STAGING SURVIVAL: Public Performance and Cosmologies of Climate Change in India's Sundarbans Delta

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I traveled to the Sundarbans of West Bengal, India, for the first time in 2016, hoping to better understand local experiences and perceptions of climate change. As Jason Cons (2018, 269) has observed, the low-lying archipelago of islands is often framed as "ground zero for climate change" because of its vulnerability to sea-level rise, cyclonic storms, and floods. Once there, however, I quickly learned that the category of *climate change* held relatively little resonance locally. The Bengali term, *jolbayu poriborton*, circulated in media and policy discourse, but it did not emerge organically in my conversations. Changing seasonal patterns and extreme weather events were matters of concern, but other social and environmental issues often took immediate precedence. As a result, my research interests evolved in new directions, and I also came to focus on issues like biodiversity conservation, capital-intensive agrarian development, and the privatization and commodification of freshwater.

It was therefore with some surprise that I found myself sitting under a tent with a few hundred people on a January evening in 2019, as we awaited a dramatic performance that explicitly addressed climate change. Bundled against the chill, the audience looked expectantly toward a temporary stage, draped in colorful cloth. The stage was topped with a banner that named the grassroots NGO

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sponsoring the event. As the crowd murmured in anticipation, the voice of a popular teacher from the organization's school boomed from a set of box speakers. The teacher, a stern but kind fifty-year-old man named Sujan-da,[1] offered a prelude to the performance,

> Today, humans have created a "digital" civilization, but due to some people's greed [*lobh*], selfishness, and utter darkness [*churonto andhokar*], our green world is now endangered. We are losing our healthy, beautiful nature [*prakriti*] because of so much pollution. We are losing thousands and thousands of animals. Environmental cycles are changing. The weather is changing. The seasons are changing. If things continue this way, our world will be destroyed.

With this, Sujan-da informed the crowd that the performance was "not only a drama" but also a "protest" (*protibad*). As his voice faded, ominous music began to play, and lights flashed in electric blue. Speakers emitted claps of thunder and sounds of lashing rain. A young woman entered the scene, dressed in a white sari. As she circled the stage in apparent confusion, three sumptuously dressed men emerged from the darkness behind her. She huddled in fear, then fled.

The woman personified winter. A sympathetic figure, she sought to bring her coolness to the earth, but the men—who personified cyclones, droughts, and floods—thwarted her attempts. Later, another antagonist appeared on stage: a wicked king named *Dushun Asur*, meaning "Pollution Demon." In Hindu mythology, demons (*asura*) are forces of chaos and destabilization who ceaselessly battle the gods (Bhattacharyya 2000). Unlike mythological demons, however, *Dushun Asur* had been created by humans and drew vitality from their vices, such as greed. In this way, the drama drew on a Hindu cosmological repertoire to stage moral claims about humanity's relationship with the changing weather.

In the years since, I have come to understand this performance as emblematic of a wider shift that has unfolded in the Indian Sundarbans over about the past decade. During this time, changing weather patterns and extreme events like cyclones and floods have become issues of growing concern. Since 2007, cyclones have caused thousands of deaths and multi-million dollar economic losses in the Indian and Bangladeshi Sundarbans (Ghosh and Mistri 2023). Beyond this, a growing number of my predominantly Hindu interlocutors have begun to discuss changing weather patterns through reference to divine and demonic entities, the doctrine of karma, and the potential destruction of the world. In these

ways, they increasingly articulate changing weather patterns and extreme events as moral issues, often in a Hindu cosmological register.

In this article, I explore the processes through which previously salient distinctions between scientific and policy framings of anthropogenic climate change and the Sundarbans' nonsecular cosmologies have eroded. Taking a cue from the drama introduced above, I analyze these processes through the lens of performance, which I approach as "a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission" that allows participants to creatively intervene in the world (Taylor 2003, 15). I argue that performance is a key modality through which ecological cosmologies have been constituted in the Sundarbans historically and through which they are transforming today. I understand this as an effect of performance's world-making qualities, that is, how performances create more-than-human presence, evoke subjunctive worlds, and transmit moral visions about how to inhabit such worlds. In developing these claims, I consider two genres of public performance: first, ritualized performances known as *jatra*, which enact stories about vernacular Bengali deities in multispecies ecologies; and second, local NGO performances that address anthropogenic climate change and offer potential solutions. I show how boundaries between these performative genres have begun to erode; in the process, nascent cosmologies of climate change have emerged, stimulating new reflections and debates about human moral agency and responsibility. I therefore suggest that public performances constitute important "worldmaking practices" (Crate and Nuttall 2024) in climate-changed contexts, and that anthropologists should attend closely to such locally situated enactments.

This argument is drawn primarily from fieldwork I conducted between 2018 and 2019 on a riverine island called Basanti. Just over a century ago, the island formed part of the Sundarbans mangrove forest. In the late nineteenth century, the British colonial state leased the island out in lots, and leaseholders recruited laborers to clear the forest, build embankments, and begin farming (Hunter 1875). In the following century, migrants and refugees from different parts of eastern India and present-day Bangladesh settled on the island, with large numbers of refugees arriving as a result of Partition in 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Together, these groups transformed the island into habitable agrarian terrain.

For most of my fieldwork, I was based in a multiethnic, multi-faith village that I refer to as Jomidarpur. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Adivasi ("Tribal") communities lived there together as neighbors and sometimes as kin. Most of my interlocutors (about 85%) identified as Hindu; of these, the majority were members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the Indian

government's designation for Dalit (ex-"untouchable") communities.[2] During my fieldwork, farmers, fishers, NGO workers, and other residents articulated varied cosmological visions relating to the environment and weather, often staged as public performances.

COSMOLOGICAL WORLD-MAKING THROUGH PERFORMANCE

In recent years, anthropologists have engaged human-nonhuman entanglements and *naturecultures* (Haraway 2003) from a range of post-humanist and neo-materialist perspectives. Within this rich body of literature, relatively little attention has been paid to the cosmological and immaterial dimensions of more-than-human worlds. Indeed, in her evocative ethnography *River Life and the Upspring of Nature* (2023), Naveeda Khan observes that most contemporary anthropologists proceed from a view of nature as material, substantive, and embodied. Tracing inhabitations of shifting riverine islands known as *chars* in Bangladesh, she urges anthropologists to expand their focus beyond material environments. Approaching nonhuman nature as a generative force that operates in an ideational sense, she demonstrates how it manifests in human thought and subjectivity, as well as in cosmology and myth.

Throughout South Asia, the generativity of nonhuman nature can also be glimpsed through everyday relationships with the "more-than-secular" entities that populate multispecies ecologies (Fernando 2022). In the predominantly Hindu milieu of Jomidarpur, for example, most of my interlocutors shared a pantheistic or animistic orientation to the world, meaning that they attributed sentience or the quality of being "animated" to animals, plants, land, water, and other forces of nature (Swancutt 2023a). Beyond this, many Hindus, Muslims, and Christians understood the land- and waterscape as enlivened by divine and spiritual beings, whether gods and goddesses, Sufi Muslim saints known as *pirs*, or ghosts and spirits.

I approach these ways of knowing and relating to the world as ecological cosmologies. Cosmologies, as Stanley Tambiah (1985, 3) proposes, describe the universe "in terms of space, time, matter, and motion" and "peopl[e] it with gods, humans, animals, spirits, demons, and the like." I understand ecological cosmologies as cosmological visions that affirm the enmeshed and interdependent existence of human, natural, and supernatural beings. In the Sundarbans, for example, the Hindu goddess Ganga assumes embodied form in rivers, and animals like tigers and snakes can materialize spiritual power. As this indicates, ecological cosmologies are not abstract beliefs; they are experiential realities enacted through lived relationships. Understanding ecological cosmologies therefore requires close attention to how human-nonhuman intimacies emerge and transform over time.

Recent ethnographic work suggests that, much like human social ties, such "networks of relationships" (Orsi 2005) are cultivated over time through specific practices (Williamson Fa 2022). Building on these insights, I suggest that anthropological approaches to performance provide a promising but largely unexplored framework for approaching ecological cosmologies and understanding processes of cosmological world-making. Performance, or social action that is "framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed" (Schechner 2013, 2), has a unique capacity to evoke more-than-human presence, create subjunctive worlds, and transmit moral visions about how to live and act. Beyond this, performance studies provides an especially useful lens for considering cosmological transformation, since performances possess the quality of emergence (Korom 2013, 2–3), meaning they are dynamically shaped by ongoing interactions between performers, audiences, and the wider contexts in which they are situated.

A rich body of scholarship on ritualized performance has demonstrated how performers and audiences co-create encounters that extend "beyond the human horizon" (Mittermaier 2021), such as divine embodiment, trance, or spirit possession. Across Hindu contexts in India, ritualized performances allow deities and spirits to be made present in the world and experienced in the lives of their devotees (Jassal 2024). The creation of such more-than-human presence is facilitated by techniques like music, song, acting, and dance, which frame performances and separate them from ordinary space and time (Seligman et al. 2008, 62).

As Edward Schieffelin (1998, 194) has noted, the successful creation of presence can transform audiences' states of mind, moods, dispositions, and social relations. Indeed, anthropologists have long argued that ritualized performances hold distinctly transformative potential (Turner 1995). This is because of how performances create subjunctive, or "as if," universes within performative frames (Seligman et al. 2008, 7). Such subjunctive worlds exist alongside and sometimes in tension with everyday experiences, and they are often normative, since they articulate visions of what *might* be and what ought to be, rather than what currently exists (Taneja 2018, 63). In some cases, the disjuncture between the subjunctive, as-if space of a dramatic or ritual performance and the realities outside the frame can serve as a basis for transformation (Puett 2014). For example, Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh (2016, 35–36) have argued that rituals provide a kind of training ground, where one can inhabit different roles and cultivate dispositions and habits to take into other situations. Such "as-if rituals" create temporary alternative realities that may allow participants to return to their ordinary lives subtly transformed (Puett and Gross-Loh 2016, 30).

For these reasons, performance is often used as a mode of moral pedagogy. Performance can be put to such purposes because it serves as a "nonarchival system of transfer" (Taylor 2003, xvii) that transmits knowledge through orality, embodied gestures, movement, dance, and song (Taylor 2003, 20). Below, I explore such processes through the case of *jatra*, a form of ritualized performance that enacts the presence of vernacular Bengali deities in multispecies ecologies. Specifically, I show how such embodied transmission rests on participants' emotional involvement and performance's ability to stimulate affects like awe, wonder, and fear.

ECOLOGICAL COSMOLOGIES IN *JATRA* PERFORMANCES

Public ritualized performances proved ubiquitous during my time in Jomidarpur, and the most popular genre was *jatra*, a form of open-air theater with deep roots in rural Bengal as entertainment and a medium for communication (J. Sen 2019, 29). *Jatra* performances, also known as *pala gaan*, took place in the cool and dry winter months, when fallow paddy fields could be used as temporary staging grounds. In Jomidarpur, *jatra* were performed by itinerant, semi-professional troupes hired from other villages and accompanied by fairs, or *mela*, where vendors sold snacks, balloons, toys, and costume jewelry from brightly painted stalls. I began attending *jatra* at the urging of elderly women with a passion for the performances, and I learned that *jatra* was popular among members of all local socio-religious groups. Even so, the performances I observed were attached to specific Hindu ritual occasions, including multiday *puja* (worship) ceremonies for vernacular goddesses like the snake goddess Manasa and the disease goddess Shitala.

Two of the most important figures in local *jatra* performances were Bonbibi and Dokkhin Ray. Bonbibi is the maternal superpower of the Sundarbans mangroves, venerated both as a Hindu goddess and a female Sufi Islamic saint, or *pirani*, while Dokkhin Ray is a shapeshifting deity and demon who can assume a human form and the form of a tiger (Basu 1978; Das 2022; Uddin 2011). As Megnaa Mehtta (2022, 597) has argued, the "animistic tendencies" of Sundarbans islanders involve adherence to moral codes established by Bonbibi. According to the *jongoler niyam*, or "laws of the jungle," for example, fishers, woodcutters, and honey collectors should not take more from the forest than they need to survive (see also A. Sen 2024). If humans give into greed (*lobh*) and disrupt the balance between humans and nonhumans, they are said to risk a retributive tiger attack (Jalais 2010, 134).

Narratives about Bonbibi and Dokkhin Ray are recorded in the *Bonbibi jahura nama* (*The Book Spreading the Glory of Bonbibi*), which was first published in the

1870s and has circulated in print since (Stewart 2023, 259). My interlocutors, however, did not primarily encounter such narratives by reading texts privately; rather, as in many other parts of rural India, they came into contact with these texts and figures through oral and visual performances (Flueckiger 2015, 46–72), including *jatra* and associated rituals.

The conjoining of *jatra* with ritual worship has a long history. The genre has origins in the *mangal-kavya* (literally, "auspicious poems") tradition (Sarkar 1975, 87), a body of oral texts celebrating the power of Bengali deities that flourished between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. In the sixteenth century, the genre assumed a more structured form through its adoption by early Hindu Vaishnava sects, who drew on performance in their proselytization efforts (Sarkar 1975, 87). In contemporary contexts, *jatra* continues to play a didactic role, leading some scholars to liken the genre to European morality plays (Sarkar 1975, 88). *Jatra* and related genres, such as *gambhira*, have also been used to generate political consciousness, such as during the nationalist struggle against the British (De 2021).

In Jomidarpur, *jatra* performances often dealt with potentially hazardous forces of nonhuman nature, including tigers, snakes, and disease. These nonhuman entities assumed embodied form as performers worked to create convincing onstage realities and enact a sense of presence that would linger after the performance ended, influencing how people encountered and responded to such forces in their everyday lives. In the *jatra* performances I observed, this was accomplished through the cultivation of certain affective states, especially sentiments of fear (*bhoy*). In performances of the *Bonbibi jahura nama*'s second episode, *Dukher jatra*, the arrival of the tiger deity-demon Dokkhin Ray served as a narrative climax and was accompanied by flashing lights, loud electronic screeches, and the din of clashing symbols. As he appeared, the audience observed the plight of a young boy named Dukhe, who ran around the stage in a panicked frenzy. Dukhe's greedy uncle Dhona had offered him to the tiger in exchange for the riches of the forest. In this scene, the actor used exaggerated gestures and wailed in a high-pitched, plaintive voice to convey his character's distress, eventually collapsing on the stage.

Fear is regarded as dangerous in the Sundarbans, and people are sometimes said to "catch" fear as if it were contagious, usually after interacting with wild animals like snakes and tigers. Even if one survives, some people are said to be consumed by fear later, sometimes dying from a sickness or suicide months afterward (Jalais 2019). In a context in which fear can prove deadly, it is noteworthy that *jatra* consciously stoke fear. Importantly, however, these performances



Figure 1. A scene from Dukher Jatra. The climax occurs when Dukhe calls on Bonbibi for deliverance. Bonbibi and her twin brother Shah Jongoli save him from Dokkhin Ray. Photo by Calynn Dowler, February 2019.

introduce fear to resolve it. In the subjunctive realities created by *jatra* performances, sympathetic human characters like Dukhe are delivered from danger because they have sincere faith (*bishash*) in the divine. In this way, *jatra* performances evoke cosmological worlds in which humans can successfully navigate relationships with potentially dangerous natural forces and other-than-human beings through their faith and adherence to certain moral guidelines.

My interlocutors no longer ventured to the Sundarbans Reserve Forest to work, largely because of restrictions put in place for biodiversity conservation. Strikingly, however, Bonbibi and Dokkhin Ray remained important in devotional life, especially for Hindus.[3] Both figures remained important for vow-making, healing, and fertility. Bonbibi was associated with certain bodies of water, especially those that flowed toward the mangroves. Fishers worshipped Bonbibi before casting their nets in these creeks, explaining that they had adapted forest rituals to the *abad*, that is, the cultivated spaces of the village. There, Bonbibi continued to appear frequently in visions and dreams. Five years before I began my research, she appeared to a young Hindu man in a dream and told him to build a shrine next to a pond, which soon came to be recognized as an "awakened" (*jagroto*) place. Bonbibi was said to fulfill the requests of all who prayed and immersed themselves in the water.

These examples illustrate two points. First, while the Sundarbans' ecological cosmologies emerged from material engagements with the mangrove forest, relationships with Bonbibi and Dokkhin Ray have persisted even without these

tangible connections. In the space of the village, people continued to live with forest beings, whom they mostly encountered through *jatra* and other ritualized performances.[4] This reality affirms that performances serve as "vital acts of transfer" (Taylor 2003, 2) which nurture and sustain more-than-human relations over time. At the same time, such examples reveal that the ecological cosmologies of the Sundarbans by no means remain static; they are dynamic and mobile formations. As Katherine Swancutt (2023b) has demonstrated in her recent work on cosmologies and creativity, cosmological visions are shaped by acts of creativity that shift over time. The Sundarbans offers a compelling vantage point from which to consider such cosmological creativity, especially since the area is a paradigmatic "contact zone" (Pratt 1991) in which different communities, knowledge systems, and cosmological traditions have met and come into productive tension. As I explore in the following sections, these encounters are presently unfolding in a context of rapid environmental change.

CLIMATE CHANGE: An Absent Presence in the Indian Sundarbans

A 2009 report published by the Government of West Bengal identified Basanti as the most climate-vulnerable administrative block in the Indian Sundarbans (Government of West Bengal 2009, 227). Considering this, I became interested in how climate change might be reconfiguring human-nonhuman relationships, and what role the delta's ecological cosmologies play in these processes. Accordingly, I began to ask people about changing seasonal patterns and weather, irregular rains, and the damage caused by cyclones and floods. I made notes of what I interpreted as experiences of "climate change": strained glances to the sky when rain was overdue; anguish at crops rotting in waterlogged fields; storm evacuations; and anxious, sleepless nights during cyclone Fani in 2019. Despite hundreds of conversations, however, I became wary of the label *climate change* because it remained almost totally absent as an emic frame of reference. A few schoolteachers and NGO workers had read about anthropogenic climate change in the newspaper or heard about it on the radio; they found the notion plausible and expressed concern. More often, however, the issue did not come up at all. Islanders spoke at length about changing seasons, problems with infrastructure and embankments, disaster politics, and the often uneven distribution of aid. However, when I asked *why* the weather might be changing or why storms and floods proved so common, many responded with statements like *ki jani*, meaning, "What do I know?" or otherwise demurred.

In 2018, I was staying with a Poundra Khoytro Hindu family,[5] and I became close with the matriarch, Mashima (maternal aunt). Mashima was an outspoken woman of sixty-three years, authoritative in her family and widely respected in the neighborhood. Having spent her entire life as a farmer, she was also an astute observer of meteorological phenomena, and I was often impressed by her ability to predict rain from a mere glance at the clouds. She knew that temperatures and precipitation patterns were changing and mentioned these changes while we tended crops or weeded the garden. One afternoon as we sat on the veranda, I asked her opinion about the reason behind such changes. She replied, "I can't say. Can I explain why winter is getting shorter? You [*tomra*; plural, i.e., researchers] can explain all that, we can't. If you do research, you can say why. It has gotten warmer, I know that much, and if it gets colder again, I can tell you that it's colder. Outside of that, I can't tell you why." Mashima had an opinion on most things, so her reluctance surprised me. However, as Nayanika Mathur (2015) has noted, climate-change discourse in India often unfolds in an expert, elite register, much as it does in most of the world. The contrast that Mashima drew between us underscored this, and I sensed that she did not feel authorized to speak on the reasons for such changes because of their association with a world of "research" distant from her own experience.

When it came to other hallmarks of climate change, such as cyclones and floods, there was little discussion of change at all. This makes sense, since river deltas are characterized by hydrological volatility (Krause 2022). The Sundarbans islands have been impacted by recurring disasters like storms, floods, and storm surges for millennia (Harms 2019, 77), as well as by gradual processes like land erosion experienced as "a frequent, mundane, and everyday phenomenon" (Mukhopadhyay 2016, 13). For islanders, storms and floods therefore constituted familiar features of a volatile waterscape.

I gained some sense of this when I naively asked an elderly man from the Namasudra community if he'd experienced many storms, and whether they were getting worse.[6] Laughing, he listed the years and names of storms he'd survived and replied, "here, we live in the midst of storms!" He reminded me that the area, Jharkhali, took its name from *jhar*, the word for "storm." Like others, he centered his reflections on the many storms he had "eaten" (*jhar khaowa*) in his life. When used in this way, "eating" expresses a sense of processing, withstanding, or enduring something unpleasant. Having arrived in West Bengal as a Partition refugee from East Bengal in 1947, he had weathered many literal and figurative storms. As the Potawatomi scholar and environmental justice activist

Kyle Whyte (2017) has argued, climate change does not represent an unprecedented catastrophe for many Indigenous and colonized peoples, who have experienced centuries of violence, dispossession, and displacement. In the Sundarbans, storms were said to cause hardship (*koshto*), but people did not necessarily experience such challenges as a novel rupture.

Even though "climate-change" discourse remained largely absent in this setting, anthropologists have shown that alterative frameworks of causality and responsibility for changing weather patterns or disasters sometimes emerge. In Michael Schnegg's (2021, 267) account of ontologies of drought in Namibia, for example, pastoralists attributed blame to social and political dynamics, such as neoliberalism, individualization, and the failure of the postcolonial state. Reflecting on similar examples, the geographer Mike Hulme (2018, 2016) has argued that people in many times and places have tied their weather and climate to the practices of morally accountable human actors, including through the attribution of "supernatural causation" such as divine punishment (Hulme 2016, 41).

During my initial research, however, no one appeared to entertain the notion that their communities were receiving punishment for wrongdoing. While people of all faiths called on divine and spiritual entities for protection, they usually attributed disasters to the vagaries of nature (*prakriti*), the nebulous forces of destiny (*bhagya*), or the general difficulties of living in the *Kali Yuga*.[7] Sometimes they indicated that disasters exceeded even the power of the gods. I recognized this while speaking with a fisherman named Sunil, who lived along the Bidyadhari River. Sunil was a devotee of the river goddess Ganga Devi, whom he affectionately called Ma, or "Mother." He organized his neighborhood's Ganga *puja* and credited the goddess for saving him from a storm that sunk his fishing boat. He was nevertheless reluctant to attribute disasters to the goddess. One day when I asked him about the connection, he posed his own questions, "What can you do if there's a flood? What can I do? And what can Ma do?" While he would certainly call on Ma Ganga for help, there was no certainty that the "fickle" goddess (S. Sen 2019, 70) would respond the way he wanted. Ganga's "play" (*khela*) was at once creative and destructive, just like the waters that washed sediment from one riverbank and built up another.

My early research reveals a disconnect between experiences of environmental volatility in the Sundarbans and wider discourses about anthropogenic climate change. Unlike studies from other Hindu contexts in India (Haberman 2021a), I also did not find that people understood disasters as punishments sent by the gods. Instead, anthropogenic climate change figured as an absent presence: sensed but not explicitly articulated.

DYSTOPIAN SCRIPTS: Climate Change through Performance

A few years after these conversations, the situation had changed, and a growing number of people began linking changing weather and water-related disasters like cyclones to human activity. In some cases, they framed the issue through reference to nonsecular cosmologies. While existing research on religion and climate change attributes this phenomenon to how climate change is interpreted *through* local systems of knowledge (Haberman 2021b, 8), this explanation does not fully account for the changes I have observed. My research instead indicates that the effects of climate change are not only interpreted through existing ecological cosmologies; it also shows that the current "epoch of planetary unraveling" (Chao 2023, 181) is generating new ways of knowing and being in the world.

To better understand these processes, I turn again to performance, which establishes a context for creative negotiations with change. This becomes evident when considering the NGO mentioned in the introduction, which originated as a tutoring center and later expanded to include a school and agriculture and aquaculture training programs. The NGO constituted a hub of performances, which served as a form of "civil ritual" (Korom 2011) aimed at transforming consciousness and practice. Through the aspirational cultivation of *bhadralok* values,[8] the NGO hoped to empower villagers to participate in development (*bikash*), which they understood to have socioeconomic and spiritual dimensions. Accordingly, the NGO enacted organic agriculture methods for audiences of farmers at a model farm. They hosted speeches and trainings about environmental issues, often with the ritualized gift-giving of ribbons and flowers to participants. They sponsored frequent performances at their school, including art shows, poetry recitations, and dance, theater, and musical shows. They also hosted Hindu ritual occasions throughout the year, including *puja* for Sanskritic goddesses like the warrior goddess Durga and the goddess of education, Saraswati.

Of everyone I met in the Sundarbans, the NGO's energetic leader, Prasenjit-da, expressed the most concern about climate change. Born into a family of smallholder farmers in 1970, he had joined a youth development league before pursuing higher studies in Kolkata. Later, he returned to the village, where he worked as a high school teacher and helped to found the NGO at the turn of the millennium. Through this work, Prasenjit-da engaged in regular discussions with urban and international partners, and he had come to see climate change as "a question of survival." Accordingly, he sometimes felt dispirited by the attitudes of family and friends. As he put it, "they don't want to know about it, don't want to understand it, don't want to listen. . . . And it's so difficult to break through

to change their minds." Like other NGOs in the region, the organization began launching programs targeted on climate awareness (*sochetonota*). Although I was not formally affiliated with the organization, I rented a room there, which provided insight into these climate-related performances.

In his work on cotton farming in rural Telangana, Andrew Flachs (2019, 55) has adopted a performance lens, arguing that farmers draw on shared "scripts," or shared sets of phrases or ideas, as they justify their work and decisions to themselves, officials, families, neighbors, and other audiences. At the NGO, human agency and "self-reliance" (*swa-nirbhor*) were key elements of a shared script employed by staff who sought to convince villagers that climate change was anthropogenic in origin and that they should respond. These scripts did not originate at the NGO but often arrived via connections with the mainland and urban partners, who tended to frame climate-change adaptation as Sundarbans islanders' responsibility. As the leader of a regional policy organization in Kolkata told me in 2018, "They know they have a problem at hand, and they are not doing anything to resolve that problem, as if it is someone else's responsibility. So to me that's a fatalistic attitude. . . . . Just because you are poor doesn't mean you can do nothing about yourself. . . . I mean, you have to get out of it. And you also have to do something to improve your lot."

The policymaker envisioned a "managed retreat" from the delta as one adaptation solution. Regional policymakers have justified similar proposals through quantitative cost-benefit analyses of the ecosystem services that would be made available if currently inhabited islands were reforested for carbon sequestration, fisheries, and ecotourism (N. Ghosh et al. 2016, 14). Global policy bodies, such as the World Bank, have put forward similar proposals for out-migration, which would amount to the depopulation of many currently inhabited islands, including Basanti (Sánchez-Triana et al. 2014; Sánchez-Triana, Ortolano, and Paul 2018). To catalyze this ostensibly voluntary process, the World Bank has suggested cuts to social programs like rations and agricultural subsidies (Sánchez-Triana et al. 2014, 31), casting such supports as "perverse incentives" that keep people in "a context fraught with hazards."

Evaluating these proposals, anthropologists have argued that the Bengal delta is increasingly governed "*as* and *in anticipation* of a world of dystopian climate crisis" (Cons 2018, 267). Further, climate governance of this sort rests on a logic of "anticipatory ruination," in which future dystopian scenarios become "the fulcrum for reproducing existing unequal power relations and enacting ruination in the present" (Paprocki 2022, 1402). For example, ethnographic

research shows that climate change "solutions" like brackish aquaculture often deepen vulnerability (Dewan 2021).

In this context, local NGOs were complexly positioned between ideas and policies emanating from the mainland, on the one hand, and the concerns and desires of their members, on the other. In my conversations, it became clear that villagers did not understand the island as an uninhabitable space of crisis and misery. The island was their home—a complicated and sometimes contradictory place where they built lives that mattered while dreaming of better futures. Although migrant remittances undeniably proved attractive, most people saw migration as a problem rather than a solution and expressed a desire to find work locally. The NGO also explicitly framed its work as an attempt to sustain its communities *in* the Sundarbans.

Even so, in their efforts to convey the seriousness of climate change to rural audiences, the organization sometimes reproduced dystopian scripts. In their trainings, they showed images of natural disasters and cited frightening predictions. Visions of a submerged future were sometimes enacted, as I observed one day when the staff introduced a group of thirty farmers to a donor-funded "floating garden" project. Staff had prepared a PowerPoint presentation, but the electricity cut out immediately, so they continued in a dim room. "Why floating gardens?" asked the program leader, Gopal-da. A mild-mannered farmer from a nearby island, Gopal-da was passionate about organic farming. Climate adaptation was new for him, but he was convinced of its importance. As he told the farmers, they would have to cope with climate change, one way or another. "If we want to survive, where will we get green vegetables?" he asked.

His presentation followed a typical developmental script: having identified a problem, he introduced a household-level solution, proposing the creation of vegetable gardens on rafts so that families could access nutritious food during floods. The performance, however, was not fully successful; the farmers seemed less than convinced. "How will we grow vegetables if everything is salty?" they asked. "Salty soil, salty water, what vegetables will grow?" one farmer mumbled. Gopal-da tried to convince the group by invoking the success of floating gardens in neighboring Bangladesh. Then, his tone became urgent, and he bluntly told the farmers that the Sundarbans would likely "drown" (*dube jabe*) within decades. He told them about a report that said that everyone might have to leave their homes by 2030. "We have to survive," he insisted, "we have to fight!" (*lorai korte hobe*).

STAGING SURVIVAL: "Secular" Cosmologies of Climate Change

Reflecting on these performances, I have come to understand dystopian climate scripts as marking a "moral breakdown" (Zigon 2007, 133) that interrupts accepted development horizons and leads Sundarbans islanders to consciously reflect on how to respond to climate change. In 2019, the NGO turned to another kind of performance to try to transmit new ways of thinking about and acting in relation to the volatile weather, namely, the climate-change drama introduced at the beginning of this article. The drama emerged out of Prasenjit-da's friendship with Aditya, a journalist and poet from Kolkata. Although born into a Brahmin family, Aditya had renounced caste and pursued social activism. He had written the script a few years earlier, then adapted it to the village setting.

The resulting performance was referred to as a *natok*, a metropolitan form of stage-based theater that signifies a "cultured, progressive and educated status" (Hoek 2012, 32). In contrast to *jatra*, which proffers religious themes and is explicitly devotional, the *nauṭaṅkī* genre is usually classified as "secular" theater (Hansen 1992, 1). In West Bengal, the genre is also influenced by the socially progressive theater traditions of Kolkata.[9] Even so, concessions had to be made in the village, lending the performance a *jatra*-like quality, both from the suspension of microphones over the stage and from the inclusion of cosmological themes. Ultimately, the drama made for a hybrid affair, which seemed appropriate given its inclusion in a week-long festival organized by the NGO, the theme of which was "Science and Folk Culture" (*bigan o lokosanskriti*). The drama was the highlight of the festival, both because of the novelty of the urban playwright and because the performers were local children and NGO staff and teachers. On the opening evening, a few hundred people gathered, emitting a hum of conversation that continued throughout the performance and rose to occasional peals of laughter at the antics of certain beloved teachers.

The drama centered on a family of six siblings, each of whom personified one of Bengal's two-month seasons. The family was in a state of crisis because they could not travel to earth at the usual time, and *Hemanta*, the late autumn season, was sick and dying. As the plot unfolded, the seasons' antagonist—the pollution demon *Dushun Asur*—played a central role. A prototypical villain, he had a handlebar moustache, maniacal laugh, and lust for destruction. His six companions personified the vices of classical Hindu thought: desire, anger, greed, attachment, arrogance, and envy. Eventually, the seasons called a doctor to diagnose their ailing brother, and the doctor explained that the problem was not in fact the pollution demon. Rather, humans had created and strengthened the demon through their actions. The drama underscored this in several scenes in which the pollution demon became visibly delighted by deforestation and inter-religious conflict.



Figure 2. Dushun Asur, the Pollution Demon.
Photo by Calynn Dowler, January 2019.

The drama developed the idea that if humans could conquer their vices and cultivate ethical dispositions, the pollution demon would lose his frightening power. The ultimate solution to the problem of the pollution demon, however, lay in collective action. At the end of the performance, the spring season, *Basanta*, played by Prasenjit-da, was tasked with traveling to earth to "awaken human consciousness" (*manusher chetona jagroto kora*) by convincing people to unite in an *andolon*, or mass movement. The term *andolon* is resonant West Bengal because of a long history of social movements, left-wing politics, and peasant radicalism. At the conclusion of the play, *Basanta* waved goodbye to the other seasons as the song "Esho mukto koro" ("Come, Liberate") played over the speakers. Composed by India People's Theater Association member Jyotirindra Moitra, the progressive anthem calls for the destruction and tearing apart of the bonds of the old world and the making of the new, in which the oppressed will be liberated and workers will attain unity and equality. As the song faded, a teacher named Amit-da led children off the stage and into the audience, effectively breaking the fourth wall. The children marched forward, holding placards with environmental slogans aloft as Amit-da repeatedly called out, "Plant trees!" and "Down with pollution!" After the march concluded, Prasenjit-da returned to the stage to complete the task assigned to his fictional character: in a speech, he implored the audience to take anthropogenic climate change seriously.

Although the *natok* was ostensibly a secular performance, it expressed certain continuities with performance genres like *jatra*. The drama relied on anthropomorphism, the attribution of human characteristics and emotions to other-than-human beings, to establish an affinity between humans and nonhuman nature (Haberman 2013, 23). By portraying the seasons as a family plagued by illness, the drama staged a subjunctive reality that proved relatable for many, allowing for the negotiation of sentiments of fear and loss that characterized the moment but were seldom explicitly voiced. Moreover, by suggesting concrete solutions, the drama sought to transform negative affects like fear into environmental actions like planting trees and political mobilization.

In contrast to the human fragility and humility that often characterizes *jatra*, however, human agency took on a powerful, monstrous shape in the climate-change drama. This was evident in the pollution demon, who recalled demonic figures from *jatra*, such as the fever demon character Jwarasur in *Shitala jatra*. Although the pollution demon was meant to be purely metaphorical, the appearance of a demon in the supposedly secular *natok* reveals the extent to which the performance drew on and reworked a Hindu cosmological repertoire. Indeed, the drama took *dharma*—a term usually translated as law, religion, or ethics—as a central concern. In one scene, enacted by children, a group of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and Jains engaged in communal conflict, strengthening the demon. Describing such conflicts as "polluted" (*dushito*) forms of dharma, the seasons introduced the concept of *ashol*, or "true" dharma. Later, when a Hindu and a Muslim entered the stage with weapons in their hands, a third child stepped in and performed true dharma, bringing about peace. Accordingly, the climate-change drama is difficult to classify according to common binaries of the secular and religious or modern and nonmodern, instead recalling other "vernacular patches of practice that mix and juxtapose many ontological alternatives" through performance (Tsai et al. 2016).

Following this debut, the cast spent several weeks performing at schools and community events across the island. The drama was well received and seemed to buttress the staff's morale, providing an outlet for their widely held conviction that human greed (*lobh*) was the root cause of social and environmental problems. As one staff member put it, "We will have enough if we live according to our needs [*proyojon*], but we cannot all live according to our desires [*chahida*]." In this way, the drama amplified and reinforced existing moral discourses about need and greed in the delta (Mehtta 2021). Several parents and grandparents expressed pride at their children's involvement, mostly as dancers

during musical interludes set to Rabindranath Tagore songs about the seasons. They also embraced the moral themes; as one man affirmed, "it is good to instill these values [*mulobodh*] during childhood."

EMERGENT COSMOLOGIES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

My long-term fieldwork concluded in 2019, though I maintained contact virtually after returning to the United States. In recent years, the processes outlined above have continued to gain momentum. This became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of three highly destructive cyclones: Bulbul in 2019, Amphan in 2020, and Yaas in 2021. After cyclone Yaas, I called my friend Alok-kaku, a retired schoolteacher and social activist, on WhatsApp. Over a crackling line, he relayed news of broken embankments and floods. His voice was heavy; a friend had recently died from COVID-19. He blamed the cyclone and the coronavirus on "people" (*lok*), specifically humanity's enormous impact (*boro aghat*) on nature (*prakriti*), along with riots (*danga*), violence (*hingsrota*), and power grabs (*khomota neowa*). "It's because people always want more, more, more . . . ," he told me, trailing off. I had never heard him frame cyclones in this way before.

My former research assistant, a young woman named Rinku, had meanwhile been forced to suspend her studies because of the pandemic, and she was living at her family's homestead in Jomidarpur. I asked Rinku whether she would be interested in helping me research this topic, and she agreed. In 2021, she conducted interviews with family members and neighbors, all of whom were Poundra Khoytro Hindu women. Like Alok-kaku's laments, the women's discussions of disaster implicated human beings, albeit in a different register. The women explicitly counterposed ideas about human responsibility for disaster with familiar Hindu concepts, such as the doctrine of karma. At its core, *karma* means "action," "deed," or "work" (Lipner 2018), but it is mostly used to refer to acts or actions with moral consequences. Scholarship on karma typically focuses on the individual and theories of rebirth, according to which one's deeds in the past may determine one's position and fortunes in the present. In contrast, in the women's narratives, negative karma figured as an effect of aggregated human activity, linked to the agencies of the gods. Rinku's grandmother Jamuna, about eighty years old at the time, shared the following:

> When God [*Bhagawan*, here referring to Lord Krishna] cannot protect the world anymore, when people become involved in unrighteous behavior and

> injustice in various ways, then God cannot bear the weight of it. And at that time, the earth shakes. God suffers. That is why all these natural disasters like Amphan and Bulbul are happening. This is God giving people a warning: that you should be careful, that you should turn away from the path of injustice, that you should love the divine, and then you will be protected. And if not, then all these natural disasters will happen. Sometimes the river will flood, sometimes all these storms like Amphan and Bulbul will come and try to destroy the world. . . . This is all the fruit of people's actions [*karma*]. God is sending these storms because of people's actions.

A middle-aged woman named Parboti further explained, "There are so many disasters happening in the world, people are becoming so cruel, people [*manush*] are oppressing people. The world cannot tolerate human oppression. People are doing ignorant and foolish things because of jealousy and anger . . . the amount of sin [*papa*] is increasing, [that's why] all these disasters are happening."

Such statements echo accounts of "double agency," in which negative human contributions like immoral behavior are framed in relation to a second, divine contribution (Haberman 2021b, 10). However, while some anthropologists have indicated that climate-impacted communities blame themselves for the consequences of climate change (Rudiak-Gould 2014), these women in the Sundarbans did not. Instead, their comments show that while they have largely come to accept the link between weather volatility and human activity, they do not necessarily embrace the idea that their communities are primarily responsible for mounting a response, which is how policymakers often framed the issue. Rather, they assigned blame with generalized terms for "people," like *lok* and *manush*.

Rinku was especially insistent that Sundarbans islanders were not responsible for the disasters they were experiencing. As she told me,

> There is a proverb here, "The king's sin ruins the kingdom" [*rajar pape rajya noshto*]. It means that everyone here thinks that among so many people, not everyone sins, and there are many good people. But when there is a flood, everyone suffers. Why does this happen? That is why that proverb is used. It means that if the king does something wrong, then all the people in that kingdom suffer.

With this, she emphasized the culpability of political leaders, whose responses to disasters frequently face critique in the region (see also Mukhopadhyay 2016).

Beyond a political critique, however, the proverb that Rinku shared echoes Hindu ideas about divine kingship, and the role of kings as upholders of worldly and cosmic order (Richards 1998).

In different ways, each of these statements reflects a growing sense of social, environmental, and cosmic disorder, which I understand to characterize emergent cosmologies of climate change. Importantly, this shift is not simply a consequence of intensifying material changes but also a response to the politics of climate change in the region, and the way it has been communicated on the island. While no one I knew understood figures like the pollution demon literally, the dystopian and quasi-apocalyptic tone of climate-related performances conveyed the idea that climate change was a force of potential annihilation. By evoking climate change as a more-than-human presence of immense significance, such performances have stimulated new cosmological reflections, as well as debates about the possibilities and limits of human moral agency.

CONCLUSION

More recently, Prasenjit-da has recalled the climate change drama and remarked that people have become much more aware of climate change over the years. While I agree with his evaluation, I am not sure that the climate change with which they have become familiar is the same climate change that I first traveled to the Sundarbans to understand. At the time, I still conceived of "climate change" as a set of material-physical processes. Reflecting on the climate performances discussed in this article, I have instead come to agree with scholars who emphasize its immaterial and cosmological dimensions, showing that it is "constantly reworked in new versions, in different settings and with different repertoires" (Rubow 2021, 29).

In this article, I have discussed one such repertoire, showing how Sundarbans islanders have drawn on Hindu thought and practice to navigate their experiences of climatic change. I have further demonstrated how the attribution of changing weather patterns and extreme events to human activity, framed through reference to divine and demonic figures, marks a shift from an earlier reluctance to speculate about the causes of such volatility. As I have also argued, public performances have played an important role in these processes because of performance's capacity to stage cosmological worlds by creating more-than-human presence, evoking subjunctive worlds, and transmitting moral visions that shape how people live and act in their daily lives.

This analysis contributes to anthropological scholarship on the Anthropocene as a "non-secular" condition (Bubandt 2018) and supports Mayanthi Fernando's (2022, 578) assertion that "climate catastrophe threatens communities that do not necessarily live in secular worlds." By pointing toward processes of eco-cosmological change, this article further indicates that such nonsecular worlds are rapidly transforming, suggesting the importance of more anthropological attention to entangled processes of ecological and cosmological change. Performance studies offer a promising framework for anthropologists hoping to better understand these dynamic more-than-human worlds.

ABSTRACT

This article explores emergent cosmologies of climate change in a predominantly Dalit Hindu community in the Sundarbans of West Bengal, India. In recent years, my interlocutors have begun to link changing weather patterns to human activity, often through reference to divine and demonic beings. This article considers how public performances generate such cosmological shifts. I argue that performance offers a key modality through which ecological cosmologies have been constituted in the Sundarbans historically and through which they are now transforming. This reflects performance's world-making qualities, namely, its capacity to create more-than-human presence, evoke subjunctive realities, and transmit moral visions. I consider two performative genres: jatra*, a form of open-air theater, and NGO performances addressing anthropogenic climate change. As boundaries between these performative genres have begun to erode, "climate change" has become a part of lived cosmologies, stimulating new reflections on human moral agency and responsibility.* [performance; world-making; ecological cosmologies; climate change; India]

সংক্ষিপ্তসার

এই প্রবন্ধটি ভারতের পশ্চিমবঙ্গের সুন্দরবনের একটি হিন্দু-সংখ্যাগুরু গ্রামে জলবায়ু পরিবর্তন সম্পর্কিত ধর্মীয় বিশ্বাসের নতুন আঙ্গিক নিয়ে আলোচনা করে। যারা আমার গবেষণায় অংশগ্রহণ করেছেন, তারা প্রধানত তফসিলি জাতি থেকে। সাম্প্রতিককালে সুন্দরবনের মানুষ পরিবর্তনশীল আবহাওয়ার ধরনকে মানুষের কার্যকলাপের সাথে যুক্ত করতে শুরু করেছেন, বিশেষ করে দৈব ও দানবীয় শক্তির উল্লেখের মাধ্যমে। এই প্রবন্ধে, আমি বোঝার চেষ্টা করি কীভাবে পাবলিক পারফর্মেন্সের মাধ্যমে এই ধরনের বিশ্বাসের পরিবর্তন সম্ভব হয়। আমার যুক্তি এই যে, মূলত যাত্রা এবং নাটকের মতো পাবলিক পারফর্মেন্সের মাধ্যমেই সুন্দরবনে পরিবেশগত বিশ্বাসগুলি ঐতিহাসিকভাবে গঠিত হয়েছে, এবং সেই একই মাধ্যমেই সেগুলি বর্তমানে বদলে যাচ্ছে। আমার মনে হয় এটি পাবলিক পারফর্মেন্সের বিশ্ব-নির্মাণ গুণাবলীর একটি প্রভাব, যা এটির মানব-অতিরিক্ত উপস্থিতি

সৃষ্টি করার, সম্ভাব্য বাস্তবতা ফুটিয়ে তোলার এবং নৈতিক দৃষ্টিভঙ্গি ছড়িয়ে দেওয়ার সক্ষমতাকে সূচিত করে। এই যুক্তি উপস্থাপনের ক্ষেত্রে, আমি দু-রকম পারফর্মেন্স নিয়ে আলোচনা করি। প্রথম হচ্ছে যাত্রা, একটি জনপ্রিয় লোকনাট্য ধারা। যাত্রাগুলিতে দৈব ও দানবীয় শক্তির পাশাপাশি বিভিন্ন প্রাণী ও নন-হিউম্যান সত্তার আখ্যান চিত্রিত করা হয়। দ্বিতীয় হচ্ছে এনজিও পারফর্মেন্সগুলি যা মানবসৃষ্ট জলবায়ু পরিবর্তন নিয়ে কাজ করে এবং তার সমাধান নিয়ে কথা বলে। আমি দেখাচ্ছি যে কীভাবে এই সব পারফর্মেন্সের ধারণাগুলি একত্রিত হতে শুরু করেছে আর এই প্রক্রিয়ায় "জলবায়ু পরিবর্তন" মানুষের ধর্মীয় বিশ্বাসের একটি অংশ হয়ে উঠেছে, যা মানুষের নৈতিক চরিত্র এবং দায়িত্ববোধের উপর নতুন ভাবনা সৃষ্টি করছে। [পারফর্মেন্স; বিশ্ব-নির্মাণ; পরিবেশগত বিশ্বাস; জলবায়ু পরিবর্তন; ভারত]

NOTES

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1. All names in this article are pseudonyms.
2. The term Dalit refers to groups that have experienced social, political, and economic exclusion because of their classification outside of the hierarchical four-fold *varna* scheme of orthodox Brahminical Hinduism. In the Sundarbans, members of these communities most often self-identify as "Scheduled Castes" and "Scheduled Tribes," which are also official governmental designations.
3. Historically, Bonbibi was venerated by Hindu, Muslim, and Christians alike. In recent decades she has acquired a more Hinduized identity. Some of my Muslim and Christian interlocutors still called on her for assistance, but some have begun to repudiate such practices because of their coding as "Hindu." She continues to be venerated by Muslims in the Bangladeshi Sundarbans.
4. There are indications that *jatra* has declined somewhat in recent years. Journalists have attributed this to the economic struggles of performers (Mukherjee 2023), while people in Jomidarpur connected it to the recent arrival of television.
5. The Poundra Khoytro or Poundra Kshatriya community is one of the largest Scheduled Caste communities in the region.
6. A local Scheduled Caste community.
7. The *Kali Yuga* is the current and final of the four cyclic Hindu ages or *yugas*, after which the world is destroyed in a doomsday flood and a new world emerges. The *Kali Yuga* is characterized by social disharmony and environmental disasters. People in the Sundarbans invoke the *Kali Yuga* to explain misfortunes of many kinds.
8. Annu Jalais (2010, 28–29) has distinguished between "village people" (*gramer lok*) and "gentle-folk" (*bhadralok*) in the region. The former refers to those who engage in forest work, fishing, and agricultural labor. The latter term combines *bhadra*, meaning

polite, with *lok*, meaning group or people. During the colonial period, *bhadralok* connoted landed wealth, education, culture, anglicization, and high-caste exclusiveness. Over time an additional strand of socialist and communist ideas emerged, and Arild Ruud (2003, 72–74) argues that *bhadralok* came to refer more to a set of values and an ideology rather than a specific group.

9. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), for example, was founded by progressive writers in 1942, and took on the mantle of anti-colonialism and anti-fascism by thematizing the struggles of peasants, workers, and other oppressed classes (Bhatia 1997).

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