this foreign land. Come to West Bengal, they said. We will make all arrangements for you. There is lots of land lying idle in the Sundarbans. You can clear the jungle and settle down there. Believing them, we went in thousands and settled on the island of Marichjhapi. We had land in Dandakaranya, we had houses there. We sold everything off dirt cheap and came back to our homeland. And you know everything that happened after that. There was no place for us there. The police came and fired on us. (Pramanik 2024, 92)

Three things deserve emphasis. First, the mangrove is offered to Dalits as *compensation*—as the residue no one else will take, the "idle" land of a reserve forest. Second, the offer is a re-run of the original clearance bargain of "Bhajahari and His Family": clear the jungle, settle, and hold. The promise made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was remade in 1978, and revoked with the same efficiency. Third, and most striking formally, the massacre is compressed into a single clause. Pramanik gives us no dates, no numbers, no description. The expansiveness of the preceding sentences—the remembered two acres in Assam, the tea gardens "in every direction"—collapses into the terse "The police came and fired on us." This is a deliberate formal inversion of Nixon's distinction between spectacular and slow violence. The spectacular event is withheld precisely because it has been spectacularised elsewhere and erased at home; the slow violence, in Pramanik's telling, is the return journey, the years "in the daily struggle for survival," the fact that "so many died on the way back to Dandakaranya" (Pramanik 2024, 92).

Read alongside Jalais, Mallick and van Schendel, "Homeland" names with unusual precision the mechanism at work. Mallick's archival demonstration that West Bengal's Left Front government invoked the ecological sanctity of a tiger reserve to justify the eviction of "Untouchable refugees" is exactly the transaction Pramanik narrates (Mallick 1999). Jalais's islanders read Marichjhapi as the arrival of the cosmopolitan tiger, a tiger "constructed by the state, conservation NGOs and urbanites" (Jalais 2010). Ghosh's own novel would, a quarter-century later, return to the island and find Nilima Bose's refuge and Fokir's drowned village there (Ghosh 2004). Pramanik's contribution is to supply what none of these quite provides: the interior monologue of the caste that was expelled. Dr Biswas's conclusion is not environmental but territorial—"What I miss is the land, the roots" (Pramanik 2024, 92)—and his demand for "a homeland we can call our own" is a demand that the environment be *shared*, not that it be preserved. This is a Dalit environmentalism, and it is worth stating plainly: it is neither the stewardship ethic of Guha's ecosystem people nor the phenomenological communion of contemporary ecophenomenology. It is a claim to occupancy.

The story also supplies the caste logic of religious conversion as an ecological fact. Dr Biswas recalls that "low-caste Hindus had converted in hordes and become Muslims in the Middle Ages in order to escape Brahminical oppression," and that Jogendra Nath Mandal had argued that Hindus and Muslims "were essentially one at the core" (Pramanik 2024, 90). In the delta's stratigraphy, conversion is a land strategy: it is an attempt to exit a caste hierarchy that governs access to water, temple, tank and field. That Champa Buri in the preceding story invokes Bhagban and Allah in the same breath is not local colour. It is the

sediment of a millennium of such exits, none of which has yet succeeded in escaping the delta's caste ecology.

Eco-Delirium in the Delta: The Madman, the Storm and the Unseen Tiger

What remains is the question of form, and it is here that Eco-Delirium earns its place.⁸ Dutta and Banerjee's diagnostic cluster—narrative overload, fragmentation, paranoia and epistemic uncertainty, affective disturbance, the recurrent staging of representational failure—appears throughout the corpus, but in a register the original formulation, pitched at Pynchon and DeLillo, did not anticipate. In Pramanik these are not postmodern symptoms; they are caste-specific modes of cognition under environmental excess.

Consider Banamali, the madman of "Bhajahari and His Family." He has lost a son to a snakebite that the *ojha* Chhoban Molla could not cure in three days of blowing and chanting, and a daughter to a matchmaker who promised a suitable groom from Kolkata. He now runs the embankment shouting, "Careful! A tiger's on the prowl! Careful!" The village discounts him—"Banamali was a mad man. He ran around every day, crying 'Tiger! Tiger!' There was no point taking him seriously. And yet, Banamali felt afraid" (Pramanik 2024, 36). In Eco-Delirium's terms he embodies the oscillation between paranoia and anti-paranoia that defines the delirious condition: he perpetually sees the tiger; no one else ever does. And then, when Bhola and Champa vanish, the pugmark vindicates him absolutely. The madman is the realist. His madness is not a deviation from the village's epistemology but its most accurate instrument—an instrument broken by precisely the attritional violence the village has learned to discount.

The second feature is the storm, and it recurs with a consistency that suggests structure rather than incident. In "In Dakshin Rai's Land" the north wind stops dead, black clouds mass in the east, and a villager notes that the jungle has gone unnaturally quiet—an observation immediately vindicated (Pramanik 2024, 44). In "Life in the Forest" the predator that halts all labour for a season is named interchangeably "cheetah" and "tigress"—the villagers dispute which it is, and the translation's own gloss notes that *bagh* and *cheetah* are used interchangeably in village speech—so that the narration can conclude, without irony, "It wasn't a tiger, but Death himself" (Pramanik 2024, 98). The labourers' debate about whether to return to the kendu leaves is a debate about the epistemology of risk. In "Surjakanta and His Nimpur Village," a story adjacent to the corpus, a storm on the Matla drowns a fisherman whose widow's biography then structures an entire narrative. The storm in Pramanik is never described for its own sake. It is the moment at which the delta's systemic causality—the thing that cannot be seen, counted or predicted from within a village—becomes momentarily, catastrophically visible, and then vanishes again. This is the Lacanian Real as Dutta and Banerjee deploy it: not a reality denied but "the internal limit of the representative" (Dutta and Banerjee 2026, 6).

The third feature is the most politically consequential, because it names the instrument through which the delta's excess is ordinarily managed: the mask. Jalais documents the Forest Department's distribution of plastic masks to honey-collectors, on the reasoning that tigers attack from behind, and the subsequent official claim that no mask-wearer had ever been killed while only the "too superstitious" were attacked (Jalais 2010). Pramanik gives us the earlier, Brahmanical version of the same device. The mantra sold for 101 rupees by Narahari Ghoshal, and the mantra sold for 51 rupees by Nakul Sardar of Satjalía in "Bhajahari and His Family," are functionally identical to the plastic mask: a cheap prosthetic that transfers the epistemic burden of survival from the state to the labourer, and that can subsequently be used to blame the dead. "A snake wouldn't bite you unless it was specifically written into your fate," Bhajahari's father says (Pramanik 2024, 33). Fatalism, in the delta, is not a worldview. It is a liability clause.

What the corpus therefore offers is not a green pastoral and not an eco-nihilist despair. It is something more difficult and more useful: a realistic fiction of caste-stratified ecology in which the environment is

simultaneously a workplace, a creditor, an archive and an executioner. Pramanik's Dalits are not "prudent predators." They are workers who know the price of their own immunity, who pay it, and who die anyway.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the Sundarbans in Shyamal Kumar Pramanik's Bangla Dalit fiction is not a setting but a caste institution. Three instruments govern it—the Brahmin's mantra, the state's permit, the *mahajan's* price—and each converts ecological risk into caste profit. Three registers of violence operate upon it: the spectacular, which Pramanik withholds; the slow, which he narrates as the texture of an entire life; and an ecological excess that exceeds both and arrives in the realist sentence as a grounded boat, a stopped wind, a pugmark. Read together, the five stories make visible what none of them states outright: that the delta's ecology is its caste order, rendered in brackish water.

The intervention runs in three directions. For Sundarbans studies, the corpus supplies a Dalit corrective to the cosmopolitan tiger, restoring to the tide country the caste histories that anthropology has documented and Anglophone fiction has largely mediated through the *bhadralok*. For Dalit ecologies, it supplies a Bengal archive and a mangrove archive, extending Sharma's eco-casteism and Prasad's Dalit ecologies beyond their peninsular centres of gravity and demonstrating that the delta's commons are as caste-marked as the tank, the well and the cremation ground. For the environmental humanities it suggests two refinements: slow violence, in South Asia, requires caste, without which Nixon's formulation describes a distribution of harm whose pattern goes unnamed; and Eco-Delirium, transposed from the late Cold War Atlantic to the delta, must be modified, since the excess that overwhelms representation here is distributive rather than scalar, and the fantasy that renders it liveable is a priced commodity rather than a postmodern symptom.

Two cautions attend any such reading. The first is translational: every quotation here is from Sayantan Dasgupta's English rendering, unusually attentive to the Poundra cadences of the original, but the Bangla texts remain the final authority, and the argument is offered as a provocation to readers of the Bangla as much as of the translation. The second is that Pramanik's corpus is larger than the five stories examined here, and includes Sundarbans material—"Khentiburir Sansar," "Banamali Daktar," "Kumir," "Suleiman Fakir"—that this article has not been able to accommodate.

Let me close where the corpus itself closes. In "Bhajahari and His Family," after the children are gone, Motibala proposes flight: "Come, let us leave this place behind and go away! What is there in this wretched village for us to stay on here?" Her husband's reply is the most austere sentence in the collection: "The ones who have left will not come back, Motibala. But others will come and take their place" (Pramanik 2024, 37). It is a sentence about labour supply. It is also a sentence about the mangrove, which does not mourn, does not record, and continues to produce honey at half the price it fetches elsewhere. The pugmark in the silt is the archive. Someone, eventually, learns to read it.

Notes

¹. All quotations are from Pramanik (2024), translated by Sayantan Dasgupta; page numbers refer to that edition. The five stories were originally published, respectively, as "Dakshin Raier Deshe" in Khilipaner Meye (1996), "Bhajaharider Ghar Sansar" and "Aranya Jiban" in Rupnarayaner Majhi (1982), "Champaburi O Ekti Geramer Galpo" in Chaturtha Bharatvarsha (2018), and "Homeland" in Nibaran Mondaler Upakhyan (2007).

². Bagdi, Bauri, Pod (Poundra), Kaibarta, Jola, Dom and Namasudra are the communities named across the corpus. Their designation as "Dalit" is the writer's own political choice; Pramanik is explicit in interview that "Dalit" is "a blanket term" within which "there are many castes and sub-castes" (Pramanik 2024, 167).

- ³. Dakshin Rai is the deity held to rule the jungle territory of the Sundarbans, and is said by some to take the form of the tiger; Bonbibi, his rival, is the guardian spirit of the forest, venerated by Hindus and Muslims alike. Pramanik's own gloss on these deities, and on the syncretic culture they anchor, is provided in the collection's notes (Pramanik 2024, 38, 45–46).
- ⁴. "Life in the Forest" is set not in the Sundarbans but in Dandakaranya, where East Bengali refugees were forcibly rehabilitated. It is included because the Sundarbans functions in it as the absent centre—an ancestral archive of loss—and because it shares characters, geographies and narrative logic with "Homeland." The two stories are best read as a diptych.
- ⁵. The Poundra register of "Champaburi" is retained in translation, including "Mochorman" for Mussalman and "Boshek" for Baishakh; Dasgupta explains that these variations convey "the politics of the original text" (Pramanik 2024, 51).
- ⁶. Shyamal Kumar Pramanik is himself a member of the Poundra (Pod) community, born in Neela village in what is now the Ramnagar police-station area of South 24 Parganas, close to the Sundarbans; he has authored two research monographs on Poundra history and on the Scheduled Castes and Adivasis of West Bengal, and he explains in interview that his Sundarbans stories derive from extended stays with relatives in the region (Pramanik 2024, 164–167).
- ⁷. Marichjhapi was an island in the Sundarbans with the status of a legally protected reserve forest. Dalit refugees from East Bengal settled there in 1978–79 and were evicted by police action in 1979, with substantial loss of life; the episode has been the subject of sustained historical controversy, and estimates of the dead vary enormously. See Mallick (1999), van Schendel (2005) and Halder (2019).
- ⁸. Dutta and Banerjee date Eco-Delirium to the late Cold War. My transposition to the Bengal delta claims structural analogy rather than historical identity: the conditions they describe—materially binding, perceptually elusive, systemically causal—obtain in the delta with greater longevity and, I have argued, with a distributive rather than scalar signature.

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