Dwelling in Loss

Environment, Displacement and Memory in the Indian Ganges Delta

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Dwelling in Loss:
Environment, Displacement and Memory in the Indian Ganges Delta

Inauguraldissertation zur Erlangung des Grades eines Dr. phil.

Vorgelegt am Fachbereich Politik- und Sozialwissenschaften der Freien Universität Berlin

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Berlin, Dezember 2013

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Tag der Disputation: 10. Juli 2014

Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea.

Marc Augé, *Oblivion*

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// Acknowledgements

The research culminating ultimately in this thesis would not have been possible without the trust, incitement, love and generous support I received along the way.

First I want to thank the islanders: for opening up their hearts and making me feel at home; for sharing their stories and struggles; and for answering my strange curiosity with theirs. For their continuous inspiration to brave a dystopian present with lust for life, often enough a contagious laughter and the unbroken insistence on dignity. I sincerely hope that my theoretical leanings toward deconstruction do not overshadow the warmth I feel for those ephemeral islands, their astonishing people and the very fragility encapsulating both.

Back home in Berlin, I owe my deepest thanks to Prof. Ute Luig for her guidance, attentiveness and support throughout the years. Her passion for ethnography, analytical clarity and unquenched curiosity – pervading the classroom and the odd trip to Pakistan – never ceased to inspire. I am very grateful, too, to Prof. Shalini Randeria for showing such an interest in my work, for her direct and indirect encouragement to place it on a larger canvas. Similarly, I owe sincere thanks to Prof. Urte Undine Frömming not only for joining the committee but also for earlier opportunities to teach and write. In the same vein, I owe my gratitude to Prof. Martin Zaumseil and Dr. Jochen Seebode for joining the committee on short notice!

On my way into the delta and back I relied on the help from various persons and institutions. My fieldwork owes its existence and many of the routes taken – in a roughly chronologically order – to Prof. Michael Bollig (Cologne), Dr. Volker Harms (Tübingen); to Dr. Abhijit Guha (Midnapur) and Dr. Ranabir Samaddar (Kolkata); to Boro Baski and Martin Kämpchen (Shantiniketan); to Dr. Joachim Schmerbeck (New Delhi) and Mr. Giri (Kolkata); Dr. Annu Jalais (Singapur); Father Jimmy Keepuram (Kolkata); the helpful staff of the Tagore Society for Rural Development (Kolkata, Sāgar); to the Sannyāsī of the Oṃkārnāth Maṭh (Gaṅgāsāgar); Probir Neyogi (Sonarpur) and Partha Kayal (Kolkata); to Dr. Sunando Bandyopadhyay (Kolkata); to the Staff at the Marine Archives (Kolkata); to Samudrika Thanka and Sulagna Mukherjee (Kolkata); to Dr. Sibdas Ghosh and the Humboldt Club (Kolkata).

My research would not have been possible without the generous funding and support provided by the DAAD and the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung – which I duly acknowledge.

My project has benefitted tremendously from being put to discussion in front of various audiences. So did I. Beyond the stimulating doctoral colloquium in Berlin, these included conferences in Rotterdam, Wien, Bielefeld; invited talks in Essen (KWI) and Bremen (artec); and workshops in Munich (RCC) and Islamabad (QAU, LMU). The exchanges in the seminar

rooms and over coffee before or after have been a source of inspiration, critical scrutiny and welcome detour from the desk. I thank all the participants and discussants for feedback, criticism and encouragement.

I am indebted, furthermore, to the constructive criticism and stimulations I received from Prof. Dorothea Schulz (Cologne) and Prof. Ursula Rao (Leipzig) toward the end of my research; and to the cartographic skills of David Tully (Berlin).

Last but not least, I thank my family – close and extended – for the unstinting support throughout these long years that I was on some exotic research project. For arranging with the various degrees of absence that I demonstrated: Physically away, lost within an elusive problem or cobwebbed with some theory or another. I am particularly thankful, for the pressure when it was needed and the supporting silence when it would have been too much.

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A Note on Transliteration

It seems to be impossible to transliterate Bengali into English without doing injustice to it. Two approaches prevail current literature and both have their virtues and flaws. One relies on modern Indology's arsenal of diacritic signs and concise transcription rules invented to transliterate Saṃskṛt. Emphasizing, thus, commonalities with a host of other South Asian languages, but diverting at times dramatically from the sound as it is spoken in Bengal. Following another approach, Bengali terms are transcribed freely, yet as closely as possible to the actual feel in the present. While particularities and regional identities may be embraced, this latter approach invites profound confusions. According to region, inclinations of the writer and also according to the degree localized patterns of English influence the transliteration, the same word may be spelled along a register of variations between writers. While I am very much in favour of the ideal to capture language as it is spoken, I think it makes more sense to be true to philology. Beyond cross-referencing within the ivory tower, this seems to be all the more necessary as Bengalis would – at least in my experience – transliterate their language rather along the procedures of philology.

To illustrate these differences, below I have given a list of variations of the pilgrimage centre in whose shadows the bulk of my research was conducted.

A.	Following philological procedures:	Gaṅgāsāgar
B.	Approximating pronunciation:	Gongasagor
C.	Popular version:	Gangasagar
D.	Colonial administrative	Gangasaugor

On maps the locality figures in the third form (C) and many Bengalis would transliterate it as such. Yet this form seems to be rather a corruption of the philological transliteration (diacritic signs are missing), than being intended to be closer to actual pronunciation. Against this background, I will rely in this thesis on the philological procedures (A). Place names will, furthermore, be subject to the period of their usage. To speak of Calcutta, for instance, will index the city prior to 2001 when it was rechristened as Kolkata – the latter name will refer, consequentially, to the city thereafter.

Glossary

ādi gaṅgā – 'original' route of the Gaṅgā towards the sea

adivāsi – (lit. aboriginal) member of the 'tribal' population of South Asia

āśram – hermitage; locus of ritual activities; in contemporary pilgrimage sites they often harbour pilgrim's rest houses (*dharmaśālā*)

BDO – Block Development Officer; lowest tier of the state government; administers one Block that comprises several Pañcāyat

bighā – popular unit to measure space; locally one *bighā* equals roughly one third of an acre

baiṣñab – (also called Vaiṣnāva, Vaishnava) pantheon assigned to Biṣṇu (Viṣṇu)

banyā – flood of the destructive type (see also *barṣā*)

barṣā – rain; rainy season; flood of the non-destructive/ irrelevant type (see also *banyā*)

bāṛi – house, place of origin

bāṅgāl – East Bengal; person of East Bengali origin; partition refugee

bharā kaṭāl – springtide; shorthand: *kaṭāl*

bhadralok – (lit. gentlemen) member of Bengal's middle classes; intimately tied to the colonial and post-colonial bureaucracy and the project of modernity

Bhagīrath – descendent of King Sagar who brought Gaṅgā down to earth, hence the river is sometimes called Bhagīrathi (the daughter of Bhagīrath)

bhaṭa – tides

bhiṭe – homestead

bhūt – ghost

bideś – outside, extra-local, foreign

CPI – Communist Party of India

CPI (M) – Communist Party of India (Marxist)

deś – local, village

DIW – Department of Irrigation and Waterways

ghaṭ – bathing site, steps leading to the water

Gaṅgā – (also called Ganges, Ganga, Gonga) Goddess and river traversing North and East India

Huglī – (also called Hooghly, Hugli) flowing along Sāgar's western side; considered to be (among) the lowest legs of the Gaṅgā

IAY – Indirā Āvās Yojanā, programme of the central government to alleviate poverty through the funding of houses

Indra – King of the gods

jaṅgal – jungle, forest, wilderness

jātrā – popular theatre mostly played outdoors; troupe involved in such

jāti – caste group

jamidār – (also called Jomindar, Zamindar) literally ‘landholder’ (Persian); (feudal) landlord; characteristic feature of colonial India; nominally abolished with the First Amendment of the Indian Constitution (1951)

iliś – (*Tenualosa ilisha*) cherished and currently very costly variety of fish

jhaṛ – storm

kaṭāl – spring tide

khāl - channel

Kṛṣṇa – Hindu god of the *baiṣñab* pantheon; extremely popular in rural Bengal

kuṭi – hut; name for dry fish business

līlā – play

Lakṣmī – (pronounced *Lokkhi*) goddess and wife of Viṣṇu, associated with abundance and wealth

makar saṃkrānti – (also called *pouṣ saṃkrānti*) auspicious date across India, marks the day when the sun enters the Capricorn constellation of the zodiac; understood to mark the arrival of Gaṅgā at the sea; climax of the Gaṅgāsāgar melā

melā – festival

morol – (political) leader

Muṛīgaṅgā – (also called Muriganga; Baṛatalā or Baratala) river channel passing east of Sāgar Island

murti – statue of a deity

Nayāchara – island north-west of Ghoṛāmārā

netā – leader

nicu jāygā - low land

N.R.E.G.A. – (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, re-christened into Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act [M.G.N.R.E.G.A]) poverty alleviation scheme by means of guaranteeing 100 days of work per year per person; locally referred to literally as Hundred-Days-Work (*eksāu diner kāj)*

nadi – river

pañcāyat – (also called Panchayat, Panchayet) literally ‘the rule of five’; ‘traditional’ village council; re-invented as the lowest tier of elected politics in postcolonial India

pātāl – netherworld

pāṭṭā – land title

Pīrbābā – Muslim saint worshipped in Hijlī Sharīf

pujā – generic term for the practice of worship, encompasses quotidian and festive practices alike

Purāṇa – (lit. the old stories) body of texts, premier source of Hindu mythology

purohit – priest

pūrṇimā – full moon

Rāmāyaṇa – Hindu epic centred on the Rām's rescue of his wife Sītā from a demon king

RKM – Ramakrishna Mission Āśram

Sagar – mythical king involved in the descending of Gangā

Sāgar – (also called Sagor, Sagar) sea; name of the island harbouring Gaṅgāsāgar

samiti – society, co-operative

Śiva – Hindu god; often depicted as ascetic; cushioning Gaṅgā in his matted hair

Śītalā – (also called Sitola, Sitala) goddess of fevers; extremely popular in rural Bengal

SEZ – Special Economic Zone

Supāribhāṅgā – (also called Bedford Island) lost island south of Lohāchara

tīrtha – literally furt; space invested with particular powers; often pilgrimage sites

TMC – Trinamool Congress

ucca jāygā – high land

Viṣṇu – (also called Vishnu, Bishnu) one of the most important gods in Hindu traditions

Zamindar – see *jamidār*

1. Introduction

It was my second day in the Colony. On the first time I had come here with a local NGO officer: Taking an interest in my studies he had given me a ride to Gaṅgāsāgar Colony on the southern tip of Sāgar Island after introducing me to two other colonies closer to his office. In contemporary West Bengal colonies are a common sight. The massive refugee influx following partition, the land distributions of West Bengal's left-wing governments and, then again, the needs of wealthier segments to live in enclaves have all brought about colonies of sorts. Yet the colonies on Sāgar Island were of another kind. They were widely seen to harbor 'environmental refugees' and to some even Climate Change's very first victims (see for example S. Sengupta 2007). The defining moment in either case is the disappearance of whole islands in brackish waters, the displacement of its erstwhile populations by a rising sea. And water was all around: Towards south, beyond the barren fields, earthen embankments and small patches of fragile mangroves stretched towards the Bay of Bengal. While in all other directions estuarine waters played around smaller or bigger islands, changing the appearance of this delicate world with the rhythms of the tide and seasons. The Colony was situated, in other words, in the extreme south-western corner of a vast archipelago constituting the coastal fringes of much of Bengal – commonly named simply as Sundarbans.[1] It was on the edge of this perplexing territory known to be a haunt of tigers, home to vast mangrove swamps and, in recent days, more and more as one of the premier Frontlines of Climate Change (e.g. 'Sea Levels Are Washing Away the Sundarban Islands' 2007). Strikingly, in all these imageries the human presence is accommodated only somewhat reluctantly. All while the population in the Indian part of the Sundarbans is contemporarily estimated at roughly four million people and counting. Sāgar Island alone is home to a population of more than 180000.[2]

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[1] The etymology and meaning of this designator continues to be debated. Three approaches can be distinguished (S. C. Sarkar 2010, 11 – 12). Most understand the name 'Sundarban' or its anglicized plural 'Sundarbans' to be a compound of the Bengali adjective *sundar* (i.e. beautiful) and *ban* (i.e. forest). Popular, too, is the transliteration as forest of the *Sundari* tree (*Heritiera fomes*) – the most widespread variety of Mangrove in the archipelago. Following the third approach, 'Sundarban' appears to be a corrupted compound of *samudra* (i.e. the sea) and *ban* – highlighting, thus, salty character of the region.
That being said, the popularity of the first approach is obviously a recent phenomenon and an outcome of a middle class appropriation. Not long ago, the forest was seen as simply monstrous and anything but beautiful (see chapter 4.3.).

[2] According to the last fully available Census data (Census of India 2001) the population amounts to 185644 populating 282.11 square kilometres. Thus, the population density amounts to a staggering 658.06 people per square kilometre – far above the nationwide average of 382 projected in the latest Census (2011).

My companion had to follow urgent business and I was on my own. After he had turned around and sped away on his bike, I took that first stroll, taking in the atmosphere and chatting with some of the residents. Trying to make sense of what I had set out to do over tea, the youngsters I had been talking to steadfastly suggested, some actually insisted that I met Sheikh Motalib. Now, a few days later and accompanied by my field assistant and friend, Probir Neyogi, I was in his house. He chased away the chicken, spread out the simple grass mat over the earthen ground of the hut – a performance that signaled, as I was soon to learn, the onset of a formal conversation warmed with hospitality, yet ripe with a sense of unequal power. When a short while later we were sitting, his wife had brought the tea he ordered for and extended introductions were in progress, it felt much like as in almost in any other household of the rural Bengal delta that was visited neither by poverty in its worst forms nor by modest prosperity.[3] Yet between us a long conversation began to unfold that not only touched, but firmly rested on matters associated with acute despair, with disasters, displacement and environmental degradation.

To close in I add another snapshot. It must have been in the late 1990ies. Marine geographers from Kolkata's Jadavpur University had set out to measure changes in the swampy waterscape south of the city, in the Indian Sundarbans. To do so, they compared latest satellite pictures of the archipelago with maps and documents that were several decades old. An initial step of the proceeding was to simply count the islands. To their great astonishment, they became aware that the number of islands had changed. On older maps they counted 104 islands, but the current pictures showed only 102. Two islands had gone missing.

Described in papers, narrated into cameras, and retold by journalists (e.g. Bhalla 2007), this seems to be the foundational moment of the idea that the Sundarbans harbor India's first 'climate refugees'. To be sure, Hazra and his colleague were more cautious: they insisted that the submergence is in itself an outcome of diverse processes and not only of climate change. Similarly, the staff from India's influential *Centre for Science and Environment* (CSE) has repeatedly emphasized that vanishing islands have a *symbolic* value as they give a glimpse into the future and their demise is not explained b Climate Change alone (S. Niyogi 2009). Yet the idea of the first and somewhat pure climate refugees stuck and continues to appear through works of media and environmentalist groups (see e.g. Lean 2006; WWF-India 2010).

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[3] Similar scenes are invoked in ethnographies (Hartmann and Boyce 1983), in novels (Mallabarman 1993) and in writing in-between (Gardner 1991).

Seen from another angle, the discovery within the geographer's office offers a glimpse into the vague state of knowledge about the exact shape of the delta, the loose sense of control over it as territory. Far from being a sensationalist hoax or outcome of an exoticising desire it is testimony to the archipelago's inaccessibility and fuzziness. Both rest firmly in the amphibian traits of this particular environment. In-between river and sea, land and water, jungle and field, it powerfully denies exact categorization. It belittles maps, infrastructural developments and, thus, the grids of governance. Against this background, which I will interrogate in depth in this thesis, the way particular islands appear in the global circuits of images and ideas is surprising. While most of the 104 islands once counted remain nameless and their population silenced, a small number of them have received sustained interest. Mirroring the islands of Tuvalu in the Southern Pacific they, too, have, as Carol Farbotko (2010, 48) insightful notes, "[…] become meaningful spaces in cosmopolitan discourses only as they disappear." To be sure, Sāgar Island itself has an ambivalent role here. It figures lively in various debates and publics since at least 200 years. Not only as a large island on Bengal's edge, but rather by virtue of its position towering over one of the most frequently travelled waterways of the British Empire and because of the extremely important Hindu pilgrimage site, Gaṅgāsāgar, on its sea-facing shore. Yet it is reintroduced into global circuits along the predicament characterized by Farbotko. Known through the specter of 'natural disasters' since more than 200 years, its population has joined the 'poster children' of Climate Change (Marino 2013) as it is dramatically shrinking and its future uncertain, at best. The smaller, neighboring islets of Ghoṛāmārā, Lohāchara and Supāribhāṅgā, however, have entered global debates *only* through the figures of sinking, disappearance and the menace of the refugee. While the latter two islands have been swallowed by the waters sometime in the 1980s, the diminished and battered ruins of Ghoṛāmārā still exist. Being – as I will show throughout this thesis bound together by geomorphological, social and mnemonic dynamics – I subsume these three very small and the slightly larger island under the rubric of Sāgar island group.

It is ironic that although these tiny islands became known as they disappeared, most *contemporarily* available maps still show them. Below (see Figure 1) I have assembled current screenshots from Google-Maps showing the islands, on the left, as they are displayed in maps and, on the right, on satellite image shot a few years ago. Uncannily, some of islands which are inscribed as present with the factual authority of the map, simply are not there 'in reality'. Seen from another perspective this continuing existence of something long gone anticipates one central theme of this thesis. For it is the 'presenced absence' (Bille, Hastrup, and Sorensen

2010) of lost lands that I will interrogate here. The afterlife of devastations, the sense of past and of place rooted therein and everyday navigations of present environmental hazards. I am interested, in other words, in a present burdened by a past which is now widely envisioned for the future: The onslaughts of rising seas and unleashed meteorological furies in a warming world. The past of the islanders might emerge, paradoxically, as an index of the bitter fruits of climate change yet to come.

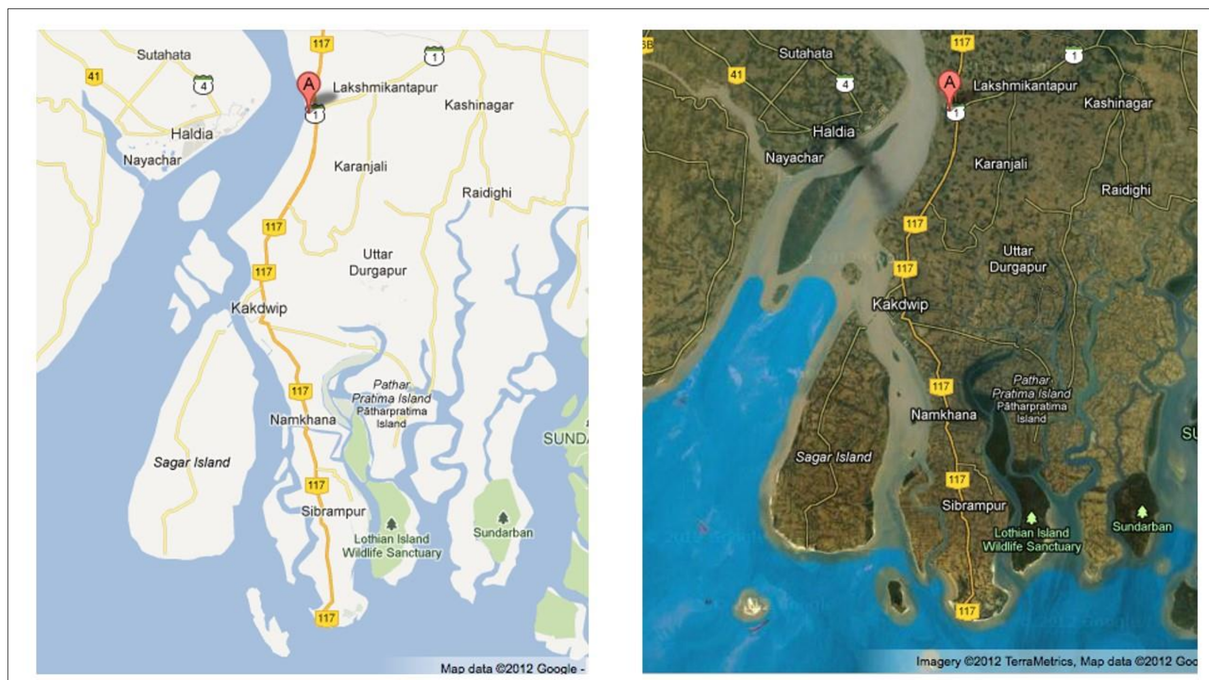

Figure 1. Incompatible Images: Sāgar seen on 'Google Maps' (left: map; right: satellite view) (Source: Google Maps, Screenshots taken on 25. June 2013)

Climate change is now widely understood to produce population movements. Indeed, the fear of footloose and destitute populations looms large in contemporary imageries of a world that is heating up and – metaphorically or literally – shrinking. They, at once, seem to threaten political orders and ethical stances. One may even follow Hartmann's scorching critique and frame this very construction as drawing on underlying xenophobic anxieties and again feeding them (Hartmann 2010; see also Hartmann, Subramaniam, and Zerner 2005). If anything, the persistence and high visibility of so-called environmental security debates demonstrates just that.

Concerning South Asia at least, displacements in the context of climate change are contemporarily only partly related to large-scale disastrous events. While the public and the media are in South Asia as in other parts of the world preoccupied with disasters, scientific debates emphasize parched regions and sinking coasts. They are, in other words, insisting on the high and diverse costs of slow and literal destructions of spaces. Prognoses by national or

interbational research bodies, as International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), unequivocally emphasize the devastating consequences of irregular monsoons and the desertification of whole regions (see Mall et al. 2006; J. Roy 2007; B. Ray 2011).[4] This will lead to forced migrations and will be experienced as displacements in those regions, where hospitable landscapes and places slowly turn into inhospitable ones or simply dissolve. Subsiding, permanently flooded or eroding coastlines form a second instance and a very similar threat – on long stretches of South Asia's densely populated coastlines. While the latter processes may seem to be not so relevant from the angle of macroeconomics or a national income, they nevertheless will affect large populations. As such they will produce, as I show in this thesis, distinct experiences: forced migrations, impoverishment and, literally, loss of place.

For want of a better term I will frame these experiences throughout this thesis as dis-placement. In doing so, I follow two purposes. First, I will emphasize dis-placements as they occur beyond ousting: to dynamics where neither fences or social categorizations and political violence enforce mobility. I turn, instead, to processes leaving in their very materiality no other choice but to move. Again, not as appropriations of land or erection of borders, but in the very destruction of spaces. Writing within an epistemic tradition that has great difficulties to think the dissolution of space, of the ground to stand upon, the notion 'dis-placement' seems in its very clumsiness helpful. Yet, for the sake of readability I will mainly retain the un-hyphenated form.

With the emphasis on dis-placement I hope, secondly, to capture the social and cultural difficulties that the very destruction of place *poses to affected populations*. Beyond the difficulties of management of resources or living-space, I am more concerned here with socially-mediated sufferings arising when places thin out or vanish. I am concerned, thus, with particular figurations of loss. Circumventing psychological approaches to the perplexing issue of loss, I engage a set of questions that resonates well with the lack of empirical research on environment and displacement; and one that similarly resonates with the troubles and joys in the colony. In this thesis I ask, therefore, for the social life and afterlife of dramatic losses. How, in other words, are retreating shorelines and vanishing islands navigated by marginalized communities? How are islanders affected by slowly, creeping environmental disasters? What is their texture? And how are these dramatic changes coped with over large periods of time?

[4] It is interesting to note that West Bengal and neighbouring states in Eastern India are actually predicted to heighten their output in rice due to temperature increases (Mall et al. 2006). Yet these may be checked by shifts in rain patterns. Hazra shows, for instance, that increasing post monsoon rainfall weakens harvests (2012, 6–7).

How are sinking landscapes, as compounds of places, subjected to socially mediated legibility? How are epistemic structures involved? That is, how do disasters persist through and as a socially mediated afterlife? Or, to put it in a more perplexing phrase, how is an island that is not?

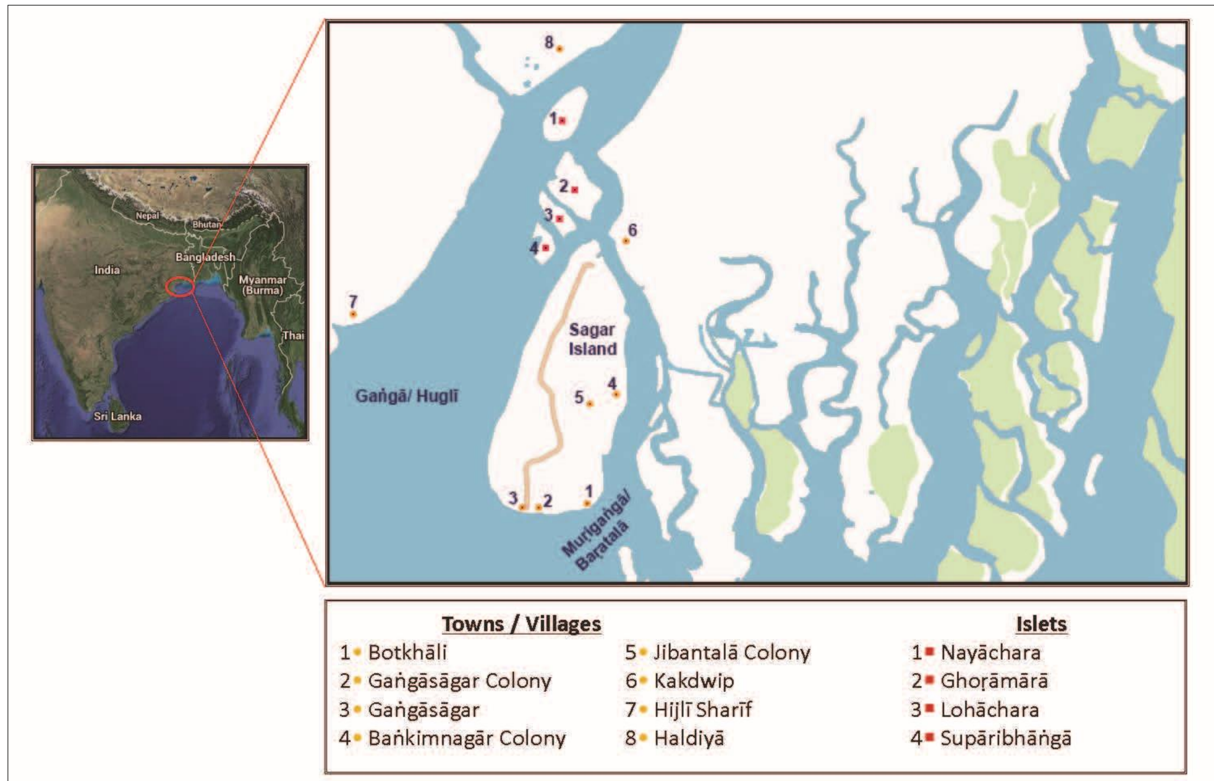

Figure 2. Map of islands and relevant localities within the delta's westernmost tracts

To engage these questions I follow a multi-sited approach that still focuses heavily on the everyday life and narrations I encountered in Gaṅgāsāgar Colony situated on the southern edge of the island (see Figure 2). Established in 1982, it is one of five colonies dotting the island that were all found within the short span of five years. Slightly older are the colonies in Hariṇbāṛi and Baṅkimnāgar, while the colonies in Jibantalā and Beguakhāli/ Lighthouse are younger. Throughout their slightly different trajectories, these colonies are testimony to a rare incident in postcolonial India. That is, the state-administered resettlement of displaced people. India has, after all, acquired a reputation of being highly erratic and rarely just in its dealings with forced migrants and landless populations. With notable exceptions – as, for instance, massive resettlements of Partition refugees in the North-western India – rehabilitations or resettlements have been widely denied, neglected and, often enough, marked by structural and political violence. Against this background, this thesis aims at contributing to two interrelated strands. On one hand, it takes its cue from, what I understand to be, a call for ethnography permeating

contemporary writing on environment and migration (see e.g. Oliver-Smith 2009a, 9 – 11). That is, the paradox encountered in almost every piece on the subject according to which we face immense population movements accompanied by intensive suffering, yet we know only little about the experiences and imaginations of those on the move. Of itinaries, suffering, coping and opportunities. Engaging a colony that has been existing for roughly thirty years, on the other hand, I aim at shedding light on the processes of emplacement, their political dynamics and the ongoing, partial unmaking of 'refugee-hood' as the everyday unfolds on Sāgar's southern edges.

1.1. Methodology

How, then, to engage a present and a recent past marked by movements and dis-placements? How to make sense of a moment that spans various tenses and is deeply entangled in globalised dynamics? Every approach to do so must be cautious of, what Lila Abu-Lughod framed (1991, 151), "[…] the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness." It must, by the same token, embrace flows, hybridities and trans-local encounters involved in (but not limited to) mobilities. Besides of focussing on difference (as an epistemological or ontological problem), the craft of ethnography is well suited to engage these situated encounters with multiple modernities. That is, a past and present bound up with, as Shalini Randeria theorizes (Randeria 2006b, 216; see also Randeria 1999b), "[…] disparate and divergent but uneven and entangled modernities […]".

Beyond the sphere of social and historical entanglements, I am concerned in this thesis with entanglements across the human-environment or culture-nature divide. I like to think of this condition less as a second order entanglement, but more as an underlying dynamic that goes still too often unnoticed and undertheorized. As a window into varieties of entanglements, as well as into localized encounters with these two highly dynamic dimensions, I rely on, what Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart recently framed as, 'ethnography of historicity'(2005). That is, I engage the complexity of local lifeworlds by focussing on the construction of meaning as it emerges in relation to past events or experiences transgressing the nature-culture divide. In doing so, I lay emphasis on the ways the past emerges in the first place and along which it is necessarily related to the present and future and inherently tied to notions of sociality.

Everyday life behind the embankments, as I came to know it, was brimming with moments, nodes and patterns of the public. I could be sure that whenever I sat down with someone to talk,

sooner or later someone else would drop in or stop to take part in the conversation. The dialogic situation would break up to include other voices; the circle would evolve. It would be a reduction to understand this only as an outcome of physical density or the boredom of most of the months. But it is in itself already the outcome of a public dissected by the faultiness of hierarchy in less obvious and more sublime ways than in many other South Asian contexts characterized by by rigidly ordered everyday interaction and conduct of speech. To be sure, individuals of certain social categories found it more difficult than others to take part in public life. Women, for instance, were widely excluded from raising their voices over a cup of hot tea in one of the numerous tea stalls. Yet, several did. Most others, however, simply performed other publics. The chatter during short or prolonged breaks between chores while being seated close to one of the muddy paths served just as that. Quite often, the conversations I had with men and women alike on and off a village path turned out to grow into one of these public exchanges. These entailed, characteristcally, a small core group of discussants, but involved very often also a flow of other persons stopping by and dropping their voices in. Hence, extended and metamorphosing conversations emerged: An intimate conversation would quickly grow into what social science text books refer to as ‘group discussions’, split up into parallel conversation only to eventually fold in again to a limited number of participants. While this made it sometimes difficult to follow arguments or speech patterns by certain individuals, it allowed to witness challenges between what might seem to be proponents of divergent views on the matter at hand. All this in a, I have to admit, fascinating mix of rhetorical verve and outspokenness bordering on belligerence. Style and politics of these challenges notwithstanding, these mutating conversations were straddling the line between debate and interview, and brought the complexities, indeed hybridities of localized interpretations to the fore. In terms of, what Peter Probst (1998, 295) once called, a ‘performative-polycentric model of the public’ they were powerful instance of how meaning is not only demonstrated, but how it is evolving in itself. These moments were, ultimately, entanglements of diverse publics, uneasily accommodating their respective, heterogeneous logics (Tsing 1994; Randeria, Fuchs, and Linkenbach 2004).

To counterbalance these shifting figurations, I have closed in on situated narrations and actions. Either through detailed interviews sought in privacy or in close attention to individual trajectories throughout morphing encounters (see Schensul 1999). In the early phase of my research I have relied here on semi-structured interviews that were subsequently abandoned by life history and narrative interviews (Flick 2007; Schlehe 2003). I have been enriching

interviews with informal conversations that form the lifeblood of ethnography, yet are sometimes difficult to accommodate with the positivist urges of social science (Stage and Mattson 2003). Interested in the way the past is a creative burden to the present – to paraphrase Lambek (Lambek 2003) – that other lifeblood of ethnography, participant observation, seemed to be of a less currency. Especially so as I faced the peculiarities of the past on these coasts: being largely played out in narrations, beyond collective *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1989). However, in certain moments, through ritual activities, labour practices or taking walks together, participant observation proved to be crucial (Spittler 2001). Particularly, as I will show, to engage silences. Both, to gain a deeper view and to critically triangulate certain perspectives, I included printed material, leaved through various archives in metropolitan Kolkata and pursued interviews with important figures of the regional elite.[5] While the latter could be sufficiently be described as expert interviews, I understand them as a part of what Andrew Vayda called 'progressive contextualisation': the accumulative inclusion of networks, interactions and meanings as the research unfolds (Vayda 1983; Alley 2003) and along the circular rhythms of 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1998). Engaging the Colony's present in a comprehensive way made it, furthermore, necessary to include other localities into my fieldwork activities. Based on the edge of the Colony, I followed invitations, stories and imaginations on and off various embankments in the region.[6] Thus, my research straddles the certainly questionable line (Weißköppel 2009, 252f) between, what has been called stationary and multi-sited research (Marcus 1995). To map histories and to quantify some assumptions, I have also conducted a comprehensive household survey – albeit only in the Gaṅgāsāgar Colony.

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[5] Reflecting about the political present in India and elsewhere, Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan have not long ago underlined the conceptual category of the region (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003). This, they argue, allows to avoid the blindfolding dichotomisation of local and global. Productive as both latter conceptualisation are, the particularities of mediating institutions, trajectories, and discursive formations are difficult to capture therewith. Two applications are immediately relevant for this thesis. One would be to engage formations that are once trans-local and not-yet-global – as, for instance, articulations of environmentalism in India as distinct from global and local approaches. The second relates to the workings of the regional state: the tense relations of the West Bengal government with the central government in Delhi. Both, as discourse and practice the latter dynamics influence the way politics were enacted in a given locality.

[6] My ethnographic fieldwork has been conducted between 2009 and 2011 and in three phases amounting to 14 months. Due to the extreme density of population within the colony – with its crowded houses and unavailable spare rooms – I had to pitch my tent in one of the Hindu monastic orders offering accommodation to pilgrims. Situated at the edge of colony, the *Omkarnāth Nibās* belonging to the *Omkarnāth Mission Māhāmilan Māth* was an ideal home throughout these months. It was run by a small group of welcoming and compassionate renouncers who enjoyed, as I was to learn, a good reputation in the colony due to their small-scale charitable efforts. Residing in the simple lodging facilities for long months and, in parts also with my family, I could avoid being identified with one of the NGOs working on the island or with government agencies. Still, I was mockingly assured, that I was not seen as yet another pilgrim or shady businessman coming through, nor a renouncer.

Finally, I have to complement these considerations with some reflection on the necessarily gendered trajectory of my fieldwork. I have noted restrictions and partial silencing of women already. Religious identities of my female interlocutors seemed to be far less relevant than age, marriage status and, of course, the situative context of the interaction. Young, unmarried women marked one end of the continuum: Beyond rare and extremely short conversations or quick-witted insertions into group discussions,[7] I could not include them into my research in a meaningful way. The other extreme were older women: they were often ideal interlocutors, indeed, conversationalists: gendered norms of seclusion were weak and many had time to indulge in the past and its presence. That being said, my attention was quasi-naturally narrowed down to male perspectives.[8] Along with a more fraught access to women, in the beginning this rested also in the structure of formal encounters and, most importantly, in what seemed to be the nature of things spoken about. In the hierarchical structure of familial order, my interest in the environment, past and mobilities was largely understood to be of male concern; and the trajectory and venues of a necessarily gendered fieldwork only enforced this. Through long-term relations and my interest in silenced perspectives, I tried to unmake these limitations. Yet my data remains thus focussed.

1.2. Structure of the Thesis

To engage the questions outlined so far, I rely on an approach informed by three distinct fields of inquiry – the fields of environmental anthropology, social memory studies and forced migration studies. I begin this thesis with a brief overview over relevant theoretical developments within these fields.

Following the theoretical framework, I devote a short chapter to the delta's geomorphology. I do so mainly to outline the context within which the shrinkage of islands and landscapes occurs. Only through the emphasis on the socio-environmental production of the 'dying river' can, I suggest, the complexity of the issues at hand be addressed in a meaningful way. Complementing

[7] Most often the limitations of exchanges with younger women were unmade in corrections and critical remarks bursting into conversations between men. Here young women repeatedly entered interactions and articulated their perspective – although not along standardized dynamics that Roy, for instance, notes in her study on rural Bangladesh (B. Roy 1994).

[8] I intentionally use the plural form of male perspectives to step beyond the much criticised, yet still prominent monolithic notion of 'masculinity' (Connell 1995; Harms 2010).

this contextualization, in the chapter 4 I outline various dimensions, discourses and tropes along which the island entered globalized debates from early on.

After these reflections on ecology and history, in chapter 5 I finally turn to ethnography. I begin with an introduction to the most important locality of this thesis. That is, I situate Gaṅgāsāgar Colony within present flows and exchanges, outline various spatial practices along which the Colony is dwelled in. This will be followed by a brief account of the complex social life the single most important building pattern – the embankment – has in everyday life.

In Chapter 6 I turn to the means of survival in these hazardous scapes. I outline the variety of work relations as well as networks they rely upon that are, taken together, an important fragment of the possibility to know the environment and to survive in it. In lieu of a comprehensive study of these complex, flexible and situated practices I emphasize moments of agency and adaptation. These help correcting local, regional and global emphases on victimization.

Thereafter, in chapter 7, I interrogate the texture of the disaster. I do so by following localized perceptions of what the disaster really is. That is, I confront the relative irrelevance of storms and floods with the much more loathed erosions themselves. To fuller engage the latter I dwell on their particular temporality and outline localized patterns of erosions. I show how groups of victims emerge despite the spatially and temporally dispersed nature of the shrinkage. And, furthermore, how efficient adaptations to the vagaries of waterscapes noted across Bengal come to an end here. I conclude the chapter with an account of socially-mediated expectations of future disasters, that is, with localized perspectives on persistence and negotiations of an expected climate change.

In chapter 8 I turn towards the past as it was remembered by displaced islanders. Engaging life histories and outlining their tropes and master narratives, I situate erosions and displacements within broader histories. I show that the displacements sustained by encroaching waters are but an instant of recurrent losses and made sense through these. Complementing this powerful theme, I draw attention to the way the past emerges as one of emplacements and joys, too. Going through narratives of despair and creativity; losses, hazards and re-rootings I demonstrate, furthermore, that the past is remembered in quite uniform patterns. Both, with respect to pasts emphasized and pasts silenced. Building on these shifting pasts I show, finally, how the stigma of being a group of displaced islanders has been shaping the everyday within one particular Colony, while it was largely unmade in Gaṅgāsāgar Colony. I then go on demonstrate the effects of a particular memory work performed in interactions mainly with arriving media persons. I argue that these encounters highlight particular past and identities at

the cost of others. Throughout this chapter I also show that the dispersed temporal and spatial patterns of coastal erosions are countered through narrative structures freezing drawn-out processes of shrinkages into eventful moments. I argue that this mode helps establishing collective experiences and legibility in the face of deep uncertainties.

The latter problem, uncertainty, is engaged in greater detail in chapter 9. Here I unravel the various dimensions along which the encroachments of brackish waters and the disappearance of islands was made sense of. I analyze localized perception of currents and waves; of ships and port authorities and the moment of a political sacrifice along which the present is understood and claims are made. Similarly, I take perceptions which invest anthropomorphic and divine traits in the river's waters into account. Building on the latter, I show that localized perceptions of the intensely revered deity Gaṅgā differ considerably from translocal patterns. I also show that amidst all uncertainties the very presence of several divine, masculine actors was seen to guarantee an ultimate protection of the island and its inhabitants.

2. Theoretical Approaches

2.1. (De)naturalizing the World: Theoretical Approaches

> I am a creature of the mud, not the sky.
>
> Donna Harraway, *When Species Meet*

Nature is, Raymond Williams famously noted, "[…] one of the most complex words" (1983, 219) and entails a tremendous amount of ideological work (Williams 1980). To outline how I will address nature in this thesis, I will have to begin with critical reflections on the concept itself. Building thereupon, I will outline anthropological contributions to the field and, finally, turn to disastrous disruptions and environmental forms of suffering.

The notion of nature has two immediate dangers. Both relate to its exceptional grammatical form: the collective singular. This form implies that nature is one and one of a kind. But in many non-western and other-modern contexts the environment is not framed in this way (Luig 2002a). Secondly, it articulates an objectification, an ontological Othering of the biophysical. Elaborating on Heidegger's meditation on the concept of *physis*, Descola noted (1996, 98; cf. Heidegger 1976) that the notion of nature "[…] functions as an encompassing totality defining

the very characteristics of each of the notions it opposes." Its complexity rests, in other words, on the variety of the antithetical opponents it is related to: culture; super-nature; art; history; mind and so on.

Through what Descola (Descola 2011, 61f) has called the 'naturalization of the world' (*naturalisation du monde*), western modernity imagines itself as set apart from an unified, presumably pre-social nature. This act of distancing culminated in a paradox: It subjected certain parts of nature to dramatic exploitation and degradation, while other parts of nature were subjected to a modern aesthetic and became sites of the sublime (see e.g. Luig 2002a; Frömming 2008). Still, with all its ideological weight, the 'naturalization of the world' appears, as Latour insists (2004), as an unfinished and ultimately illusory project.[9] Neither in terms of cultural production, positivist science nor through (sustained) control has it never been possible to sustain a clear dividing line (see i.e. Krauss 2007; Krauss 2009; Helmreich 2009). To speak of (one) nature, hides the latter's manifold facets and layers; its various discursive and symbolic dimensions; its deep correlations with human bodies and social history (Schama 1996; Bender 1993; Ingold 2000). And it is nothing less than a tragedy that precisely in the historical moment of the anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), theorists, activists and artists alike cling to the notion of the untouched, the wild.[10]

In light of the deep entanglements of culture and nature, of bodies and material flows, many writers have chosen to deconstruct the notion, while others have largely abandoned 'nature' for the sake of 'environment'. Some, however, despise the functionalist pinch of 'environment' or its perceived one-dimensionality and retain the notion of nature in a cautious way (Gold and Gujar 2002, 9). On the following pages I will follow suit and use the notion of nature in a reformulated way and with critical attention to the various discursive dimensions entailed in necessarily localized and very often messy conceptions of the biophysical. Precisely to capture

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[9] As a project it is related to the greater project of European Enlightenment and has been travelling along globalized spheres ever since. The powers of economic or cultural dominance have facilitated the mimesis, transfer and translation of these approaches in far-flung places. While the familiarity with the nature-culture divide across diverse contexts today is an historical outcome rather than an instance of universalism, the concept's travels have opened up space of hybridizations (Cruikshank 2005, 245).

[10] The notion of the anthropocene is intended to capture the effect that humanity has become a geological force shaping earth on a planetary level and, most likely for millennia to come. Man is thus understood not only to shape and alter nature but the geological foundations thereof. Highly evocative, the notion is also a significant departure from earlier approaches to the social fabrications of nature. Marx' theorization of nature as the product of and as accessible only through labour is of a more limited scale. "Animals and plants", he wrote (Marx and Engels 1967, 1:188), "which we are accustomed to consider as products of nature, are in their present form, not only products of, say last year's labour, but the result of a gradual transformation, continued through many generations, under man's superintendence, and by means of his labour." His conceptions are easily accommodated with today's insistence on the anthropocene.

the dynamic engagement with the latter, that is the materiality of being and the ensuing co-substantiality of mind and matter. Helpful to capture these dynamics are, I argue, the notions of entanglement and scape (Appadurai 1996, 48 – 65; Randeria 2006). For every concept of nature is, as K. Sivaramakrishnan claims, produced at the convergence of powerful biophysical processes and human interventions (see also Rademacher 2011, 15 – 17). He writes (Sivaramakrishnan 1999, 292):

> "Human agency in the environment, mediated by social institutions, may flow from cultural representations of processes in 'nature' but we cannot forget the ways in which representations are formed in lived experiences of social relations and environmental change."

Engaging primarily the interplay of material and social dynamics, Sivaramakrishnan also reminds us of the varieties of natures. Nature is made, engaged, appropriated and interpreted in encounters saturated with power. What it is and ought to be, is therefore contested along unpredictable lines of difference. South Asian natures have emerged here as a particularly rich, dynamic and fraught field (see e.g. Greenough and Tsing 2003) that clearly transgresses monolithic versions of say, 'Hindu concepts of nature' (Coward 2003). Imbued with orientalist notions, the latter approaches continue to reappear in Asian environmentalism and are, thus, far from obsolete (Haberman 2006).[11]

Furthermore, various regimes of natures appear to be unevenly distributed, yet coexisting (Escobar 1999). Interrelated in hybrid formations and localized trajectories, appropriations of nature are neither simply manifestations of historical periods nor aligned to neat epistemological orders. Unfolding along material, political and cultural dynamics all at once, these localized encounters emerge as, what Anna Tsing has called, frictions (Tsing 2005). That is, they have to be understood not simply as collisions, but as moments of tension between discursive formations and material flows from where localized versions of the extra-local emerge. As a dynamic and project, nature flows – to put it in other words – from concrete encounters that conflate bio-physical processes with cultural dynamics and power. For, questions of power are not external to, but always an integral part of environmental relations (Wolf 1972).

[11] In a fundamentally different context, the anthropologist William Sax (1998) has equated the interplay of orientalist depictions and their influence on South Asian thought with a 'hall of mirrors'. Presumably Hindu or Buddhist or Indian conception of nature are a prime example of subtle mimesis involved in the (post)colonial encounter.

Coming into being through entanglements and frictions, the environment emerges not as a given entity nor as a balanced whole, but as ephemeral outcome of unstable and multidimensional processes.[12] Both – the conceptualization as disequilibrium and the emphasis on social natures – combined in the radicalized understanding of present environments as being mutually created by various categories of actors, including but not limited to humans. From here it is but a short step to frame the biophysical as a creative process. Materiality is, so it is now widely argued, the outcome of a dynamic, yet uneven interplay of society and landscape, of body and matter (see e.g. Latour 1993; Ogden 2011). Both emerge as deeply entangled and mutually co-evolving even when they may appear as stable at any given present moment. Brought explicitly to the level of anthropological analysis, societies and environments are bound up in transformative processes that make landscapes what they are as much as giving shape to the way human actors move through them (Ingold 2000). Veronica Strang has recently captured these multifaceted and complex patterns as a process of 'gardening of the world' (2009).

2.1.1. Disentangling disasters

Within the last decades, social disasters have become a concern also of environmental anthropology. The boom in disaster theory – explained by many with an increase of disasters or the visibility thereof and by others with a growing fascination of dramatic imageries (Briese and Günther 2009, 192 – 194) – resonates clearly in anthropology. After scattered engagements (e.g. Firth 1959), social disasters have now become the subject of dedicated debates (see e.g. Torry 1984; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Luig 2012).

The diverse field of disaster and risk studies, to which anthropology now lively contributes, can heuristically be divided into (a) inquiries into the genesis of risks and disasters; (b) the immediate effects and experiences of shaken worlds; and (c) ensuing processes and long-term effects. Throughout these interdisciplinary inquiries the label 'natural' or 'unnatural' disaster

[12] The theoretical shift from wholes (and, hence, limitation, adaptation and stability) towards larger processes and imbalanced mutualities is often understood as the divide between ecological and environmental anthropology respectively. Not appearing out of thin air, or course, the shift rests on theoretical developments in various disciplines (Biersack 1999; Kopnina and Shoreman-Ouimet 2011). Crucial was the emergence of the so-called New Ecology and the embracing of political economy. In their respective ways, both these developments underlined the embeddedness of given ecosystems or societies along temporal and spatial scales. The former emphasized the beauty of nonequilibrium states and its complex trajectories were anything but loss or devastation. The latter, instead, asked for questions of power that are not external to, but always an integral part of environmental relations (Wolf 1972).

has lost much of its credibility. Simply because no disaster can ever be purely natural, nor can there be a social disaster that does not involve environmental dimensions.[13]

Inquiries into causations of disasters are deeply influenced by approaches from human geography. Resulting in, what is sometimes called, the complexity paradigm, path-breaking works emphasized that disasters do not simply occur but unfold in a complex, multifaceted interplay of power, space and hazard. The highly influential works by Hewitt, Bohle and Watts (Watts and Bohle 1993) or by Wisner and colleagues (Wisner et al. 2004) identified vulnerabilities of socio-spatial arrangements as fundamental precondition of disaster. Disasters are not of themselves, so it is argued, but events turn into disasters only under particular circumstances. Only when vulnerable conditions, in other words, met with an external shock or a particular hazard, as human geographers tend to put it, may societies be struck by disasters. Yet while hazards are often understood as quasi pre-social dynamics 'out there' (see Felgentreff and Dombrowsky 2008), their social implication has also been stressed: as condition (White 1974, 3) or perceptions and negotiations (e.g. Pelling 1999; Frömming 2006, 12 – 14).

Vulnerabilities proved to be in themselves multifaceted and politically charged. With all the ink spilled in the last two decades, definitions still remain hotly contested. However, most writers today locate *social vulnerability* in concrete historical developments, spatial arrangements and economic conditions that articulate power relations and again reinforce them. In a prominent formulation, the anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith (1996, 314) states:

> "[Disasters are] less as the result of geo-physical extremes […] and more as functions of an ongoing order, of this order's structure of human-environment relations, and of the larger framework of historical and structural processes, such as colonialism and underdevelopment, that have shaped these phenomena."

What on hindsight might seem to be an event – the collapsing city, the flooded fields or villages in fever –, emerged as the outcome of various processes that could be mapped on temporal and spatial scales. Most disasters are consequentially better understood as climactic points within longstanding developments: as accumulated events. While social disasters accentuate, thence, intersections across ecosystems and globalised spheres in sometimes dramatic ways, political dimensions of the fabrication of disasters are often sidestepped. Be it through the very rhetoric of nature, by the workings of structural violence (see i.e. Farmer 1996; Akhil Gupta 2012) or

[13] This proves immediately true when we take the environmental consequences of industrial accidents or war into account (Rajan 1999; Filippucci 2010). Only normalised genocides, experienced as disasters by its victims, may limit this argument. But even Adorno's perpetual catastrophe (*permanente Katastrophe*) – a notion intended to capture the social, cultural demise characterizing late modernity – is ultimately tied to environmental processes (work, urbanisation, degradation).

as effects of, what Ferguson (1990) has called, the 'anti-politics machine' (see e.g. Rajan 1999, 263 – 265; Sandesara and Wooten 2011). These difficulties notwithstanding, to many writers disasters emerge as opportunities to engage hidden structures of power and to work against them. Another line of writers (Voss 2006; U. Beck 2008) is reminded by these 'dreadful social processes' (*entsetzliche soziale Prozesse*) (Clausen, Geenen, and Macamo 2003) of persistent changes, contingency and, finally, the impossibility to control environment and technology.

Available accounts of *the experience* of disasters, allow glimpses into lifeworlds that are not reducible to bereavement and pain. Within and beyond the fight for survival, disasters are moments of dramatic, even traumatic suffering (see Erikson 1995; Sturken 1997). However within their existential struggles, victims are not reduced to, what Agamben (1998) framed, as 'bare life': neither stripped of agency, nor beyond the polity.[14] The opposite seems to be the case: survivors are active rather than passive; social orders may be reworked or revolutionized, but hardly disintegrate (Ethridge 2006, 805 – 809). Similarly, is the very unfolding of disasters enmeshed in situated practices and socially-mediated strategies: How persons and groups react to hazards within their given structures, perceptions and inclinations *makes* or *unmakes* the disaster. Embedded in cultural formations, specific bodies of knowledge or socio-economic horizons these practices entail crucial fragments of vulnerability and resilience.

Against all odds and throughout what is perceived as rupture, solidarities and particular modes of collectivity are enacted – only to become remembered later as precious moments encapsulated in the very horror (Hoffman 2002). Oliver-Smith frames it as the 'brotherhood of pain' (Oliver-Smith 1999) – and I will return to it in later chapters.

Much of the literature on the *aftermath of disaster* demonstrates the dissolution of a clear boundary of the time and space of disaster. The literature tells us, in other words, that disasters are not only to be mapped into deep histories, but linger on in various ways on. So much so that, what is experienced as the real disaster may begin only when the hazard has ceased and the event seems to external observers to be itself history. This applies to economy and survival, when, for instance, harvests are devastated and famine sets in months later (Firth 1959, 52f).[15]

[14] Agamben's intervention points, of course, to state power and the assumed ability to exclude subjects so much as to reduce them to 'bare life'. But the notion has been widely received and has become somewhat of a metonym for erasure and victimizations associated with powerlessness (cf. Butler and Spivak 2007, 39 – 41). In a critical fashion it can therefore be applied to disaster theory as well.

[15] In his classic ethnography on Oceania, Raymond Firth, witnessed long-lasting economic consequences. Destructive as the storm was that hit the island, it was its destruction of fields and future harvests that caused equal or more suffering: the interruption of the agricultural cycle, however, became acutely felt only months after the event. Scarcity ensued and turned into a deadly famine. Parallel developments have often been written about since.

But it applies also to coping and culturally-mediated patterns along which the events are made sense of.

Although even the most prompt disasters unfold as accumulated events, the imagery of striking or befalling disasters, of instantly shattered civilisations and certainties, and that of innocence and rupture still figures prominently in localized perspectives on disasters. The imagery seems, that much is safe to say, to fulfil diverse functions in coping strategies and cultural responses to disasters. Studies on the afterlife of disasters have shown a bewildering diversity of interpretations and engagements with these accumulated events. While some emphasize the radical openness, indeed: a distinct dynamic quality of the event itself, many others show how these events are integrated and made sense of along well established localized dynamics. A prominent theme here is, what might be called, an intimate linkage between environment and society established through the event. In this vein, disasters are often understood as a mirror of or an answer to social conduct; and appear to be included in surveillance and control. 'Natural disasters' have often become moralising instruments of punishment for wrongdoings (Frömming 2006; Schlehe 2010; Simpson 2011); a proxy to understand, criticise and control society (Firth 1959, 80; Dove 2010); or moments of development of the self (Zaumseil and Prawitasari-Hadiyono 2012).

As much as environmental hazards unfold in localized fields of power, they resonate with and shape the latter (Sökefeld 2012). Indeed, disastrous events and processes deeply transform societies. For disasters actually shape lifeworlds of survivors across emotional, social and material registers. Recent studies have shown that disaster, society and landscape are in the wake of an event or dramatic process intimately tied to each other. To such an extent that each of the three constituents has to be understood as having become what it is only through the event itself (F. Hastrup 2011a). To speak of affected societies and communities is, therefore, ultimately misleading. As much as it is theoretically problematic to distinguish between immediate effects and lasting consequences. Where would one draw the line? Where would recovery begin and what could it be? Yet administrators tend to distinguish between the event and its wake and in many cases survivors, too. Not only the force of the event or of intensified suffering, but also the emerging possibilities to restructure the landscape materially and politically in the aftermath (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005) and to engage these as sites of resistance (Swamy 2011; Vaughn 2012) seem to suggest that. Taken together, they inscribe an eventfulness that is ultimately misleading. The inclusion of devastated localities into globalised

scapes, complemented by the dissemination of memory practices, has only complicated these dynamics (see Chapter 2.2.1).

Against the background of globally circulating images and an ever uneven transnational generosity, the question of vulnerability in the *wake of* social disasters calls for a nuanced treatment. There is no denying the fact that many, if not most disasters deepen social vulnerabilities among already marginalized populations and feed, therefore, into ensuing disasters. Yet, other, widely circulated events set into motion funds and expertise that may strenghten local adaptation and safeguarding measures and, thus, help to decrease social vulnerabilities (F. Hastrup 2011b; Schild 2012). These dynamics highlight, thus, the open-ended political processes which disasters are necessarily bound up with (Bryant and Bailey 1997, 28 – 32).

2.1.2. Suffering Disastrous Environments

The sensory richness and drama of, for instance, a tsunami or an earthquake will hardly cease to be experienced as an event – regardless of how efficiently the externalization of the hazard might be deconstructed or the social vulnerability proven to be processual. However, a range of other hazards and disasters are framed as being precisely of an uneventful kind. Falling out of the grid of the analytical procedures of sociological and geographical approaches – privileging, as it were, massive destructions, collapsing institutions and shattered certainties[16] – that other kind may at times emerge as no less threatening nor disastrous.

The disastrous accident that occurred in India's Bhopal roughly thirty years ago is an entanglement of both modes and tenses. When the gas repository exploded in Union Carbide's pesticide factory, the poisonous cloud did not only kill thousands in *that night*, as survivors put,

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[16] Taking his cue from the insistence that disasters are non-routine events, Quarantelli, probably the most influential writer of the American sociology of disasters, differentiates between emergency, disasters and catastrophes (Quarantelli 2005). All are sudden and unexpected events that differ with respect to the devastations and, more importantly perhaps, the afflicted society's capacity to manage. While emergencies are more or less efficiently handled within the procedures of specialists, catastrophes are marked by dramatic destructions and the breakdown or utter irrelevance of societal arrangements to response.

The German sociology of disasters similarly emphasizes the role of specialists, but dwells to a somewhat higher degree on the breakdown of socially-mediated conceptions and frames of reference. Catastrophes, then, are understood to be falsifications of societies (*Realfalsifizierungen*) articulating the shortcomings of response mechanisms and entail, at its extremes, the liquidation of values (Voss 2006). While both sociological models imply drawn-out temporalities, both models still hinge on an event, a shock, a turbulence. In short, they are concerned with externalized hazards exploding into quotidian routines and, at its worst, imploding societal arrangements.

but it entered the earth, plants and water of the city and from there the flesh and bones of its populations. For a countless number of those who survived the night, but who could not and still cannot flee, it made life miserable. It enfolded the everyday into, what might be framed, a persistent disaster (V. Das 1996a; Rajan 2001). That what Bhopal now stands for is, thus, both the aftermath of an event and the still unfolding presence of disaster.[17] In living after the cloud, the everyday is toxic, is interwoven with or better: is in itself of a disastrous quality. The troubles affecting Bhopal's everyday are mirrored in a range of landscapes marked by encoraching ruinations and elusive toxicity (cf. Stoler 2008). Be it around nuclear testing sites (see i.e. Kuletz 2001), industrial compounds (Auyero and Swistun 2009; Kane 2012) or through large-scale development projects (Glantz 1999).[18] But while in Bhopal and elsewhere the suffering can be pinpointed to a certain event and group of actors (that night, the Company), in many other cases, time, culprit and, indeed, the hazard itself seem often to be buried within cultivated uncertainty (Auyero and Swistun 2009). Obviously, the question of responsibility makes a great difference for claims on victimisation and justice (see V. Das 1996a); and, equally important, to make sense of a toxic everyday.

This leads to yet another entanglement of eventful and gradual mode of social disasters: anthropogenic Climate Change.[19] Most attentive writers are aware that Climate Change entails both the increase in disastrous events and an overall degradation of particular global regions. And while there is a strong emphasis (see e.g. Billett 2010; Jogesh 2012) on meteorological shock in scientific literature and the public imagination – storms, floods, rapid changes – slow and creeping changes are nonetheless widely framed as being disastrous. As much as climate change forces us to rethink the notion of history and nature (D. Chakrabarty 2009), it also forces us to reconsider the diverse temporalities of disasters and, thus, the notion itself.

The environmental historian Rob Nixon understands degradations such as these as 'slow violence'. In an engaging, programmatic passage he writes (Nixon 2011, 2):

[17] The anthropologist Kim Fortun demonstrates how the state tried to enforce a sense of closure and therefore a management that amounted to a grave simplification of the toxic and unfolding nature of the event (Fortun 2000). Although the enforcement of a settlement with the victims clearly followed political interests, it also pointed at the difficulties in addressing unbounded processes and to make them liable to claims for justice.

[18] Writing on the Aral lake, Michael Glantz notes 'creeping environmental problems' that cause a material decline of the waterbody and render biotic live, including that of humans, ultimately impossible (Glantz 1999). He hints, therefore, implicitly at the figuration of displacement I engage in this study.

[19] Climate is never static, but always evolving; and climate change, therefore, ubiquitous. Even though the changes may in themselves be hardly discernible. However, various social interventions throughout the last several centuries, have accelerated particular trajectories of change or broadened their effects. Throughout this thesis I use the notion of climate change to capture these latter dynamics.

> „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 as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, 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. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. Climate change, […] deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively."

Beyond his insistence on drawn-out disasters and their barely visible, yet existential threats, he also points to the difficult relation of environment and violence. Leaving the intricacies of this relation in Western thought aside, I want to emphasize questions of power and the mutuality of society and environment to approach the issue. If, as shown above, the environment is approachable and accessible only through webs of power; if the entitlements to nature's bounties and the possibilities to flee nature's wrath are always uneven; if nature flows from social practice; and if futures are lost due to anthropogenic degradations, than it is but a small step to conceptualize certain environmental states or shocks as a form of violence (see also Hartmann and Boyce 1983; Watts 1983). To be sure, the question of a perpetrator, which is fundamental for most definitions of violence, can only be answered indirectly – but that only underlines what Nixon noted about the problem of representation and uncertainty (Cf. Gardiner 2011).

In this perspective, Nixon's slow violence appears as a figuration within the broader category of structural violence. For it is part of normalized conditions that render marginalized populations subject to poverty, injustices and death (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Farmer 1996; Bourdieu 2010); that produce particular embodied subjectivities and distinct trajectories of suffering. The latter have been approached through the concept of social suffering and, thus, by asking, as the authors of a foundational volume put it (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1996, IV), "[…] how such pain is produced in societies and how acknowledgment of pain, as a cultural process, is given or withheld." Not only the genealogy of suffering, but the articulation and attribution of meaning emerges, thus, as fundamentally social and deeply imbued in power relations. Ramu Nagappan (2008, 11) writes,

> "[Social suffering] pertains to the sometimes unknowable and innumerable physical and emotional wounds in the community, to the varieties of distress mediated by gender, class, caste, and religious affiliation."

Writing about life in a marginalized settlement engulfed by highly polluting, petrochemical industries in urban Argentine, Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun recently coined the concept of environmental suffering. Through the latter notion they intend (2009, 17) to capture, "[…] a particular form of social suffering caused by the concrete polluting actions of specific actors […]". Both, in its material and symbolic dimensions.

In shanty towns or on marginal embankments, environmental hazards hardly form neatly isolatable threats to well-being or survival, but affect groups or individuals in combination with economic relations and political conditions. Environmental hazards and their disastrous repercussions may, thus, be engaged as spread out on two different dimensions. As slow degradations, gradual changes and accumulating losses they are drawn-out on temporal scales. Secondly, they merge with various other detrimental effects of marginalisation. Taken together, the slow violence of environmental degradation feeds into what Henrik Vigh called 'chronic crises' (Vigh 2008). Drawing heavily on Walter Benjamin and Pierre Bourdieu he reminds us that marginalised lifeworlds are characterised largely by critical states that have to be navigated as conditions and not as exceptions. What we have to account for are *normalized conditions* of decay. Slow, encroaching disasters, on the other hand, involve given societies, furthermore, in a fundamentally uncertain way. Rob Nixon's formulations capture this well: uncertainty is rooted similarly in the temporal drawn-out-ness, the near invisibility, and the dispersed patterns of affection. The question of the what, who and why which seems to effectively defined in localized frames when applied to punctual disasters, gives rises to doubts and agonising diversity of explanations in situations of slow violence or encroaching disasters. Yet, as I will show, particular hazards, or to be more precise: particular moments of living through these hazards emerge as disastrous events. Both, for small groups and as remembered past for whole societies. Dramatic destructions and intense suffering have to be made meaning of – and because societal wholes are shaken, afflicted and deeply involved, interpretations of the event(s) are mostly swiftly arrived at. Either through stabilizations or ruptures. Of course, re-interpretations of the political in the wake of disasters do not appear out of no-where. Only within situations of, what Susan Neiman calls, 'saturation' can disasters become moments of conceptual, epistemic or political changes (2002). Furthermore, when they occur within such

saturated times as tipping points, than the changes will happen astonishingly quick.[20] And even if not, they do so with clear reference to an obvious event.

2.1.3. On Resilience

But if disasters are processes and unfold in situations marked by historically deep social vulnerabilities than they are bound up, too, with similarly diverse processes and configurations unmaking disasters. That is, social configurations, capabilities or practices that help to avoid hazards or to withstand disaster. Acknowledged implicitly or explicitly (Waddell 1975) in ethnography, these patterns were long overshadowed by the more nuanced attention to vulnerability. While this certainly has changed as resilience emerged as a buzzword in scientific debates on environmental hazards and Climate Change, another difficulty set in: definitions and usages are still haphazardly vague and unclear (Manyena 2006; Reghezza-Zitt et al. 2012).

This vagueness may be partly explained also with the fact that the notion entered scientific debates roughly in the same time via two entirely distinct routes. Earlier were influential studies of development psychologists framing resilience as a personal capacity to psychologically develop under trying circumstances (Werner, Bierman, and French 1971). Only two years later and without taking note of the other work, the ecologist Crawford Stanley Hollig framed resilience as an (eco-)systemic capacity to absorb external shocks and still persist (Hollig 1973; see also Folke 2006). From here on, the concept has been introduced into environmental sciences broadly defined. Debates about Climate Change have given a new urgency to the notion and cemented an ecosystemic understanding of resilience. The popularity of the term notwithstanding, sustained efforts to embrace the historical constituents and social dimensions of resilience (as it is well established with respect to vulnerability) still seem to be in their infancy (see K. Hastrup 2009).

Of course, the confusion of how to define partly rests in the inherent difficulties of interdisciplinary debates to accommodate diverse approaches and logics, as well as widespread tendencies to outgo others (*Überbietungstendenzen*) that chronically complicate scientific debates (Briese and Günther 2009, 193f). But it is also rooted in the problem itself: In contrast to social vulnerability, it is still unclear and heatedly debated where exactly the societal

[20] All these dynamics are, of course, not tied to postmodernity alone. The famous earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 is a good example for the complex and dialectical repercussions of particular disasters in early modernity – indeed, for the routes and trajectories of globalisation traceable through this event (Neiman 2002, 240 – 249).

possibilities to withstand might be located. Certainly, spatial figurations and the efficiency of (governance) institutions are important (William Neil Adger 2001; Nelson, Adger, and Brown 2007). But if we understand resilience to emerge from distinct capacities or situated practices allowing for successful adaptations or mitigations (Harms 2012; Lauer 2012), than it becomes difficult to precisely locate these capacities. One starting point to counter these vagaries are the resilience's temporal layers.

One important, yet limited approach to capture the temporaility of resilience pertains to endangered or lost, but somewhat redemptive local knowledge.[21] Thus, in much of the literature on social resilience and climate change, temporal layers are invoked as a proxy to uncover local knowledge (W. Neil Adger et al. 2005) or forms of cultural capital constituted by past experiences (Berkes, Colding, and Folke 2003). Social memory, while occasionally quite broadly defined,[22] emerges here effectively as a tool to retrieve 'traditional knowledge' (in the singular) or as means of intergenerational learning.[23] While it embraces localized and other-modern forms of knowledge, this approach has severe shortcomings. For it falls in the trap of associating certain populations with particular places and particular types of knowledge (cf. Kalland 2005; Buege 2008); frames knowledge as a body that can be tapped in and recovered in a supposedly pristine state; and blends over tensions, varieties and intertextual borrowings that characterize mnemonic practices.

In her study of reconstructions after the Boxing Day Tsunami in a small coastal village in South India, Frida Hastrup tracks resilience in, what she calls, the temporal span of the disaster. Her interest therefore marks not so much resilience as avoidance, but rather the resilience of and within the social response to the disaster. Weaving the dramatic events that swept and shattered

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[21] Throughout this thesis I use local knowledge as a shorthand for all that subsumed under Traditional Knowledge (TK), Traditional Ecological/ Environmental Knowledge (TEK) and so on. I use it furthermore along the lines of what Antje Linkenbach called 'localised knowledge' (*lokalisertes Wissen*) – that is, with processual reformulations, reflections of its contents and entanglements with other forms and contents of knowledge (Linkenbach 2004, 255f). It is important, hence, to keep in mind that bodies of knowledge relating entirely and only to environments do not exist: Knowledge is always related, as Talal Asad reminds us, to other domains as well (Asad 1993). Similarly, the notion of traditional knowledge appears to be misleading, as knowledge is always evolving: We could perhaps speak of traditionalized knowledge as that knowledge which is produced as and deemed to be traditional and therefore intimately related to cultural politics, belonging and territoriality. Knowledge, however, is, as Geertz has shown (Geertz 1983), always localized – be it in the armchair, the laboratory or on India's coasts.

[22] Drawing on the anthropologist Roderick McIntosh, Fikret Berkes and his colleagues define social memory as "[…] the arena, in which captured experience with change and successful adaptations, embedded in a deeper level of values, is actualized through community debate and decision-making processes into appropriate strategies for dealing with ongoing change [...]" (Berkes, Colding, and Folke 2003, 21).

[23] That is, when it is reduced to a homogenising capacity. The same applies, as I have shown above, to an understanding of social resilience as capacity and may be avoided, I argue, by an understanding of social resilience as a situated practice.

this coast into a localized “temporal envisioning” established, she argues, a sense of direction and engenders resilience to live through the aftermath of the horrid tsunami (F. Hastrup 2009, 124f, 128).

Theorizing resilience from the angle of avoidance and survival, Lauer and many others (Lauer 2012; see also Randeria 2003a; Tsing 2005) examine the messiness of localized knowledge about impending disasters and the situatedness of practical response as dramatic events actually unfold. Writing on a Tsunami that struck the Solomon islands, Lauer shows immediate response were often not characterized by the activation of a ‘traditional’ knowledge or the actualization of oral histories, but were rather characterized by diverse bodies of knowledge and trajectories. Hybrid knowledge – gathered from radio, community programmes, NGO activities and mingled with localized cosmologies and embodied knowledge – does, so he writes, not signify a loss, but marks situated practices that are resilient themselves (Lauer 2012, 284).

Regardless of the orientation on temporal scales – avoiding disaster, navigating through it or living in its wake – resilience remains in every case a relational category. It encompasses the possibility to avoid particular disasters and others not. Indirectly, this points to another problem: to the fact that resilient behaviour itself may be so only in the short term and only for limited groups of actors within a given ecosystem. When, as will be demonstrated, localized communities manage hazards and avoid breakdown (through, for instance, economic flexibility, shared histories or social expectations), this may actually entail degradations for other constituents or the whole ecosystem. Resilience is, therefore, not automatically mutually constitutive across a given system, as Adger and others insists (W. Neil Adger 2000; Finan 2009), but rather situated and again dispersed on a timeline.[24] Processes and content of social memory in either case play a decisive role for the unmaking of or the coping with disastrous processes. To use them in a balanced and critically attentive way, I will now turn to the theoretical engagement with the persistence of the past in the present and its hold on the future: memory.

[24] Social lifeworlds are therefore bound up in, what Lauer and his colleagues call ‘resilience trade offs’ (2013). That is, the decrease of vulnerability to some hazards at the cost of an increasing vulnerability to others.

2.2. Figurations of Social Memory

Silence is what makes sound into song.

Indra Sinha, *Animal's People*

It took several decades before the social scientific inquiry into social memory, established by Maurice Halbwachs and Aby Warburg, gained momentum. Not entirely forgotten, but with little immediate consequence, it ascended to a paradigmatic approach for the humanities (Uhl 2006), only at the historical juncture of vanishing modernity. Social disasters – as the holocaust, the world wars and culminations of imperialist cruelties in the colonies – enforced, on one hand, a new interest in the past. As a moment to cope or to find a way back into the present and its futures; as a moment of general witness to atrocities. On the other hand, with what Lyotard captured evocatively as the end of Grand Narratives, ideas of progress and teleological salvation began to fade. This translated into a renewed interest in multiple, fragmented pasts, engulfed diverse academic debates and instigated interdisciplinary approaches and gave them a sense of urgency. With vastly different historical applications and methodological approaches, the sheer number of umbrella terms for the field mirrors the uncertainty on what it really is we are talking about (Argenti and Schramm 2010, 1).

Two critical qualifications are necessary. One points at the risk of overgeneralization. If the notion of social memory is applied to rituals, habits, and unconscious gestures alike – as some writers do (see e.g. Connerton 1989) – then the theory of social memory becomes ultimately yet another theory of culture (Berliner 2005). Clearly, remembering plays a vital role in the production or reproduction of cultures and societies. It is the lifeblood of learning, of recognition and intentional actions. Without remembering neither would symbols be legible nor, say, the navigation of one's environment be possible. Skills, after all, are gained at the interface of environment and body and through skills does the body (learn to) remember these engagements (Palsson 1994), as much as the effects of these engagements may be inscribed into the material surroundings (Ingold 1993).[25] The past is, therefore, not a foreign country but rather are we, in the words of Tim Ingold paraphrases Susann Küchler (Ingold 1996, 164; see also Küchler 1996), "[…] creatures of the past abroad in the present." Against this background

[25] In his brilliant essay on landscape and dwelling, Ingold notes (1993, 152f): "To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perpetually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past."

it is imperative to emphasize that individual or personal memories are not at all meant to be clearly delimited from social ones. Both are implied in dialectical relations, as well as in expanding rounds of, what Jacques Derrida captured as, *différance*. Memories overlap and interrelate: on the biophysical level of electric circuits in the brain; on the social level of belonging and shifting identities; and in, what might be constructed as, analogues between inner, social and material markers.[26]

To maintain analytical clarity, I will distinguish between various forms of remembering and reserve the notion of social memory only for those memories which are related to *distinct events* in the past. The difference here rests not in the social mediation in itself: all remembering is socially mediated, since all *actions*, *perceptions* and in the anthropocene also all *environments* are socially mediated. But only a fraction of all memories relate to distinct events or processes; and only a fraction entails plotlines that are relevant for the group of narrators, performers and their audiences. I will retain the notion of social memory to capture only this particular fraction.

Another qualification points to the dynamics and spaces of social memory. In his seminal work, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann distinguishes between differing layers of memory along their societal validity, fixity and implied temporal framework (J. Assmann and Czaplicka 1995). He understand collective memory as being constituted of cultural memory and communicative memory respectively. Ritualized repetitions, inscription – from books to artifacts – and transgenerational endurance are the characteristics of *cultural memory*. *Communicative memory*, on the other hand, points to relations with the past that are far less enduring and authoritative: recollections of the recent past shared within small groups – say, families and the past of their movement through time and space; as well as tacit or everyday knowledge of limited groups. Fleeting as communicative memories might be, they were shown to structure the texture of the everyday and that their power rests ultimately in its lived-in intimacy (Carsten 2007). Mediating between the largesse of public ceremonies and the implicitness of embodied memories, attention to these fleeting, limited and very dynamic patterns of communicative memory has proven to be a particularly useful line of inquiry (Welzer 2008).

Contrary to what Pierre Nora believes (1989), our times are therefore neither hollowed nor thinned out of the past. The postmodern present maybe a time of rupture and instabilities, but

[26] Neurologists working on memory, have been reported to distinguish between two different modes of material inscriptions of memories. Endograms, on the one hand, relate to inscription of contents as neuronal traces within individual brains. Endograms turn into exograms – the second category – as soon as they are seen as being or used as an external content (Welzer 2010, 3)

it is nevertheless, as recent studies have shown, one where the past lingers on.[27] Not so much maybe in large narratives, in mythology or in spectacle, but in practices of ritualized performances and gestures, random artefacts or in the materiality of things. In a word: in the texture of the everyday marked by conspicuous absences and through subjects that ever tread (not master) the line between inner and outer world. I will now turn to these dynamics and things in more detail. More important than the division of societies along an assumed richness or scarcity in past(s) seems to be critical attention to contextualised senses of history and, as Hirsch and Stewart note (2005, 162), to scrutinize "[…] the manner in which persons operating under the constraints of social ideologies make sense of the past, while anticipating the future".

2.2.1. Becoming Narrative

Often conflated, silence and forgetting are neither the same nor the effects of dysfunctional memory. Accentuating an absence, both are tied to the politics and poetics of memory (Dimbath and Wehling 2011, 19 – 21; Connerton 2008). In his theoretical essay on forgetting, the French anthropologist Marc Augé relies on a marine metaphor to capture the workings of forgetting. As the forces of land and water perpetually engage each other and produces, he argues, fickle shores, so are the pasts reworked, too. Resonating with the subject of this thesis on more levels than the matter at hand, he couples land with remembering and the sea with forgetting; while the outcome of their engagement, the patterned coast, is memory. Resembling the approach by Luhman and others,[28] he arrives at the conclusion, that there would be no result, no remembrance, without either of the constituents. To him (Augé 2004, 21) "[…] oblivion is the life force of memory and remembrance its product." However, he departs from Luhman in framing oblivion as much more than merely an ordering process. For him it emerges, instead, as part of narrative identity construction (Augé 2004, 55f).

Drawing on her ethnographic fieldwork, Janet Carsten arrives at closely related insights (1995). Researching Thai island communities in the Bay of Bengal, she was struck by the

[27] It would be wrong to assume, as Nora does, that the supposed other of modernity is almost naturally implied in persistent and tacit presences of the past. As much as the so-called modern Westerners, they have to literally *work* these ties to cultivate these ties and keep them intact (see e.g. Cole 2001).

[28] According to sociological systems-theory, the forgetting of the non-redundant enables order and orientation and is therefore a 'natural' precondition for brain and social functions (Esposito 2008; Esposito 2002; Luhmann 1998). Luhman, in whose steps Esposito theorizes, wrote famously (Luhmann 1998, 579 original emphasis): "Die Hauptfunktion des Gedächtnisses liegt also *im Vergessen*, im Verhindern der Selbstblockierung des Systems durch ein Gerinnen der Resultate früherer Beobachtungen."

extraordinarily shallow and blurry structures of localized kinship. Of course kinship mattered, but here more as a horizontal web laying emphasis on related *living persons* scattered in space, than deceased ones on a vertical ladder; and along, as she was to write later (Carsten 2000), flexible modes of relatedness. Migration, localized state relations and particular environmental dynamics contributed to this flexibility. Yet it was sustained by a particular forgetfulness. Ancestors, narrated pasts and events quickly ceased to play a prominent role, and were, one might add, almost strategically forgotten.[29] Allowing, thus, manoeuvring space for the present society – always young and always including arriving migrants – to evolve further. Forgetting, in a word, emergs as a productive practice;[30] productive even in denial and devastations (see also Connerton 2009).

Framed by the possibilities of speech, social memories unfold between actors, groups and various media. Here, in this intertextual and intersubjective realm, the narratives of social memories are forged and worked out or suppressed and denied. Memory is, as Lambek shows, always a relationship: to the past and among those who remember. He notes (1996, 240), "[m]emory is never out of time and never morally or pragmatically neutral." Similarly, memory is predominantly narrative. Johannes Fabian reminds us that even, what he calls, 'non-narrative memories' are accessible only as narrative (2007, 85) – as part of, say, memories articulated in conversations. Narrative and memories are therefore bound in a dynamic that is at once political tense and poetically inventive (see also Luig 2009, 265 – 269). Pointing, once again, to the possible distinction between memory as cultural practice and memory as political conflict (Uhl 2006).

I first turn to the narration of communities. While the production of sociality and coherence at the interface of fact, memory and narration certainly invites critical reflection of the craft of

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[29] Forgetting has become a crucial, if ambivalent strategy in societies coping with experiences of traumatic violence. Living in the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa or genocide in Rwanda, for instance, reconciliation of wounded groups has been grounded, among others, on ritualized forgetting (Connerton 2008). And sometimes has to need to forget to be remembered dearly – or else the group may fall apart (Mookherjee 2006).

[30] Hindu concepts of remembering and forgetting add another layer to these understanding. Forgetting here becomes neither an ordering, nor a creative, but rather a redemptive function. In theological perspective, for example, forgetting may be understood as the means to pass over or to avoid the unfolding of creation and to return thereby to a truth which is distinctively beyond history. This model, of course, points to the theme of cyclic time of Hindu cosmologies. The deterioration of sequential ages within each 'creation' rests not just in waning moralities, but, in a sense, in the unhindered unfolding of history itself. Causing decadence, poverty and strife, history leads as it unfolds away from the good beginnings and the even better condition of unfolded-ness. To live therefore is, in the words of Lawrence Babb (Babb 1982, 65), "to forget, and only the dead-in-life can remember." That is, only through the very act of renunciation, which is a death to the world of the living (*jinvanmukti*), may *truthful* remembrance be possible. To this Cohen adds a, what he calls, paradox of memory: As memory of sacral texts it "[…] points us beyond the illusory confines of this life to the cyclical unfolding of multiple lives. Yet memory prevents us from forgetting the phenomenal, nonessential names and forms […] and thus prevents us from realizing that which is essential behind the veil of samsara […]" (Cohen 1998, 143)

ethnography and its outcomes themselves (see e.g. Srinivas 1980), I have to emphasize here social constructions of belonging. Paul Ricoeur has rightly argued that these dynamics are at the core of engagements with the past and are being pursued by way of narrations (2012). By way of 'narrative emplotments', Ricoeur explains, groups embed themselves in larger storylines of their own making, give meaning to layers of succession and to the present. The usefulness of this approach notwithstanding, Ricoeur neglects the relevance of things, places and landscapes and, thus, the potential of materialities to underline and, in a sense, to nourish narrated pasts (Gottschalk 2001, 70f). I will return to these dimensions in the next section when I engage the mutuality of remembering and materiality.

Narrative emplotments are, furthermore, intimately tied to notions of rightful ownership, of exclusive membership or social hierarchies. They point to questions of power and the politics of narrative (see i.e. Said 1984). With regards to social memory it seems therefore necessary to complement the metaphor of the palimpsest (A. Assmann 1991) with the conception of 'master narratives'. While the former emphasize poiesis, the latter helps to confront the limits thereof. Or rather: the productive and not necessarily coercive workings of power (see Foucault 1990) in and through the domain of social memory. In recent literature, the concept of master narratives points to power-laden, narrative meta-structures shaping the thinkable, sayable and then again: that what can be remembered within a given present (see e.g. Zerubavel 1995).

Furthermore, commemorative narratives point to distinctive events, which are singled out as particularly important or characteristic. In a word: as worthwhile to remember.[31] On the narrative level do these events figure as structuring elements: they periodize and give an ideologically framed structure to the vast expanses of past. Ordering unbound time into places and sequences, these remembered events figure – according to the historian Yael Zerubavel – actually as turning points (1995, 8 –10). The symbolic wealth, political centrality and discursive ambiguity that these events obviously entail do not stem, she argues, from the past events themselves, but rather from their position within the narrative. Drawing on Turner's theory of liminality, she (1995, 10) writes:

> "The liminal position of the turning point allows for different interpretations, obscuring the tensions between them, and thereby protecting the sacredness of these events as well as their place within the master commemorative narrative."

[31] Even while, as Zerubavel points out (1995, 7), most commemorative narratives entail linear conceptions of time, they are in fact structured by recurring or actualized events, engendering thereby a "[…] tension between the linear and cyclical perceptions of history [that] often underlies the construction of collective memory."

These reflections on liminality and the event may help to illuminate the ambivalent relation of social memory and disasters; to explain why some disasters have such a hold on social memory while other seem to vanish almost without traces. Writing in the wake of the Shoah, Zerubavel reminds us that it was not the sheer magnitude, the grotesque proportions of suffering *alone* that made it the disaster it is, but its repercussions over time.[32] The historian Manfred Jakubowski-Tiessen (2004, 286) postulated that disasters remain engrained within social memory only when these memories involve distinct interpretations (*Deutungsangebot*) which are in themselves tied to legitimization of actions or to self-assurances (*Selbstvergewisserung*). In line with these considerations, the Shoah became the event it is *also* as it derailed identities and happened in a moment that called for a translation into action (see also Neiman 2002).[33]

But in thinking about disasters, we have to add another dimension of present pasts to these considerations. Writing about the Philippines, Greg Bankoff coined the notion of 'cultures of disasters' (2003). He demonstrated that on the Philippines disasters are 'frequent life experiences'. Occurring in a bewildering variety and number, localized cultures are well-adapted: in architectural practices and interpretations (Bankoff 2003) as well as in institutionalized reciprocity (Bankoff 2007), to name but a few. While the environmental hazards still unleash devastations and bring havoc, their very nature as disasters stands ultimately in question. For among witnesses they hardly resonate in the way they would in a less well adapted society. In other words, we encounter layers of social memories relating to disasters that have shaped identities and actions to such an extent that later disasters ultimately cease to be such. In a word, both, the liminality of the event and the event itself is, in a sense, negated.

Regardless if distinct events emerge as turning points or merely as recurring events, they are intimately related to a particular public. Speaking about social dimensions of remembering and forgetting, this is blatantly clear: diverse and dissecting publics serve as actors, performances and arenas of the production of memories. Several scholars have underlined, thus, what Assmann called the connective dimensions of remembrance (J. Assmann 2000, 108 – 112). Patterned memories are seen to produce publics through subjections to particular memories or

[32] This, of course, is not intended to question the horrors which are beyond words.

[33] What it means to be a Jew was to a considerable part reinvented through and after the event: it made Zionism an imperative, not just the ideology of a few. Similarly, the Jewish population in the Levant has been deeply refashioned through the Ashkenazi project of Zionism (Zerubavel 1995; Piterberg 2006). Without going into details, these dynamics highlight the impact the event had on actions and affirmative identities; and that the event is, conversely, known through these.

the fabrication of belonging. Often, yet not necessarily played out in public performances, these involve moral dimensions and claims to the future (Lambek 1996; Novetzke 2008, 25f).

Along the routes of increasingly globalized circuits of information flows, translocal intimacies and belonging anchored in far-away places, particular events involve global audiences. Large-scale disasters serve as a prime example here: They seem to be sending ripples across global spheres, are televised, capture the imagination and may enforce debates in great distance. Here, then, another form of the complexity comes in: the entanglement of events with their consequences and repercussions (Nancy 2012, 8). For their afterlife may be intimately shaped by imaginations and practices transgressing affected places and communities. To put it differently, as much as the meanings of particular events are debated elsewhere, they often come to be remembered by groups scattered across an entangled world. Casey frames these dynamics as 'public memories' – as instances of a global public that relates to particular events (2004). He argues that these articulations are not to be reduced to silent witnessing, but are bound up with localized patterns and activities of remembering in their respective sites. Yet, in a few cases at least, the workings of public memory do not stop at witnessing from afar and shape memory patterns among the very survivors themselves. Memorial activities devoted to the victims of 9/11 or the Boxing Day Tsunami are telling examples: Social memories of these events transgress affected sites or populations and forge witnessing and suffering among persons who have not been directly involved. Complementing images and narratives by survivors being spread along transnational flows, we see reverse flows cementing or fabricating particular ways to remember among affected communities. Through funding and interventions among survivors – such as memorials or invocation of victimization – memories and, thus, the afterlife of particular events are unintionally or intenionally shaped (Simpson and Alwia 2008; Miller and Bunnell 2011). Throughout this thesis I will retain the notion of 'public memory' for these uneven and dispersed patterns.

Bound up in dissecting publics and uneven relations, "[…] debates about the remembered and unremembered pasts" (Schmalz and Gottschalk 2010, 281) are, to add another crucial dimension, sites of domination as well as of defiance and resistance. Counter-memories – either in Foucault's sense of partial narratives or in the sense of complete, even autonomous versions of *another* history[34] – may be arranged around competing sets of events and media or around

[34] The influential Subaltern Studies group, for instance, propagated the view of autonomous cultural production beyond the grasp of dominant structures or discourses. Initially analysed within the framework of historical materialism and its teleological promises (see e.g. Ranajit Guha 1983), with the onset of deconstruction the voices and memories became later a matter of fundamental difference (see e.g. Spivak 1988).

the same events remembered in dominant storylines. However, inquiries into deviant narrative traditions have at times tended to gloss over internal differences and hierarchies and failed to acknowledge further mechanism of silencing, i.e. along the lines of gender. Ann Stoler and Karen Strassler (2000, 4) note,

> "Subaltern acts of remembering have not been in question because it is official memory that is on the line; the process of remembering and the fashioning of personal memories are often beside the political points being made, and may in fact be seen to work against them."

Narratives are, finally, subject to circumstance. Contrary to many a narrator's insistence, they are by definition unfinished and bound to be reworked by ensuing events and publics. Disasters, as instances of what Veena Das called 'critical events' (V. Das 1996a), therefore entail the potential to fundamentally change such particular figurations of a sense of history.

2.2.2. The Materiality of Remembering

Debates about social memory have from the very beginning been concerned with its material dimensions. I have alluded to the relevance of bodily practices above and want to turn now to the materialities of memorials, things and places. Of interest here is less, what might be called, the thingness of remembering, but rather the practices surrounding it. Tied and, how it might be seen, rooted in tangible objects, narrations of the past gain plausibility, while the objects may themselves emerge as substance of the past. Mutual identifications of past and object, of substance and media are – however durable and stable they may seem – always subject to dynamic and politically charged contestations, negotiations and appropriations in actual encounters.

Both, in the landscape of memorials and in interdisciplinary debates centred on these, the theme of wars, martyrdom and genocide loom particularly large. But what has repeatedly been identified as their underlying logic – the appropriation of losses into a particular sense of history – applies to memorial of environmental disasters, too. Particular Monument have been built as an attempt to adress the immense suffering and devastation in the wake of, say, recent South Asian earthquakes. Fashioned along elite aesthetics and real estate interests (Simpson and Alwia 2008), these memories have been largely unsuccesful as *popular* sites of remembering. A different picture emerges when we look at, what has been called, 'grassroots memorials' (Margry and Sanchez-Carretero 2011) and local appropriations of either official or grassroots

memorials (S. Wagner 2010; Revet 2011). These emerge as sites of struggle over the past and the claims routed therein; as tangible interfaces where various imageries continue to be remade. They may turn into sites, where new memories emerge or are skillfully crafted. That is, a memorial may not only "[…] become a device to think about an event" (Simpson and Alwia 2008, 7), but also an arena of distinct interactions that are in themselves remembered and woven into localized historicity (Feldman 2010).[35]

It is this intimacy, this productive encounter that connects the memorial to the relevance of smaller, everyday objects within patterns of memories. The ubiquity and perceived liveliness of small and quite often seemingly insignificant objects for memories is obvious. What at times appears to be an utterly private domain – enclosing personal stories into mute materials and interweaving both with the self – is nevertheless a social act. Various strands of memories may be woven into the same object by various persons and mutually evolve in narrative reconstructions.[36]

Approached differently, to be implicated in stories and the past, in many cases means to have relations with 'their' objects, too. But their sheer numbers should not hide the fact that they still are scarce resources. That is, while materials may help "[…] in *presencing* that which is absent […]" (Bille, Hastrup, and Sorensen 2010, 18, original emphasis) or to give fleeting stories a sense of permanence and even substance, things are in themselves fragile. They are endangered – in a sense more than stories – as they may fall prey to intended destructions, disasters or inevitable decay. Papers might be burned, washed away in nightly floods or eaten by moths as wood rots in salty environs. To these dimensions we have to add the speed of conspicious consumption marking the present and the threat to the durability of things inbuilt into ever narrowing circles of obsolescence (see Connerton 2008, 66f; Connerton 2009, 122 – 125).

Yet, it is precisely this fragility and ephemerality lending power to certain objects. Particular things unfold meaning and their ties with the past in their very decay. Particular african rituals performed to transfer kingly power from a deceased to his successor, for instance, are centered on ephemeral monuments built to rot (Argenti 2001). Similarly, decay has been included in

[35] Jackie Feldman's ethnography of staged witnesses at Holocaust memorials (2010) is another telling example: More than just excursion to memorials of traumatic violence, state-sponsored and organized journeys to Auschwitz are intended to install new memories in young Israelis (as they witness the survivor and the ruins) and, therefore, to tie the forgetful young generation to the national imagination of the Zionist state. The production of new memories converge, thus, with travelling publics visiting and revisiting certain spaces and fostering meaning and political identities.

[36] The picture on the wall or the chair in the living room may, similarly, point at once to the absence of loved persons, to the historic circumstances leading to their absence and finally emphasize the ebbs and flows of guilt or the necessity to remember, as Ricoeur claims (1999, 7), as duty to the dead.

modern memorial architecture as an artistic element itself (Robinson 2010). The power of most fragile objects, however, rests in the fact that they have persisted at all. Communities haunted by the violence of war, disasters or displacements have been shown to entertain intimate relations with trivial objects. As things that may either connect victims to the time before dreadful events and bridge, thereby, silenced pasts (Kidron 2009); or as things that allow in their persistence a sense of continuity and therefore a re-entry into normality, however modified (F. Hastrup 2009).

Memories, finally, are woven into places and landscapes. This rests partially in the latters' endurance as opposed to the impermanence of words and fragility of things. But it relates also to the experienced wholeness of places and landscapes. As such they might appear to hold, as Paola Filippucci (2010, 165) notes, "[…] the potential to evoke and therefore transmit the incommunicable". At first sight, landscapes seem to serve as kind of arena within which history unfolds and which holds testimony to the past. As if the landscape would remain unchanged by people's dwellings, by decay and reassembled ruins. The growing consensus on the impermanence of landscapes notwithstanding (see e.g. Ingold 1993), Carsten's words still ring true when she notes (2007, 14), "[t]he immobility of places provides a counterpoint to the movement of people."

Yet, they do not only serve as totalizing backgrounds of episodes imagined and ultimately frozen therein. But landscapes are made and tied up with, what Edward Casey calls, the implacement of being and society (2009). Cultural formations, he argues, are inconceivable beyond a place to take place within and, thus, necessarily implaced. Complementing Ricoeur's emhasis on narrative emplotments, he emphasizes dynamics along which actors *actively* place themselves within surrounding space and its time. Place and landscape emerge, thus, as spatial-temporal entanglements. At the merger of time and space, meaningful arrivals are constructed, transcendent presences added and accumulated environmental knowledge coded in specific forms – all culminating in social memories. Conversely, familiar landscape are known through social memory patterns entailing a sense of orientation and subjecting the surroundings to meaning. Mark Nuttall calls this coincidence of space, time and stories a 'memoryscape' (1991).

Contrary to, what might be perceived as inertia, landscape are continuously reworked and emerge, ultimately, as assemblages rich with histories. Kate McLoughlin reminds us (2010, ix), "[t]o view landscape solely synchronically risks overlooking what is not evident on the surface: the displaced, the buried, the otherwise vanished." Of relevance for mundane affairs, it holds

significance for extraordinary events and disasters, too. Communities that had to live through disasters experience their surroundings, as Uhlberg has shown, as 'disaster memoryscapes': as event and scape being bound up with each other; as an environment dotted with significant markers and ensuing political contestations (Ullberg 2010; cf. N. Fischer 2007).

Particular landscapes point to the possibility of a given landscape's very demise. Europe's famous war landscapes – as for instance the French Argonne researched by Filippucci (2010) – are a case in point. Reworked by the up and down of trenches, by years of shelling and firing, the landscapes they once were, have evaporated. With the devastation of markers, the Argonne lost its recognisability. Not only have artifacts as houses or bridges been gone, but entire landscape formations as molehills, rivulets or forests have fallen prey to the relentless war machinery. What is more: unmade and reassembled in a new form these scapes now stand, as Filippucci concludes, in their new totality as a sign for what unmade it. The shrinking landscapes that I will engage on the pages to come, are at once a more benign and more awful sight: free from nightmarish war, the landscapes literally evaporate making a return impossible and the past a surreal dream.

2.3. Of Fences and Lost Valleys: Genealogical Notes on 'Forced Migration'

Echoing 'memory', the experience of forced migration has become a pressing concern during the last decades. World War II emerged as tipping point in this regard, too. Massive upheavals fleeing the war machinery and, shortly thereafter, the outer delimitations of aspiring nation states and decolonizing territories profoundly shaped the second half of the 20th century. Not, of course, that these processes had been unprecedented – but stronger than before have they sent ripples through public and academia alike. In this context, the notion of the 'refugee' was defined as universal juridical value[37] for the first time (see also Samaddar 2003, 40 – 43).

Massive population movements took place: Millions left, passed through or settled down. Many found a strange solace in what was perceived to be the non-movement and stillnes of landscapes. Others, however, mourned the irretrievable changes to landscapes themselves, dissected by border zones, emptied by exodus or transformed by colonisations. Populations on the move took, in any case, memories of 'their' places with them: frozen in time and illuminated by nostalgia. Facing a humiliating and alienating present, they begun to rework their memories.

[37] It was achieved with the 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* (commonly abbreviated as the *Refugee Convention*).

Reworking, in a word, their memories through a present experienced as humiliating and alienated. However important the landscape emerged to be in these instances, the present seemed to be marked first and foremost by lines. By lines – being "[e]qually imaginary and consequential" (Ingold 2007, 50) – dividing groups as category; dividing (and defining) regions as border.[38]

While here, of course, the physical violence itself figures dominantly, it is actually mutually bound up with displacement in complicate ways (see Pandey 2002, 188 – 196). Reminding us of the affinitive powers of places and distinct environments (see Rademacher 2011); and of necessarily spatialized notions of loss complementing embodied notions thereof (Coker 2004). Caught up in the national order of things, trans-border movements and relations figure particularly large. The last few decades, however, have seen the emergence of critical scholarship devoted to forced migrations *within* the confines of nation states. Beyond the purview of the Refugee Convention, but in many cases effectively denied rights of citizenship and sometimes even persecuted by their governments, their plight seems to be particularly tragic. Experiences and trajectories to be subsumed under this rubric pint, once again, at the limits and fallacies of the imagery of the benevolent state, the *pater patris*. To address this predicament, the notion of 'Internally Displaced Persons' (IDPs) has gained currency. While the concept has been applied most widely to violent conflicts – in scholarly debates as well as humanitarian assistance (IDMC 2012a) – it also encompasses environmental relations. It is applied, in other words, to make sense of displacements rooted in large-scale development projects, exclusions from conservation projects or in dramatic consequences of hazardous environments.[39] In a sense, the notion of IDP mirrors, therefore, the equally diverse reality behind the figure of the refugee.

The picture is complicated further, when empirical dimensions are taken into consideration. For the latter trajectories and experiences coincide with 'ordinary' mobility, from which they are impossibly to distinguish neatly. Internal displacement may or may not feed into trans-border movements and involves networks that transcend state territories even when people stay within national borders. Border regions like the Sundarbans are marked by complicated patterns of internal and trans-border displacements (Samaddar 1999; Acharya, Gurung, and Samaddar n.d.;

[38] Insightful Ingold (2007, 50) goes on: "Whether however a line is real or a ghost – whether, in other words, it is a phenomenon of experience or an apparition – cannot always be unequivocally determined, and I have to confess that the distinction is decidedly problematic."

[39] Recent studies (see e.g. IDMC 2012b, 7) brought forward the still untested, yet indeed probable hypothesis that the large majority of people fleeing environmental hazards and disasters do not cross international borders and swell the rank of IDPs .

Schendel 2004). Similarly, it might be argued, when living with distant or hostile states and under conditions of fragile citizenship it may ultimately only be of secondary concern, in which state one is.

Complementing outer demarcations in the form of border regions, nation states are marked by inner demarcations of state power, too. The gigantic development interventions implemented by postcolonial states are a prime example here. True to, what James C. Scott aptly framed as 'high modernism' (1998), many of these projects involved the engineering of localized environments as much as they were aiming at reconfiguring the social and were implemented with paternalistic force. Be it because of their aesthetic grandeur or the sheer largesse of state interventions, the construction of large dams in Nehruvian India holds a particular place in learned debates. Through intense mobilizations that spoke more or less articulate to global audiences (Baviskar 2001; Nilsen 2010) and insightful accounts, these dams emerged as a looking glass to assess the social dynamics unfolding around similar mega-projects (Randeria 2003b; Routledge 2003; Baviskar 2004; U. P. Mukherjee 2010).

For the present purpose, I want to emphasize merely the mechanisms of displacement surrounding such projects. In contrast to the vagaries of war or ethnic conflicts (in the broadest sense), development projects are intended to be well-calculated measures and are legitimized most often in the language of progress, well-being and citizenship. Yet, it has now widely been shown that land acquisition and displacement amount to an appropriation by elites as well as a moment of enclosure in the sense of Marx' primitive accumulation (A. Guha 2007; K. K. Sanyal 2007). The disappearance of 'traditional' lands or other resources behind fences delimiting future project has instigated a wide range of reactions. These range from consent rooted either in wilful sacrifice or with a view on personal gains over bitter capitulations to intense, sometime armed struggles (Baviskar 2001; Randeria 2002; Da Costa 2007; J. P. Parry 2008). Particularly the latter are testimony to the many dimensions involved in relations with land. For economic values have been demonstrated to be complemented with figurations of belonging, ritual relevance or the role of place-based knowledge to survive. The erection of fences or the intentional flooding of valleys emerges, thus, as distinct from the displacements I will encounter in this thesis. While environmental dimensions certainly are involved either way, in the mentioned cases it is not nature that appears to be robbing or destroying, but clearly discernable, powerful agents.

2.3.1. Environment and Displacement

Migrations in the context of environmental changes have a deeper history as most recent publications concede. The possible interrelations of climatic changes and mass migrations in various historical periods have repeatedly alluded to some hundred years ago.[40] Yet, as Piguet and his colleagues rightly note (2011, 1), "[…] references to the environment as an explanatory factor were to progressively disappear from the migration literature over the course of the twentieth century." However, the relationship of environmental changes and involuntary migration has recently received fresh interest. To a degree, perhaps, because associated phenomena became more pressing; but also because these phenomena gained visibility and currency as *humanitarian* problems for the first time. In contrast to the displacements mentioned so far. Research on environmentally induced migration has been troubled by basic issues of definition. What, in other words, is the role of the environment in migration patterns? How does it fit into economic scenarios? And where exactly begins involuntariness and force? With exception of those few patterns of displacement where landscapes literally disappear, these questions trouble writers until today. At the same time, a neat distinction into voluntary and involuntary forms of migrations has lost currency (Samaddar 1999, 28, 39). Veena Das (1996b, 1510) reminds us thus:

> "A sharp dichotomy between voluntary migration and involuntary or forced displacement may prove to be an obstacle in understanding those processes through which agency is vested and deployed by the different kinds of actors involved in the process of movement and the ways in which the state may be either petitioned for fulfilment of local desires or resistance may be organised around it."

One set of contributions to the evolving field stems from South Asian environmental history. Largely unrelated to the aforementioned debates, these contributions take their cue (and much of their zeal) from the present state of the environment in India. In one highly influential study, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha characterize India's postcolonial present as being one of dramatic, even catastrophic deteriorations. To make sense of the continuities and aggravations of exploitation throughout colonial and postcolonial times, they propose a somewhat monolithic differentiation of social actors (1995, 1 – 33). Between the tiny minority of, what they call, 'omnivorous people' benefitting from destructive exploitations and the 'ecosystem people' who live directly from natural resources, they place the category of 'ecological refugees'. Due to environmental changes and political interventions, a growing

[40] The Migration Period between late antiquity and the middle ages would be an obvious example.

number of people either lost access to nourishing pastures, or the pastures themselves lost – to speak figuratively – what nourished them. Victimized they, Gadgil and Guha claim, seek shelter and meagre livelihoods elsewhere: in industrial sites, urban floodlands or on the pavement of megacities. Throughout their heavy emphasis on victimization and mere survival, the authors manage to take slowly unbound, but ultimately disastrous realities seriously.

Another, ultimately more influential stream of contributions has been published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Within the framework of universal human rights, the threat of environmental degradations and disasters stimulated new classifications of the 'refugee'. El-Hinnawi coined the notion of the 'environmental refugee' (1985) and set the stage for subsequent generations of researchers. Their groundbreaking publications are marked by distinct approaches which signalled inherent limitations. The first pertains to the analysis of causes and circumstance making people move. Populations came to be organised around a list of so-called push and pull factors among which various configurations of the environment (degradations, disasters) figured prominently. Consequently, the definitions shifted towards the figure of environmentally induced migration (EIM) or environmentally induced displacement (Black 2001; Castles 2002).

Secondly, the dimension of power and access tends to be flattened out. Populations became effectively entrapped between vague categories; and depicted, to overstate slightly, as little more than wilful subjects of the nature's whims. As a corollary of these vague categories and predictions, scientific debates are still caught between, what has been framed as, maximalist and minimalist views on the subject (Suhrke 1994; Morrissey 2012). While minimalist deny the very existence of something like environmental displacement, maximalists tend to state oversimplified, direct relations between environmental change and mobility (see also Lübken 2012, 5f).

The third problem relates to quantifications and the limitations of numbers to address suffering meaningfully. Against the background of complex causations and diverse, interlinked trajectories of mobility, it comes to little surprise that estimates given vary greatly. What is more, how authors arrive at their numbers is hardly transparent and invites well-funded criticism. Although these estimates have, therefore, to be treated cautiously, several authors claim that the number of environmentally displaced persons exceeds estimates given for political refugees by far. To know how many people are or will be on the move due to environmental changes is certainly important. Not only within the ivory tower, but particularly

when it comes to developing legal apparatuses and humanitarian interventions to assist footloose populations (Kempf 2009, 197 – 199; Klepp 2013).

Aligned to the quest for numbers, virtually every piece on the subject includes, what I understand to be, a call for ethnography (e.g. Oliver-Smith 2009b, 132f). That is, a call to engage the contexts, trajectories and particulars of these displacements. Yet such analyses still remain to be produced in a systematic fashion – this thesis is but an attempt to take up the task.

A recurring theme throughout these approaches, finally, is the emphasis on the variety of migrations. Even xenophobic constructions of environmental refugees, embrace a plethora of possible articulations and formations of flight (see e.g. Kaplan 1994).

They range from permanent out-migration over short refuges in regions deemed safer to circularly migrating persons of a given household. In a prominent reformulation, Renaud and his colleagues, for instance, distinguish between environmentally motivated migrants, environmentally forced migrants and environmental refugees. The differences, therefore, are seen to rest in choice and in swiftness. They (2007, 28f) write:

> "An environmentally motivated migrant 'may leave' a steadily deteriorating environment in order to pre-empt the worse. […] Environmentally forced migrants on the other hand 'have to leave' in order to avoid the worst, often on a permanent basis. Examples include movement due to sea-level rise or migration from the Sahel zone of Africa due to desertification. […] The distinction between environmentally forced migrants and environmental refugees could be sought in the swiftness of necessary actions. Environmental refugees (including disaster refugees) flee the worst."

As anthropological accounts have demonstrated since long (see e.g. Spittler 1989), migration is not the opposite of adaptation, but in many circumstances in itself an adaptation strategy (Black, Adger, et al. 2011; Black, Bennett, et al. 2011). This is relevant for situations, too, which are not marked by dis-placement: To make peasant lifestyles in deteriorating environments possible at all, an increasing numbers have to move along with the flows of what Breman calls 'footloose labour' (1996). These labour circuits have to be taken into account in their seemingly paradox form: Involuntarily its subjects move about to sustain their families and do so to avoid what is commonly understood as an 'uprooting' of the family altogether (Badiani and Safir 2009; Kartiki 2011).

Against this background, I will use the notion of environmental displacement to index processes, outcomes and experiences of enforced mobility due to the literal destruction of places

by environmental forces.[41] To be more precise, I understand environmental displacements to be intimately bound up with politics and cultural figurations. This applies, first, to their occurrence at the interface of materiality and society. Secondly, it points towards to the fact that loss of land or place is much more than the loss of a crucial commodity. It is better understood to be the loss of an amalgam of resources: Beyond being agricultural means of production, it articulates financial standing and status and is key to diverse risk aversion strategies (Baviskar 2004; Baviskar 2008, 6f). Furthermore, it entails localized ties culminating in a position within a known environment and translate, among others, into access to further resources (Oliver-Smith 2009b, 125). Finally, as place it is a legible entity enfolding the present into narrative emplotments and intimate knowledge affirming a sense of belonging. Following the historian Peter Read, I will understand environmental displacements, thus, as instance of 'place-bereavement' (1996, 198). As moments that not only enforce mobilities and economic re-orientation, but also a quest for meaning. Characterized by socially-mediated, presenced absences (Bille, Hastrup, and Sorensen 2010; Meyer 2012), they seem to call for 'narrative truth' (Eastmond 2007, 259f) weaving localized conceptions into material encounters.
Reflecting about degrading landscapes and places, several writers have brought forward the notion of solastalgia (Albrecht et al. 2007; Tschakert and Tutu 2010). By way of a definition, Petra Tschakert and her colleagues (2013, 14) note that solastalgia is intended to theorize "[…] the sadness caused by environmental change, homesickness while being at home, as well as a sense of powerlessness and injustice and lack of control over unfolding injustices." This approach speaks to the lifeworlds engaged in this thesis. For it allows to address what they aptly frame (2013, 23), as "experience [of] existential outsideness, thinned-out places and […] increasingly hollow homes." And, therefore, a predicament aligned to and embedding environmental displacements. Against this background, an important question pervading contemporary theoretical approaches to forced migrations and displacement needs to be reformulated. For it is not sufficient to ask, why people choose to stay back in times and places of trouble (Castles 2003, 15 – 17). But one has to ask why certain marginalized populations choose to settle a-new within the very vulnerable landscapes even after they suffered 'place-bereavement'. Why groups populating hazardously shrinking coasts, for instance, are rather moving with the coast in relentless, small-scale mobilities than leaving it altogether. To reduce

[41] As noted in the introduction, this is perhaps best captured in the hyphenated dis-placement.

this endurance to economic reasons or affective ties alone does not adequately adress the many dimensions involved.

2.3.2. Emplacing Lives

Certainly, no existence is possible or even imaginable beyond place. The philosopher Edward Casey (2009, 15) reminds us that "[…] by virtue of its unencompassibility by anything other than itself, [place] is at once the limit and the condition of all that exists." There is no coming out of place and no total loss of place ever conceivable. Places neighbor and encompass places. Dis-placement, then, can never be just that. It entails, among others, a movement between different spaces and spans these. Anything else would mean to perish. Displacement as a spatial relation, entails, therefore, to necessarily atttain a new place. The loss of one place is intimately related to an arrival. In, both, a material and a social sense. A space not only has to be found and moved to; it has to be cleared and taken possession of. The relocation itself may therefore be embedded in social relations, but it certainly entails the unfolding of a set of further relations (Bönisch-Brednich and Trundle 2010, 6). With neighbours, bureaucrats; and with the environment itself. The plot – be it the edge of a fragile embankment, the backyard of one's kin or the tiny 'space on the side of the road' (K. Stewart 1996) – hardly stays untouched. It is reworked, refined if you will, and slowly changes from being just-a-space into a place. It will be known through relations, will be dwelled in and coevolve with their dwellers. Following Harri Englund, I understand this development to be part of an emplacement. He writes (2002, 267):

> "Rather than being a place in which migrants come to be situated, the local appears as an achievement that they carve out of cultural material that the fact of their movement provides."

Precisely here, underlying themes of this thesis intersect: Forced to leave, dis-placed persons arrive emplaced into a host of social and environmental relations, and shape them in the light of particular memories bearing the signature of loss and dis-placement. 'Homing', as Ahmed and her colleagues frame comparable processes (2003, 10), unfolds as an act also by holding "[…] on to their ties to places from which they have been dispossessed."

But this unfolding of relations, this settling-in in another space-to-be-turned-into-a-place is in itself an odd thing. At least in the theoretical juncture we find ourselves in. I will therefore briefly turn to what is at stake here. Two theoretical developments seem particularly important.

One amounts to a critique of the long-standing tradition in orientalist scholarship (and beyond) to inscribe, indeed: to incarcerate certain populations into given territories (Appadurai 1988). Among others, this approach effectively denies arrivals, fluctuations and recurrent mobilities. The ongoing currency of this approach is frequently illustrated in contemporary writing on forced migration – for instance, when the conceptual framework of autochthonous regions is taken for granted. In a strange turn of events, it gained further currency where indigenousness became a resource: here relocations tend to be denied and preceding histories of migration and ousting silenced or re-appropriated.[42]

The second limitation to think emplacement rests in the transnational moment and its somewhat deterritorialized character. Augé's 'non-places' (1995) and the notion of freely floating elites merged here. Both approaches have their merits, yet have to be balanced by emphasizing on-going rootedness of transnational actors and mobile groups in place. For, as Zygmunt Bauman notes (Bauman cited in Castles 2003, 16), "[…] the riches are global, the misery is local." Immobilities are not only a moment of victimization, but also of agency and particular subjectivities. Enacted through quotidian practices, localities are literally made as much as emerging socialities are produced.

That being said, the way how new spaces are engaged with and turned into meaningful places has been an important focus in anthropological studies on forced migration. Of crucial importance here are administrative relations governing flights and arrivals. Vast numbers of refugees, Liisa Malkki reminds us, live in camps. As spatial figuration, administrative relation and social status rooted therein, camps are thought as being "[…] transitional, temporary, or ad hoc […]" – even while millions live in these for decades and without an end in sight (Malkki 1997, 88; see also Malkki 1995; Hailey 2009).

Resettlement understood as a compensation and implying permanence of dwelling opens up dramatically different dynamics. Yet these, too, unfold in tense encounters between governed populations[43] and states (R. Sanyal 2009); between schemes and the facts on the ground (Scott 1998; A. Guha 2007); and amidst hostilities (M. Ray 2002).

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[42] Among the East Indian Santal, for instance, the histories of dispossession by and flights from Hindus (who appear mainly as oppressing moneylenders-cum-landlords) do not question the notion of autochthony in the *new* territories. Nor are the groups they forced to leave attributed a somewhat fuller autochthonous status (see also Kochar 1970, 18 – 22).

[43] It is interesting to note, however, that the partition refugees were only hesitantly labelled refugees by political elites and never officially framed as such. What is more, none of the South Asian states has ratified any of the refugee conventions (I. Ahmed, Dasgupta, and Sinha-Kerkhoff 2004, 4f) – that is the convention of 1951 and the additional protocol of 1967. A legal refugee status was thus effectively denied. The experience of distinctive

In their particularities and localized trajectories, both modes are marked to a certain extent by, what recently has been called, the 'autonomy of migration'. Programmatically Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos note (2008, 202f),

> "To speak of the autonomy of migration is to understand migration as a social movement in the literal sense of the words, not as a mere response to economic and social malaise. … The autonomy of migration approach does not, of course, consider migration in isolation from social, cultural and economic structures. The opposite is true: migration is understood as a creative force within these structures"

These conceptions resonate with the words of George Clifford (1997, 3 original emphasis) who insists that "[p]ractices of displacement might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extensions." New identities and meanings do unfold as relations to, on and from land evolve. While other fragments are tied to the locale, literally intertwined and give rise to meaningful places. Long cast under the rubric resettlement, these processes and moments do seem to more than that. Resettlement, Veena Das argues, is basically an administrative category: It subsumes typically vertical relations of power and entails sets of legal and administrative claims (1996, 1510). Therefore, it is surely useful to theorize the state's legibility of territory and population, as much as the often quotidian engagements of the state by localized actors. Nevertheless, at least certain cultural or environmental dimensions of arriving and dwelling population may better be framed as the dynamics of emplacement and as "[…] localisation as cultural technique […]" (Rapport 2010, 184). In her ground-breaking, longitudinal research on forced migration and resettlement in the Tonga valley Elizabeth Colson has shown this long ago (Colson 1971; Colson 2003). While she and her colleagues were mainly interested in socio-political processes of change, in temporal sequences of reactions to the resettlement and emerging choices, instances of an actual emplacement are woven into these studies. She describes how spaces are turned into places by and through quotidian practices, the establishment of new social relations and the inclusion of the spaces and then places into ritual practices. In this thesis, I will engage these dynamics of loss and gain and their bearing on the past and the environment. To do so I will have to briefly introduce the particular material figuration which form not only the background but, in a sense, the dialectic counterpart of the lives I will inquire: the delta itself.

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refugee groups was consequentially characterized by unevenness and capriciousness by 'in-taking' states, who discursively framed their sparse help as a gift or charity and not a right (Chatterji 2001).

3. On the Topography of the Ganges Delta

> The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the *ãchol* that follows her, half-wetted by the sea. They number in the thousands, these islands; some are immense and some no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago. These islands are the rivers restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift. The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. … There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, the river from the sea. … The currents here are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily – some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks were there were none before.
>
> Amitav Ghosh, *Hungry Tides*

> Man kann nicht zweimal in denselben Fluß steigen, aber man kehrt an dasselbe Ufer zurück, und dies sogar dann, wenn man sich im Fluß, um mit ihm als demselben wenigstens für eine Zeit eins zu bleiben, hat treiben lassen.
>
> Hans Blumenberg, *Quelle, Ströme, Eisberge*

Deltas are difficult to think. Not that they were peripheral or exotic landscapes: deltas are famous for their fertility and home to huge populations, quite often incredible riches and have since centuries been important nodes of globalizations (see e.g. Schama 1988; Nienhuis 2008; I. Iqbal 2010). Yet, deltas defy categorizations which are widely taken for granted and bound up with predominant epistemic orders. Land-based approaches – distinguishing between solid and fluid in order to place history onto the soil and not its watery Other (cf. Gillis 2012) – are turned on their head. The ubiquitous stance, invoked by Blumenberg in the epigraph opening this chapter, according to which the land behind the shore remains unchanged while the waters constantly change, is misleading when applied to a delta and, ultimately, also dangerous.[44]

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[44] Surprisingly the assumption of the primacy of the land and its durability holds true also for many Bengali urbanites, as the media ripples generated by Ghoṛāmārā's sinking indicates.

The offensiveness of sea-facing delta zones rests – to apply Mary Douglas' theory of purity – in their threatening in-betweenness (Douglas 1966; see also Douglas 1992). This ontological state can be mapped on diverse registers. For one, deltas are sandwiched between a landmass and the vastness of the sea; they seem to belong to both and neither of them. Furthermore, their appearance and materiality depends on narrow temporal cycles: What is now sludgy ground may be buried unter sluggish waters in a few hours and vice versa. The spatial in-betweenness is complemented, thus, by rhythmically moving frontiers and transformations. I like to think of this as a rhythmic accentuation of liminality. It is no coincidence that both faces – the sludgy ground and the sluggish water – invoke Douglas' meditation on treacle and viscosity (Douglas 1966, 38f) as instance of, what she calls, secular defilement.

Seen from another angle, deltas challenge reductions of landscape and nature to mute, passive and firm presences; to a backdrop and object of human interventions. Along their imbalances, mutabilities and contingencies, the entanglements of social and ecological processes can clearly be observed and felt in everyday encounters. As amphibian spaces (L. Fischer 2005), deltas and related landscapes – swamps, peats, marshlands – destabilize, therefore, terracentric and anthropocentric approaches (cf. S. McLean 2008; Ogden 2011; Palsson and Huijbens 2009).

Deltas seem to comply with neat ecological or spatial distinctions only in ahistorical snapshots. They make therefore for particularly compelling instances of waterscapes – a notion that "[…] captures the spirit of this fluid, fast-changing terrain" (Baviskar 2007, 4; see also Swyngedouw 1999; Orlove and Caton 2010, 408). Hugh Raffles' usage of Benjamin's famous dictum of 'the flow of becoming' (*im Fluss des Werdens*), as he theorizes place in the closely related muddy formations of the Lower Amazon (Raffles 2002, 46f), is noteworthy. Originally used to illuminate the constant shifts and transformations of speech, to apply it here is no less apt. In her historically saturated ethnography of another closely related waterscape – i.e. Florida's Everglades –, Laura Ogden mirrors these sentiments when she (2011, 31) notes, "[m]angrove swamps are both in-between and becoming." The latter involves, of course, various spheres of social activities (Cf. Ingold 1993). Amita Baviskar (2007, 4) writes,

> "The labour and capital embodied in waterscapes include not only building and cultivating physical things – check-dams and crops – but also the work of creating, sustaining and altering relations between people, things, and places."

Being an always imbalanced, always shifting entanglement of biota, fluid matter and sediments, the Sundarbans differ from many other waterscapes in that they border the sea. In, figuratively speaking, their very growth into and out of the sea. The waterscape of the Sundarbans marks,

therefore, an immensely long, dispersed and, indeed, an unravelled coastline. Maps show, that the separation into the Bay of Bengal and a myriad of named streams, is ultimately a fiction. In a sense, the Sundarbans mark in their totality an immensely long, dispersed and unraveled coastline. Beyond the constant transformations of the rivers' edges, this relates to the form of the archipelago as well as to the deep incursions by sea waters into the lands and the wide influence of estuarine waters into the bay. Scientists have demonstrated the intrusion of salty tides (and therefore the sea) up to 150 km up the river; and the inhabitants of the islands insist, as I will substantiate in a later chapter, that the sea begins only a couple of miles off-shore. Taken together, these encounters hint at what I understand to be the ultimately fictive character of the shoreline.

There is no doubt, however, that the sea – for good or bad – powerfully shapes the texture of the Sundarbans. Being a 'delta front' (Reker et al. 2006, 13), these islands are materially imbricated with the sea and saturated with marine salinity. The latter qualification relates to the brackishness and sluggishness of the sea, but also to local society's ambivalent relations towards it.

In terms of geomorphology, deltas are extremely young and rapidly moving formations of sediments and water (Reker et al. 2006; Avijit Gupta 2011, 195 – 207). Unfolding between a 'delta head' and the 'mouths' of estuaries.[45] In the space between head and mouth, diverse sets of material formations, ecosystems and social articulations are nested. The pervading idea of *the* delta (as a form or substance) glosses over vast differences. Particularly with respect to mega-deltas as, for instance, the Ganges-Meghna-Brahmaputra-delta, commonly abbreviated as Ganges or Bengal delta.

Deltas owe their existence to sediments which rivers carry with them. To be more precise: to the former's property to sink and deposit in the riverbed whenever the speed of the water carrying them reduces abruptly. Upon emptying into the sea, the speed of riverine waters is abruptly reduced and the sediments sink and accumulate at these points. On rough coasts – be it through high wave activity or powerful oceanic streams – deposited sediments are quickly dispersed and only small deltas will emerge. On less dynamic coasts, however, the sediments accumulate into mudflats and islands (Hori and Saito 2008), which force the waters to flow

[45] This analogy of anthropomorphism is in itself noteworthy as it points to the complexity of and, in a sense, the bafflement with respect to these ecosystems. As metaphoric language it, once again, lends the status of personality to rivers and may be useful to subject these vague scapes with a legibility. Theoretically and in textbooks, at last.

around them. These dynamics cause the river to split into ever more creeks and produce ever more sandbanks and, thus, to literally grow into the sea.

At first sight simply natural, these dynamics are deeply entangled with social history. Indeed, the longstanding complicity of matter, flows and society shapes the present size and appearance of the delta. As formations of sediments the very growth of delta is linked to soil erosions upstream. And, therefore, linked to deforestations and agriculture that dramatically fanned the inevitable process of soil erosions (see Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Stonich 1993, 144 – 154; Eitel and Bork 2008). True for all deltas, the interlinkage of anthropogenic changes along the tributaries with the very growth of amphibian tracts in the river's mouth, is particularly pronounced in the development of the Ganges Delta (P. Ray 1998, 29 –33). For only few rivers across the world have such a longs-standing human presence along its banks and such a long past of accelerated soil erosions through deforestation and agricultural cultivation.

At the interface of waves, currents and tides, erosions and accretions are the normal state of affair in deltaic tracts. Yet their quantitative relationship may differ greatly. In the contemporary Bengal delta, three broad figurations can be distinguished: first, tracts where accretions outweigh erosions (the growing parts in the east); second, tracts where they are roughly balanced, and, finally, tracts where erosions chronically outweigh accretions. The islands I am concerned with in this thesis, as most of the Indian part of the delta, fall clearly within the latter category. These differences are often organized around converging pairs of attributes: The attributes of fluidity, youth and mobility are complemented by drainage, maturity and decay. Relying on an idiom of anthropogenic features and lifecourse, deltaic formations tend to be classified, thus, along its vitality. Beginning with youthfulness they are understood to be maturing which, again, leads towards death. Their curious use of metaphors of lifecourse notwithstanding, these classifications help to understand geomorphological dimensions of today's devastations.

Once emerged, young islands grow through regular flooding which leave sediments deposited on top layer after layer. When they have ultimately grown beyond the high tide line, they fall into the category of, what is called, the *mature delta*. Henceforth they are affected only by annual floods of the rainy season, become less and less saline and form extremely fertile, alluvial soils. Growing slower, the mature tract eventually develops into, what is called, *moribund delta tracts*. From this stage on, the floods hardly reach the land. This has two implications: First, the fertility of the lands decreases as it lacks the fertilization by sediments.

Remaining in the river, secondly, the sediments rise and eventually choke the channels.[46] Through this process, deltas shift in their entirety: over centuries, inevitably and everywhere. Framed in the language of maturity and decay, these upriver changes are cuasally related to demise and are seen to culminate in the figire of the *dying estuary*. The Huglī river system encompassing Sāgar island group is a prime example (Nicholas 1962; Fergusson 2001). Literally choked by moribund tracts and further attracted to the east by tectonic dynamics, since centuries the Ganges gradually shifts its sediment-laden streams since centuries further toward east. In due course, it abandoned its earlier main channel which led via Calcutta and Sāgar into the sea. While this is a blessing for the eastern parts of the delta where it translated into massive accretions and far superior soils, it turns the Huglī into a channel less and less reached by sediment-laden fresh waters. By the same token, the estuary became increasingly dominated by the tides and accretions have been reduced significantly. Throughout the 20th century, they have ben outweighed by the erosions by far. In the process, the whole region became, what I want to call, a shrinking landscape. While this certainly invites to think about in terms of an 'ecology of shrinkage', it is something quite distinct from what is usually referred to with the latter concept. That is, I am not concerned here with social and environmental consequences of shrinking cities or depopulated region (see e.g. Rink and Kabisch 2009), but rather by the literal disappearance of the ground to walk and dwell upon.

It is nothing but paradox that huge amounts of sediments eroded from the banks or trickled through are not washed into the sea. Due to hydrological dynamics too complex to outlay here, these sediments remain within the estuarine waters and turn the latter in, what geographers call, a 'sediment sink' (Nandy and Bandyopadhyay 2011). Floating, sinking and shifting within the dying estuary, over the years and centuries, these particles still rework the waterscape. In 'natural' conditions – that is, without embankments facilitating the agrarian regime – the tides would enter the islands and, most likely, would continue to swell layer after layer of particles on top. But since the thoroughly diked islands are now beyond the reach of the tides throughout

[46] In this process, the quality of floods alters from mostly nourishing to mostly destructive. The reason for this relates to the sinking of sediments once the velocity is abruptly reduced. This happens not only where a river empties into the sea, but also when a river floods a given landscape. On leaving the bed, the swollen and turbulent waters significantly reduce their speed and immediately deposit large amounts of sediments immediately beyond the banks. Over the course of time, natural levees build up in flood-prone areas that increasingly hold the river within its banks and continuously diminish the quantity of floods. The reduction of floods then translates into a reduced fertility (the nourishing sediments brought by the floods are missing), but whenever floods break, the water remains entrapped in the levees destroying crops and boosting water-borne diseases. This dynamics cause in the eyes of many observers, the social decay noted above (see Nicholas 1962). For they ensure lesser yields and higher death rates.

the Huglī estuary, the particles sediment only the bottom of the water channels and lift the latter considerably up. While this threatens the navigability of the river and is a constant nuisance to port engineers and pilots (N. Mukherjee 1968, 203 – 205), it also amounts to an increasing pressure on the embankments.

In a tragic twist, the lifting of channel beds is met with its opposite on the other side of the embankments. Again, precisely because the embankments prevent the tides to enter, they also prevent the muddy grounds to be periodically watered by the tides. Neither the rains nor the partial flooding associated with rice cultivation compensate this. Over decades and centuries, the earth literally dries out, whereby unconsolidated sediments compact (Working Group 8.4, International Hydrological Programme 1984; Jelgersma 1996).[47] The intensification of agriculture with the so-called Green Revolution aggravated these processes through yet another dynamic: Mechanized pumping taps groundwater resources on a massive scale and leaves the earth only further compacted in the process (Jelgersma 1996, 56f). Through these processes, the land's surface subsides gradually; and more so in relation to the lifting water channels. What emerges are 'basin-like' islands (Jalais 2010a, 5) surrounded by waters mounting increasing pressure against the embankments.

Returning to the anthropogenic speech patterns, the southern fringes of the Hooghly estuary are therefore at the same time young and dying. Beneath the tide line, islands as Sāgar, Ghoṛāmārā and many others, are subject to rapid transformations; situated in the lowest reaches of a decaying river they have to do without continuous supply of sediments. And, therefore, in formations marked by negative growth.

Against the existential role of riverine networks in Bengal, these changes have not gone unnoticed. They have been observed since the 16th century und subjected to countermeasures since long (Mukerjee 1938).[48] The Farraka Barrage surely is the largest and most controversial intervention to slow down or revert the death of river. Rooted in designs by the British, it has been constructed only 10 kilometres before the Ganges enters, what is today, Bangladesh. Since 1975 it diverts river waters from the main channel into the Huglī. Controversy surrounded it right from its beginnings. In line with other large-scale intervention into India's rivers, there is

[47] Under the premises of the International Hydrological Decade heralded by the UNESCO in 1965, these patterns of subsidence received considerable interest. But while the findings and warnings reverberate, among others, in the suspicion entertained by local peasants against pump-fed irrigations on Sāgar, in wider debates subsidence is again used a fuzzy notion. It encompasses, among others, the overall threat of coastal erosion; a longstanding, but contested notion of the subsidence of the whole delta due to the notorious 'point of no ground' in the sea close to the contemporary border between Bangladesh and India; and finally the imagery of Sea Level Rise.

[48] Colonial geographers had noted the seasonal dissection of the Bhagīrathi-Huglī estuary from the Ganges started early in the 19th century (S. Bandyopadhyay 1994, 22f).

a constant outpour of critical literature on the topic (P. Ray 1998).[49] With the debates still raging on, there can be but little doubt that the project did not live up to its promises. Neither has it accomplished to reverse the river's sedimentation, nor to enhance the navigability of port channels and agricultural livelihoods downstream. Right the opposite seems to be the case. Studies show that the situation downstream has deteriorated significantly; particularly through the further *reduction* of sediments coming through the Barrage (cf. M. L. Parry et al. 2007). Closer to the sea, interventions by the Calcutta Port Trust have had further detrimental effects. Not in general, but for the islands I am concerned with here (see chapter 9).

These geomorphological and technological degradations of the river are only worsened by Sea Level Rise. According to many scientists, there is hardly any doubt that accelerated Climate Change mainly in its form of rising seas does not only loom as future threat on Bengal's coast but that it is already effecting the present, even the recent past. It is necessary to reiterate that we witness here not the onset of a climatic catastrophe but rather the acceleration of processes already in motion. However, marine and climate scientists have shown that relative Sea Level Rise on Bengal's coasts in general and around Sāgar in particular is exceeding the global average by far.[50]

In their recent report on changes in the Sundarbans, Hazra and his team analyzed Tide Gauge data from Sāgar Lighthouse. Using these datasets, they demonstrated that during the decade

[49] The controversy was, to make matters more complicated, from early on one of transboundary water disputes. Amidst the tensions between India and Pakistan, hence, the Barrage could not be built, but only after Independent Bangladesh gave in to an agreement as a sign of gratitude towards India that had helped in the Bangladeshi War of Independence from West-Pakistan (Hill 2008, 178).

[50] In their assessment the IPCC calculated a *global* Sea Level Rise of 3.3 mm per year in the last decades of the 20th century as opposed to 1 mm per year in the beginning of the same century (Nicholls and Cazenave 2010, 1517f). But these numbers have to be disaggregated as the actual Rise varies greatly from region to region. Comparing data on the Indian coasts, Unnikrishnan and Shankar (2007), for instance, show that the Sea Level Rise in Mumbai was in the last 50 years below the global average (only 0.77 mm per year), while in Kolkata the global average was exceeded dramatically in the same time period dramatically (as much as 5.22 mm per year). In western Bangladesh the Sea Level Rise was recently, to give one final example, measured at a rate of 4.00 mm per year (Karim and Mimura 2008, 493).

One reason for this is the uneven distribution of gravity and thus of water on the globe. In his remarkable account on the sea marrying travel writing with ethnography of marine scientists, James Hamilton-Paterson (1995) remarked dryly, that the earth basically resembles a potato and not the immaculate ball we tend to imagine it. Humbling as it is, this image also easily explains the differences in gravity and water distribution across the globe.

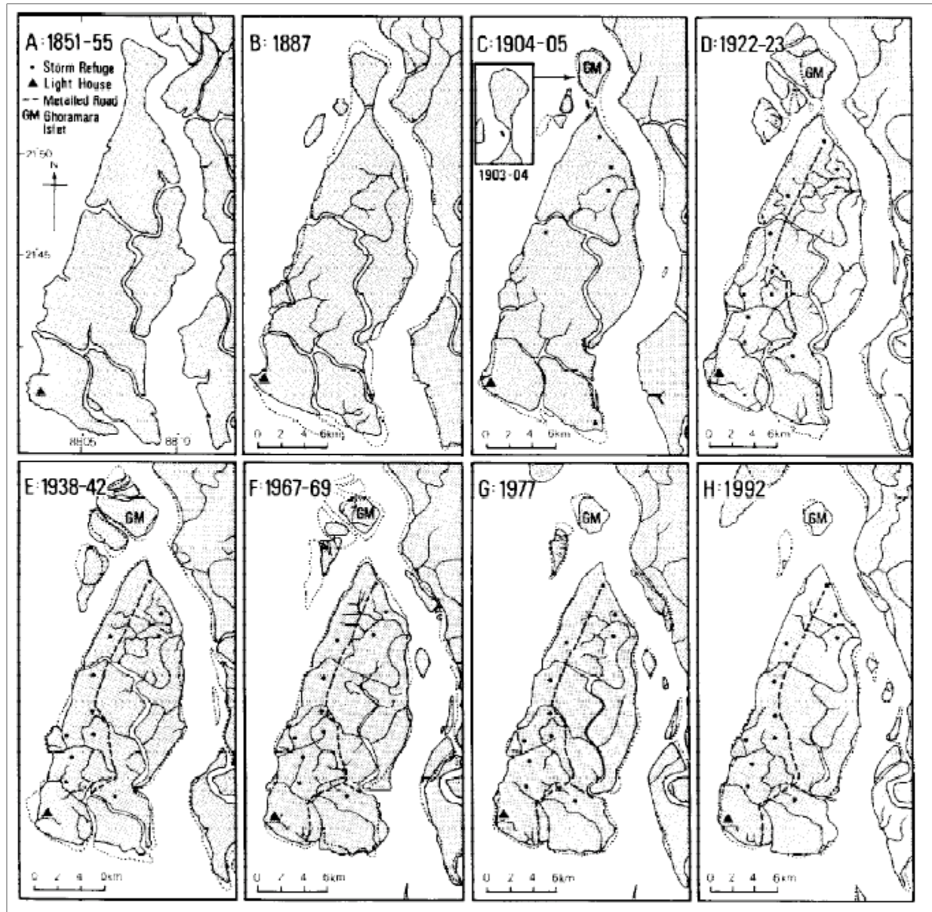

Figure 3. Transformations of the islands 1855 – 1992 (taken with author's permission from Bandyopadhyay 1994)

ending in 2009 the relative Sea Level Rise at Sāgar amounted to as much as 17.88 mm per year; as compared to 'only' 3.14 mm per year in the preceding decade (Hazra et al. 2010, 4). While it may turn out to be ultimately impossible to single out Climate Change and neatly define its consequences, there is little doubt that Bengal's coasts are among the most vulnerable and will continue to recede on an ever increasing rate. None of the available data leaves any room for doubt that the landscape has become a shrinking one; and that the speed of the shrinkages has increased dramatically over the last decade.

In his historical approach to the transformations of and the hazardous texture of Sāgar Island, the geographer Sunando Bandyopadhyay demonstrated the accumulative losses since the 1850s. Analysing maps, available satellite data and other sources, he calculates an average shrinkage of 0.51 km^2 per year between 1851-55 and 1992, amounting to a loss of roughly 25% of the overall size of the island (S. Bandyopadhyay 1997, 26 –29). Drastic as these erosions were, they included also radical transformations of the island. That is, the unravelling of the island and it's, literally, giving birth to the ephemeral islets of Ghoṛāmārā, Lohāchara and Supāribhāṅgā (see Figure 2). Being earlier parts of the island proper, they detached from the body of the larger island between 1904 and 1905 – a moment noticed with some alarm by contemporary state officers, yet forgotten or silenced among most islanders today. Supāribhāṅgā, the third islet, owed its existence most likely to a brief spell of accretion giving

birth to the islet and inverting itself a few decades later. While most of the lands that were to make up these islands had not been freshly evolved – but ‘only’ were transforming into a new island – it is still important to keep this material ephemerality in mind. Or better: this ephemeral being as territories of their own, as islands. For they are, as I will show, complemented by the ephemerality of recent migrations and, what I will call, shallow roots.

Rachel Carson (2003, 124) once noted that “[i]slands are ephemeral, emerging today they are gone tomorrow.” Carrying her dictum to extremes, the islets were to persist only briefly by all standards: Eighty years later Lohāchara was gone, Supāribhāṅgā even slightly earlier and Ghoṛāmārā stripped of its largest parts. It remains to be seen, how long Ghoṛāmārā will be traceable on the map. For the Indian Centre of Science and Environment (CSE) has recently come to the conclusion that in the Indian Sundarbans 250 km^2 have been eroded since 1930; and, what is more important, the speed of the erosions has severally increased over the last decade.[51] The erosion of the ten most vulnerable islands in the Indian Sundarbans during the last decade was totalled at a staggering 30.6 km^2 within eight years alone (2001 – 2008). While Sāgar suffered the highest amount of absolute land loss (5.3 km^2) of the studied island, neighbouring Ghoṛāmārā saw the second greatest shrinkage (14.5% of its landmass) within that period (Hazra et al. 2010).

[51] Indeed, based on Hazra’ study the CSE recently claimed that the amount of erosion doubled during the first decade of the new century (http://www.cseindia.org/userfiles/adaptation_paradigm.pdf last accessed on 8 August 2013).

4. Palimpsest, Materialities: Hybrid Histories

> … landscapes are assemblages constituted by humans and nonhumans, material and semiotic processes, histories both real and partially remembered.
>
> Laura Ogden, *Swamplife*

> Born amidst the sea
>
> The island is named
>
> 'Sāgar' to spread its fame
>
> Bijay Chākrābartī, *Charāy Sāgar*

Shrinking and ravelled, Sāgar island is in itself a palimpsest: Like the canvases of old, the island has been worked through by several groups of actors and material process. With earlier forms erased, and new forms built onto the never fully erased spaces, the island is traversed by layers of succinct histories and usage regimes. Not all condition the present with the same force. Some had been erased, forgotten and sometimes disqualified; while others were to last and continued to shape everyday relations. Coincidentally perhaps, the name of the island – Sāgar – has in itself already a palimpsestic, redolent quality. According to speaker, pronunciation and speech situation the term implies either the ocean itself or the tiny island laying at its fringes. More than that, both dimensions – vast waters and fragile land – are tied to the mythical king Sagar who was involved in the incidents that brought Gaṅgā down to earth. The name mirrors, therefore, the entangled material possibility of the island; and underlines its position in a cosmological order. Similarly, it plots the island onto heterogeneous maps – maps that, as will become clear, shape the contingent materiality.

In this chapter I will engage the island's hybrid histories. I arrange them around the themes of pirates and kings; its appearance in medieval writings; of vistas from British ships traversing its shores; of capitalist dreams; of a laboratory within hazardous environments; and, finally, of its relevance in postcolonial circuits. In doing so, I aim to illuminate the horizon of imageries and involved materialities against which narratives of environmental endangerment, of risk and belonging unfold. To engage these polyvalent layers, then, contributes to a historically saturated account of the moment from where localized futures are addressed. For landscapes are made, as Luig and von Oppen remind us (1997, 7), not "[…] as a sedimentation of history, but as a continuous reworking of past experience and future potentialities."

4.1. Kings and Pirates

To many, the vast tracts to the south of today's Kolkata made their appearance in history with the acquisition of the so-called 24 Parganas[52] by the British. Yet, the archipelago's past is more complex. The 'deep history'[53] of Sāgar preceding conquest and empire, unfolds along two trajectories apparently parallelling each other: one being political and the other religious. To local and regional historians, the absence of conjunctions between these lines seems to be rather unproblematic. The prehistory of marauding pirates and early empires is almost entirely superseded by religious dimensions and the usage regime introduced by the British. However, archaeological endeavours, unearthed artefacts (e.g. vessels, bricks) and patterned landscapes (e.g. remnants of tanks, roads, dikes) signalled earlier presences and inclusion into networks (S. Bandyopadhyay 1994, 77).

To be sure, most writers saw no need to acknowledge and on-going human presence, but portrayed the Sundarbans as an emptiness waiting to be claimed and transformed. Proclaimed or refuted (see Chapter 4.3.), the existence of civilizations within the hostile jungles was a matter of the past either way. Paralleling W.W. Hunter influential theory according to which the now empty Sundarbans were sitting on the ruins on sunken civilizations (1875), proto-national writers elaborated on the idea of indigenous civilizations in these parts as a claim to nationhood and pride. In fact, their claim was driven by the urge to acquire uncontaminated pasts (Srivastava 2010, 835). Within an intellectual climate denying Bengalis the ability to rule themselves by labelling them as an 'effeminate race', the legacy of early civilizations preceding the 'conquest'[54] of Muslim and British rulers, had in itself implications for nationalist and separatist movements in Bengal. Empire emerges as the historical moment through which the pre-histories of these forgotten forests gained their weight. Based on vague traces, several writers saw today's Sāgar Island as harbouring the erstwhile capital or, at least, an important naval base of the Vanga/ Ganga dynasty that was wiped out in the 11th century (Sircar 1971,

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[52] This denominator still figures as name for the district to the south and south-east of Kolkata. With only one reservation: It had been divided into 24-Parganas (North) and 24-Parganas (South) in 1986.

[53] Although the notion of 'deep history' refers mainly to the discovery of a much longer history of the earth than was assumed before 19th century (see Ramaswamy 2005), it may be applied to the deeper layers of Sāgar's history as well. If only because the history of the island is quite commonly thought to have commenced with the advent of the British (see below).

[54] From the 15th century on, the Sundarbans came under the control of Muslim rulers. Their expansion was, however, less of a conquest than more a slow extension of settlements into 'virgin' forests (Eaton 1996). Likewise was the power a group or rulers, treading the thin line between landlords and king, limited and contested. The northern areas are reported to be in a tighter grip, with the southern areas being hardly included into fragile kingdoms (Mukherji 1981, 5 – 7).

173; Māitī 2001, 51).[55] And, then again, as base of the more recent king Pratāpāditya, a contemporary of Akbar (Mookerji 1912, 218; A. Banerjee 1998, 159). The latter became famous for his rebellion against the Muslim overlord and is invoked to foster a regional identity which justified the struggle for Bengal as a distinct nation[56] and indexed a past of sovereignty rooted in violence (S. Banerjee and Basu 2006, 489; cf. R. Chakrabarti 2009, 77).

Even while these authors locate mighty ports on Sāgar and frame the coastal fringes of Bengal, as having been in the tight grip of early states, there is hardly any doubt that for most of the time, the mangrove belt lay at the fringes of political control.

Rooted, on one hand, in the very hazardousness of nature, this liminality was related also to the activity of marauding pirates. Throughout most publications, the predations of disasters, fevers and tigers concurred with those of armed gangs in emptying the land. And vice versa: the empty swamps are often depicted as inviting the 'infestations' by robbers and harmful species such as tigers and mosquitoes (N. K. Sengupta 2011, 9).

The activities of Portuguese explorers-cum-warlords in Bengal were not limited to the aforementioned alliances with King Pratāpāditya. To tap into Bengal's fabled riches, they managed to build towns and establish mercantile networks far into the interior (see Subrahmanyam 1993). Beside barter, they became notorius for vioelnt assaults and slave raids (Hossain 1908, 272f).

An ambivalent role, oscillating between the establishment of infrastructures, on one hand, and the actual depopulation of the swamps, on the other, structures also a second category of 'marauders': the Arakanese. Pushing in from today's Myanmar, they were seen as haunting the lowest reaches long after the British had driven the Portuguese out consolidating their rule over Bengal.[57] Infamous for slave raids on villages (N. Mukherjee 1968, 27), the destruction of whole settlements and, finally, the depopulation of islands (D. K. Chakrabarti 2001, 129), the Arakanese became identified as *mog* – i.e. pirates. Other writers, however, emphasize the

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[55] The Ganga/ Vanga dynasty figures possibly as the state of Gangaridai on Ptolemy's famous map which was drawn roughly in 150 A.D. (see D. K. Chakrabarti 2001, 154; N. K. Sengupta 2011, 23).

[56] Critical of the emerging cult around Pratāpāditya in nationalist circles, Rabindranath Tagore wrote a novel on the king where he mocked and pictured him as an anti-hero. In a later foreword to the novel he (Thakur 1986, I:, ii:603 cited in Chowdhury 2001, 164) exclaimed: "The fervor of the Swadeshi venture attempted at one time, to present Pratapraditya as the ideal heroic figure in Bengal. This trend still continues unrestrained. At that time, whatever facts I had culled from history proved that he was an oppressor and a cruel tyrant and though he had the spunk to defy the emperor of Delhi, he had no power."

[57] It is not only the usual fate of historical narratives (written as it were by the 'winners') that exempts the British from pirate histories and subsumes their rule under that of empire. But this peculiar development is in itself an epitome of the distinguished role the British managed to claim for themselves. For in the eyes of most proto-national and national elites, throughout all their cruelty they still seen to be driven by a rationale and developmental practices that set them apart from mere pirates (Chatterjee 1985).

achievements of intruding Arakanese (but not of Portuguese) as skilled agriculturalists settling parts of the jungles, depicted them only partly as marauders and looters (S. C. Sarkar 2010, 17f). Regardless if the pirates were actually Arakanese or if this ethnic group was subjected to orientalist discourses on dacoity[58] – in oral traditions, administrative documents and postcolonial publications they figure regularly as threat to the passage of merchant fleets and emerging urban settlements (Hamilton 1820, 1:84). Here, the amphibious spaces emerge as retreats allowing in their difficult accessibility, but proximity to trading routes surprise attacks and rich bounties. Through the intertwined motifs of threatened traders and hazardous refuges, of depopulating slave raids and skilful settlements, pirates became part of orientalist constructions of the swamps.

In today's Sundarbans, the trope of pirates figures as a metonymic allusion to lawlessness and the absence of the (benevolent) state in these regions (see also Chatterjee 2011, 33). The figure of pirates unfolds along two registers. As 'pirate's den' the Sundarbans are, on one hand, framed as a space of unruliness and endemic violence (Jalais 2010b, 4). However, in other contexts or conversations, the idea of haunting pirates is used to accentuate a contrast between externalized and localized actors or between state and 'village community'. Violence emerges, along this trajectory, not as a consequence of environmental conditions, but is brought about by externalised actors. Invading remote islands, outsiders are understood as inflicting discord and violence onto what are otherwise peaceful communities only to further their own ends. Through the trope of pirates, lawlessness and bloodshed is, thus, imagined to be distinguished from local frontier societies.

[58] In their quest for knowledge and order colonial administrators and early ethnographers began from the 19th century onwards to invest criminal behaviour with distinct ethnic groups. Armed robbery (*dacoity*) and murder (*thuggee*), framed either as an economic strategy or as a ritual necessity became a motif through which large swaths of the population were known. Sending shudders through elites at home and abroad, this motif relied on naturalizing and racist classifications (e.g. criminal castes and tribes) and legitimized draconic measures against these groups as much as it underlined the 'white man's burden' to rule. Together with other strategies of inscription of criminality that seemed justified to know and rule the vast Empire (Anderson 2004), these discourses and practices have in recent decades been critically engaged with. Armed robberies have been demonstrated to be related to times of dearth and entailing a good deal of protest (Arnold 1979); while the theme of ritual murder has emerged a colonial fantasy (K. A. Wagner 2004). The assumption of criminal behaviour as a quasi-natural inclination among various lower strata of society continues, though, to reverberate through conceptions of postcolonial elites.

4.2. Ritual Dimensions

Situated at the very end of the rivers journey, the island is intimately tied to Gaṅgā's appearance on earth. It is understood as space where incidents took place that culminated in both, the celestial river's descending and its actual route from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. The island figures as an anchor within sacral geographies and converges different cosmological layers. All these interpretive dimensions rest in a basic narrative structure unfolding between King Sagar, his successor King Bhagīrath and the sage Kapil Muni.

Spanning diverse textual traditions and resurfacing in various localized mythological accounts, the narrative structure remains surprisingly uniform (Feldhaus 2000, 20ff). Particularly prominent is the inclusion of the story into the epic Rāmāyaṇa – both, in the tremendously popular version of Vālmikī, as well as in the version attributed to Kṛttibāsa[59] most loved by Bengalis (Zbavitel 1976, 145f; T. K. Stewart and Dimock 2000, 243).[60] In both Rāmāyaṇas the riverine goddess or the divine river emerges similarly as epitome of fertility and purity.

Similarly, the episode of the divine river's descending is subjected far less to shifts in accentuations as it is the case for many other episodes of the epic (see e.g. Datta 1980; Benoit 1998; Richman 2000; T. K. Stewart and Dimock 2000). Only marginally related to the Rāmāyaṇa's main plot, sage Viśvāmitra tells Rāma and his brother the story of their ancestor King Sagara at the onset of of the epic. I will paraphrase the plotline here (cf. D. Sen n.d.; Valmiki 2005).

After many efforts and only with the help of a sage, King Sagara's two wives gave birth to sons. His first wife had one son, while the second wife gave birth to sixty thousand sons. When they were grown up, King Sagara commenced a Vedic horse sacrifice in Ayodhyā.[61] The ritual

[59] Various authors have shown that these two and most likely many others versions of the Ramayana are compilations that grew in the course of long centuries and through contribution by various groups of authors (see i.e. W. L. Smith 1988). In what follows I use the names of Vālmikī and Kṛttibāsa therefore to refer to particular outcomes of such processes (culminated in distinct bodies of work and indexed with the respective name) and not to historic authors. I should add that the texts subsumed under either name have furthermore been shown to diverge to not a small amount (W. L. Smith 2004).

[60] Its ongoing significances (and re-interpretations) rest not only in oral transmissions and the widely available cheap prints, but particularly in theatrical versions. As in many other places throughout India, the serialization of the epic for public TV has obviously enriched the lively sphere of localized theatrical forms (see e.g. Lutgendorf 2006). In earlier decades, however, the Rāmāyaṇa was part of the standard repertoire of travelling theatre troupes, the *jātrā*. Travelling still throughout Bengal in the months after the rains and giving public their highly anticipated performances, they seem to have turned towards other subjects: to leftist politics (Da Costa 2007) or to more filmy entertainments (as the *jātrā* I witnessed during my fieldwork). Several of my interlocutors actually had a background in these theatre groups acknowledging the ongoing relevance of these forms of popular theatre.

[61] The reasons to do so, differ in the two versions. Vālmikī's Rāmāyaṇa emphasizes his worries about the bad manners of his many sons. In the Bengali version, on the other hand, the intention to gain predominance for his sons in the three world is clearly stated (D. Sen n.d., 20).

involved seetting free a sacrificial horse which was from now on followed by an army (Gonda 1966, 110 – 115). Neighbouring kings had to let the horse pass onto their territory and thereby testify to the sovereignty of the royal sacrificer. To stop the horse meant to challenge the sacrificer and war would resume. Until the date of the actual sacrifice of the horse, the body of the horse signified in itself the body of the king. These political dimensions of the sacrifice are not directly alluded to in either Rāmāyaṇa, but form its subtext and explain the terror King Sagara is depicted to have felt when he received the news that the horse had been stolen under watchful eyes of its guardians. What he did not know is that it had been snatched aways from its guardians by Indra, king of the gods, himself.[62]

Horrified that the ritual would have to be left unfinished, Sagara sent his sons to bring back the horse. After several years of thorough searches they returned home empty-handed. The king then ordered them to start digging and to extend their hunt into the netherworlds. Tearing up the earth in one direction after the other, they encountered various creatures of the underworld, unsettling all and killing many. After years of fruitless devastations and killings in all directions, finally they turned towards the north-east and found the horse in the depths of the netherworld. It had been tied to the hermitage of the meditating sage Kapil Muni and grazing peacefully. Enraged, the sixty thousand sons isnulted the sage. Angered by their disrespectful behaviour and accusation of theft, Kapil Muni burnt the Sixty Thousand princes to ashes. Meanwhile, King Sagara had become increasingly worried and sent his only left son, Aṅṣumān. He followed the trail of destruction into the underworld. Arriving at the hermitage, he learned about the death

[62] Typically for Hindu mythology, Indṛās motives are explained in profoundly different terms. Kṛttibāsa, for one, writes that Indra felt threatened by the worldly aspirations of Sagar and his sons (D. Sen n.d., 21); while the Vālmikī Ramayana abstains from any direct explanation. Other sources, however, frame the theft to be part of a strategy to ultimately tame the unruly sons or to bring, in an even wider scheme, the divine river down to the Earth. Without identifying the thief, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, to name but a further possibility, frames the theft as part of Kapil Muni's plan to get rid of the unruly sons. Irritated by the injustice bestowed by the sixty thousand sons, the gods had asked him for help and he had consented (Wilson 1870).

Figure 4. Bazar Print depicting Gaṅgāsāgar's main temple and Gaṅgā's descending

of the princes. He was shaken by both, the demise of his brothers and the absence of purification rituals which are precondition for a proper death and an afterlife. In despair, he asked the sage what could be done to free their souls. Upon his humble request, Kapil Muni promised that the waters of the Gaṅgā would, once brought here, ensure the purification of the ashes and the passage of the souls. With the horse and these tragic news he returned to the King. From that day on, the King lived a life of sorrow. In fact, he is frequently portrayed as having wept so much that his tears amassed to the sea in the first place. Aṅṣumān, upon him his son Dilīp and, finally, his grandson, Bhagīrath, devoted their lives to the quest of purifying the souls of their relatives by bringing Gaṅgā to the spot. After centuries of penance, the gods were eventually pleased by their devotion and Brāhma himself convinced the celestial river to descend upon earth.[63] A major obstacle, however, had to be removed: the

[63] According to most mythological narratives Gaṅgā was content in heaven and had either to be convinced to descend upon earth or was forced to do so. In the Devibhāgavātā, for instance, Gaṅgā is framed to be one of Vishnu's three wives (Bhaṭṭācārya 1976, 21): Quarrelling, Lakshmi told her that she had to go the earth and sins and calumny would be her domain. Even while Vishnu assured that the sins would do her (and her purity) no harm, the descending still emerges as a curse.

destruction caused by an unhindered downfall of the river from the sky. Śiva finally agreed to help and caught her with his matted hair. Finally Bhagīrath welcomed the celestial river in the Himalayas, where she entered this world, and guided her through the plains. Bringing fertility and joy wherever she went, the river finally reached the spot of Kapila's hermitage and purified the souls by washing over the ashes right before entering the sea.

Because the river had been brought down, as Hindu thought has it, by Bhagīrath's perseverance, the river as a whole is sometimes called Bhagīrathi, the daughter of Bhagīrath. Additionally, two separated tributaries are officially called Bhagīrathi: on one hand, the stream fed by the source in the Himalayas and, on the other hand, one of the larger tributaries heading through Bengal and towards Gaṅgāsāgar. The latter stretch of the river, which becomes the Huglī when halfway through Bengal, is furthermore understood to lead into the underworld: Not into a depression or low-lying floodplains, but literally into the netherworld (*pātāl*). In a sense, of course, this assignation of Sāgar and, generalizing for a moment, the Bengal delta into the netherworld fits well with ancient Indian theories of environment and 'proper places'. According to the latter, the swampy and extremely low landscapes to the East of the 'vedic' territories were deemed unfit for healthy lives and the cultivation of virtue. Conversely, they were seen as home to creatures of lowly moral standards and phlegmatic bodies (see Zimmermann 1987). Beyond these ancient versions of environmental determinism, the space of Kapil's hermitage figures as liminal and dangerous position throughout Hindu cosmologies. At least two layers of this dimension have to be noted.

Accessible only through digging and hidden deep in the ground, the space is obviously situated *beneath* the earth. It emerges, therefore, less as a wilderness, but more as a space of extreme seclusion. With nobody being around, Kapil Muni could engage unhindered in his ascetic practices and Indra had been able to hide the horse here. Although the netherworld is in Hindu traditions ofte thought to be populated by civilizations of snakes, demons and monsters, these do not figure in either account of the space surrounding Kapil's hermitage. In agony, even outright killed by the digging army, toward the story's deadly climax they are not mentioned at all. Depth and seclusion emerge as the primary characteristics of the space. As such it emerges in itself beyond the reach of earthly powers. Without consequences for the sage, the sacrificial horse, whose freedom signifies, after all, political authority, was literally *tied* to the hermitage; and the ensuing army sees horrifying defeat.

A similar picture emerges when we take the island-ness of the space into account. Certainly, in the paraphrased sections of the Rāmāyaṇa the space emerges as island only as the story unfolds.

It is, therefore, rather an island-to-become than an already existing island that threatens order. In either case, the very island-ness underscores, I suggest, notions of liminality and threat. It is comparable, in this sense, with that other larger island and centerpiece to the main plot of all Rāmāyaṇas: Lanka. For Rām's main adversary, the demon king Rāvaṇa, is represented as King of Lanka. Briefly leaving his island capital, he assaults the 'righteous' prince by abducting his wife Sītā. Furthermore, on the island itself she is held captive and from there she has, ultimately, to be returned to the mainland to restore personal honour of the prince and moral order.[64] Throughout their differences, islands emerge in both plotlines as spaces harboring threats to political power. They appear as liminal places, nested at the edge or beyond 'proper' territory (i.e. the continental landmass) and their inhabitants seem to endanger lawful, righteous rule in the scheme of Hindu mythology.

Regardless, if the cave is seen as unearthed by digging armies or as turned into an island by arriving currents, the space of Kapil Muni's hermitage has attracted pilgrims since centuries. Beyond recurring allusions to masses arriving for the yearly festival, the *melā* and, as I will show later, to murderous practices of idolatry, astonishingly little is known about the routes, times and motivations of pilgrimage. As endpoint of the sacred river, as place where the imminent goddess manifested her purificatory powers, and, finally, because it came to be seen as invested with the presence of Kapil Muni, so much is safe to say, remote Gangāsagar stands apart. To Hindus it became a *tīrtha*, literally a 'ford' or 'crossing'. Situated at the shores of sacralized water bodies, at *tīrtha* the waters may be crossed, but more importantly they allow to cross into other states and realities. *Tīrtha* are understood to be entanglements of this world with that of the gods. They are places where distinct divine powers are thought to be present; sites allowing to effectively reach out towards or immerse in deities; and as sites that make transitions into liberation more easy (Eck 1981; Eck 1983, 34 – 39; Veer 1988, 1 –3 ; Haberman 2006).

It seems very likely that the two main particular powers contemporarily recognized as pervading this place were sought in earlier centuries, too. These are, on one hand, the powers of the Gaṅgā understood as having purified the ashes of King Sagara's sixty thousand sons in precisely this spot. Appearing as marvellous along its whole length, her powers are frequently framed to be particularly effective here.

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[64] In paraphrasing the main plot, I have deliberately chosen a language that mirrors the reduction of Sītā to an object of the divine prince and his opponent. While this approach to Sītā pervades both, the Sanskrit Vālmikī-Rāmāyaṇa and the Kṛttibāsa-Rāmāyaṇa, it has been contested by a bewildering range of local traditions and recent reappraisals of the epic (see e.g. Richman 2000; Lal and Gokhale 2009).

On the other hand, then, marks the southern edge and, by extension, the whole island, the place of Kapil Muni's erstwhile hermitage. It is unclear, if his name has become the subject of an accumulation of meaning typical for Hindu literature, or if it had been connected to the story of Gaṅgā after having grown famous in other contexts. Both positions seem possible. In any case, during the last centuries he has been attributed with diverse deeds and India has seen, as Knut Jacobsen rightly claims (2008, xi), the emergence of "[…] several Kapila traditions".
Although Kapil Muni is certainly a significant figure within Hindu traditions and intimately related to Sāgar, pilgrims have an ambivalent relation towards him. Jacobsen notes (2012, 99):

> "Pilgrims come to the sites associated with Kapila in order to draw upon the salvific power created by his presence, but most do not come to worship Kapila, although they usually visit the temples to have darśan of them. … The salvific power of many of these centers of pilgrimage is based upon the belief that Kapila once practicised asceticism at the place and, since Kapila is known to have discovered and revealed a way to mokṣa, the sacred place associated with Kapila are considered to have strong salvific powers."

To be sure, the diversity of pilgrims and their theological and practical attitudes toward Kapil Muni cannot be accounted for in this thesis. They are beyond the scope of my research. Nevertheless, random conversations, participant observations around the main temple complex and the study of pilgrimage manuals allow for some general remarks. He is thought, among others, to be the founder of one of the main schools of 'Indian' philosophy, the Sāṃkhya system. Mentioned in the eulogies of pilgrimage scriptures, history books and devotional souvenirs (e.g. Māitī 2001), for pilgrimage patterns his association with Sāṃkhya has only been a negligible. Nothing indicates that it was different in the past. Furthermore, he is understood to be yet another full incarnation, an *avatār*, of Vishnu – a dimension that was, again, of limited significance to contemporary pilgrims in Gaṅgāsāgar. That being said, the visit of the main temple and, here, the darśān of Kapil Muni certainly was a climactic moment of every pilgrimage. The overarching majority of pilgrims worshipped the sage as a crucial figure in the mythical incidents that lead to the descending of the Gaṅgā and not in his own right. This figuration is mirrored remarkably clear in the architecture of the main temple and the arrangement of effigies. With Kapil Muni in the middle, all central figures of the myth are literally lined up as stone statues and watch out toward the sea (see figure 4). They were worshipped as an assembly of actors within Gaṅgā's myth. The worship in the simple, yet famous temple, hence, is one of a myth or mythical complex rather of one particular deity or, what is equally often found in Hindu India, an eclectic mix of figures assembled to worship.

From the very beginning, the ritual practices seem to have been concentrated on the southern, sea-facing shores of the island. Yet, the exact position, its seasonality and, finally, the enforced mobility the temple complex has been subjected to as a whole mirror the landscape's instability and liminality. The temple's beginnings are lost to the dust, or better: to the mud of history. As with many other pilgrimage sites in South Asia, it seems likely that architectural structures were preceded by a more ephemeral presence of ascetics and ritual specialists. Housed in simple dwellings they left little archaeological evidence. It is a matter of dispute, when the first proper temple was erected. The earliest accounts point toward the 6th century, others date the first temple into the year 1030 or 1031 (year 437 of the Bengal Calendar).[65] With the onset of the 19th century, various sources attest to the existence of a temple. We also know that from the then on the latest, the temple has been run by the Rāmānandī Sampradaya, a monastic order centred in the North Indian town of Ayodhyā (see Veer 1988), claiming to be hereditarily connected to King Sagar. Be it due to a strong North Indian identity or a monastic ethos, the priests have been sent directly from Ayodhyā since and remained a secluded community.

The fact that the priests speak only little Bengali and hardly mingle with the local population, was irritating many of my interlocutors.[66] Managing the renowned temple, the *māṭh* has been enjoying absolute control of the revenues and allegedly transfers them in their entirety to the North Indian headquarters. It can only be speculated about the amount of revenues gathered – but they ought to be substantial by any means, for the melā is India's second largest pilgrimage festival and the temple one among India's most important ones.

As was the case with other, rich temples in India, the claims of the *māṭh* have been challenged by the postcolonial state. But in contrast to parallel cases throughout postcolonial India, the efforts failed and the Government of West Bengal could not wrest control over the temple's treasures from the order.

The available information on this conflict are extremely scarce. In his book on the *melā*, Tārundeb Bhaṭṭacarya mentions the conflict and lists "[…] one Gopal Mukherjee and others […]" as contenders (Bhaṭṭācārya 1976, 42). From what I could gather from local residents, the

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[65] Drawing on a 19th century article that appeared in the Bengal journal Harkara, Tarunadeba Bhaṭṭācārya dates the first temple to 1030 or 1031 (1976, 41). He goes on to write (1976, 41f): "It is said that the great temple which stands there has been erected 1,400 years back. Ramayet sect of Bairagis and other types of Sannyasis worship this idol. This temple was erected during 437 B.C. [1030 or 1031 of the Christian era] by the members of the Guru Community of Jaipur Rajas."

[66] One of my friends, Uthio Mukherjee, an urban middle class renouncer serving in the small Omkarnāth Nibās that I called home during fieldwork, lamented the fact that the temple complex was so unimportant in the fabric of islanders' popular religion. With a sharp tongue he added that this would perhaps change, if the temple would further integrate Bengalis.

conflict involved a court case filed by the government against the Rāmānandī order. To forestall further contestations, the temple staff had strict orders to withhold all information. Conseqently, the monastic archives were locked and lips sealed. Now, this very secrecy following the case has also been its most important implication for my work. Due to this rift, the past of the temple, its movement with the coast and the interpretations thereof by the monastoc order remained uunder lock and key.[67]

In contrast to the clear patterns of ownership, the objects of worship have been constantly shifting. The *murti*, on one hand, had been moved back and forth between Calcutta and the island until early 20th century. That is, they had been kept in premises of the Rāmānandī in the city, only to be brought to the island for the festival. It is very likely that either the conditions had been too difficult for to stay throughout the year or they saw no need to do so as the stream of pilgrims had been ebbing after the month of the festival. While it possible to assume that renouncers or others stayed permanently, the practice of shifting *murti* suggests that the sacral complex on the southern shores was extremely fragile; and that the hold of priests onto the materiality of the island was weak. Early accounts emphasizing the depth of surrounding jungles or the incessant tiger attacks only underline this picture.

More important for my thesis is the fragility of the settlement at the edge of the flexible coast. Not only had the temple been repeatedly damaged by storms and been subject to deluges, but it had been necessary to shift the whole structure further interior repeatedly. I will return to these recesses when I engage the relevance of hazards as prisms to know the island, its laboratory-ness. For now I want to suggest merely that this fragile presence certainly underscored the perception of hazardousness, depth and amphibiousness circulated along pilgrimage networks. That being said, the routes to reach the shore and the tempel itself had been rather undeveloped until the 1970s. Pilgrims generally had been sleeping out in the open and the temple, located right at the beach, was surrounded by dense jungles. Therefore, pilgrims had either to face a long journey by boat or to cross the jungles on foot. Both routes were arduous and dangerous. Only a few decades ago, so it was said, pilgrims approaching the temple on foot would sing and call out aloud to scare the tigers away. On the waters, on the other hand, they had to brave mighty currents, rough weather and dangerous estuarine creatures. The journey itself and then

[67] To be more precise: the caretaker of the temple assured me in an informal conversation that they had documents on the recesses and devastations of the temple complex. But he denied them saying that I would need an official clearance by the head office in Ayodhyā to access them. Due to time constraints I had to abstain from travelling to the city and asking a favour that, I felt, was hardly to come by in any case.

again the final moment of landing right on the beach were, in a word, life-threatening.[68] Tarunadeba Bhaṭṭācārya pointedly remarked that today's motto of the pilgrimage site – 'To all *tīrtha* time and again, to Gaṅgāsāgar only once' – was originally not conceived to illustrate the advanced holiness and purificatory potential of the site, but rather the simple fact that many did not make it back alive (1976). Among these two possibilities to reach Gaṅgāsāgar, waterborne traffic had been more popular. On all kinds of boats and ships, pilgrims would set out from Calcutta and countless other spots along the river's edges to reach the sacral site. Flowing past the largest part of the island and bypassing its the jungles, their journey inverted those of European gentlemen passing by on their way to Calcutta and, thus, to enter the Jewel of the Britisch Empire. To these travellers, their perceptions and imageries of localized nature, I will turn to now.

4.3. Colonial: In the Mouth of Darkness

> Though lines of imperial power have always flowed along rivers, watercourses are not the only landscape to carry the freight of history.
>
> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*

> Farther south, nearer the sea, we find the primeval forest, impenetrable jungle, trees and brushwood intertwined, and dangerous-looking creeks running into the darkness in all directions.
>
> Mr. Westland cited in William Wilson Hunter, A Statistical Account of Bengal (Vol. 1)

The colonial period marked a watershed for environmental relations in the Sundarbans (Gadgil and Guha 1993). Not only have the settlement operations commenced then, but in the course of colonial knowledge production the coastal fringes were subjected to systematic inquiries for the first time.[69] On what appears to be a lighter note, Sāgar became an instance and emblem of

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[68] As conditions for the pilgrimage to the confluence, these life-threatening risks resonate also in popular culture. Premendra Mitras famous short story (Mitra 1957) on a Brahmin women losing her arrogance toward an 'untouchable' girl amidst the environmental hazards of the pilgrimage may serve as an example. Particularly, as it was later adapted into a critically acclaimed film (D. Bose 1959).

[69] Other wide-ranging, if not thorough measurements of these tracts have been reported. The tax roll completed for Aurangzeb' brother, Sahar Suja, in around 1658 assessed vast and also unsettled parts of the Sundarbans (Mukherji 1981, 5f).

this salty wilderness from the early days of British colonialism as it flanked the entry to the only more or less reliable channel into the western parts of Bengal (Hamilton 1815, 361). Sailing back and forth between England, Bengal and the wider empire, the island could not be avoided. Leafing through travel accounts, it becomes clear that it actually was one the few noteworthy sights. The bureaucratic gaze anxiously turned here to safeguard the vital connection to the sea. From the 19th century travellers had, furthermore, to disembark here on smaller ships for the passage up the river (Carey 1887, 123) and travel writers took it as a means to meditate upon the nature of the country and its people. Through the varieties of voices, as well as the shifting significance within the process of writing the colony, Sāgar remained for the colonial period at a curious position. It emerged as a darkness that had to be engaged with; a darkness that had to be crossed to reach the city and its 'civilized' promises (see also Arnold 2006, 71 – 73). Likewise, it became a darkness awaiting the light of the colonizer. In short, Sāgar emerged as a mirror of metropolitan anxieties. Take, for instance, Maria Grahams account (Lady Graham 1812, 133):

> "The water looked like thick mud, fitter to walk upon than to sail through. […] Nothing can be more desolate than the entrance to the Hooghly. To the west frightful breakers extend as far as the eye can reach, you are surrounded by sharks and crocodiles; but on the east is a more horrible object, the black low island of Saugor. The very appearance of the dark jungle that covers it is terrific. You see that it must be a nest of serpents, and a den of tigers; but it is worse, it is the yearly scene of human sacrifice, which not all the vigilance of the British government can prevent. The temple is ruined, but the infatuated votaries of Kali plunge into the waves that separate the island from the continent, in the spot where the blood-stained fane once stood, and crowned with flowers and robed in scarlet, singing hymns to the goddess, they devote themselves to destruction; and he who reaches the opposite shore without being devoured by the sacred sharks, becomes a pariah, and regards himself as being detested by the gods. Possessed by this frenzy of superstition, mothers have thrown their infants into the jaws of the sea monsters, and furnished scenes too horrible for description; but the yearly assembly at Saugor is now attended by troops, in order to prevent these horrid practices, so that I believe there are *now* but few involuntary victims. As we advanced up the river, the breakers disappeared, the jungle grew higher and lighter, and we saw sometimes a pagoda or village between the trees."

In all its hyperbole and error, this account illustrates almost all the themes through which this very island was framed from the 19th century onwards: human sacrifice, nauseating wasteland and monstrous creatures. Only an explicit reference to the recurrence of natural disasters is missing. But its hazardous nature does not restrict itself to a mere background for the frenzy

and murder of idolaters, as she would have put, but rather plays an active role.[70] This begins with the peculiarity of earth-like waters that have probably caused erosion to a former temple on the shore ('the blood-stained fane'). And it is further developed in the evocation of the island's creepily low jungles[71] and darkness. Set against this darkness and gloom, even the notorious 'Black Hole of Calcutta' (Hutnyk 1996; Chatterjee 2012) emerges as somewhat of a relief and a space of, at least potential enlightenment. But at its centre, of course, looms the complicity of nature and superstition in the murderous practices of the Hindus.[72]

While these accounts perpetuate rumours of indiscriminate, yet largely voluntary deaths, other voices saw the ritual murder limited to female infants (see e.g. O'Malley 1914, 257). Girls were reported to be fed wild animals out in the open or under the cover of night,.[73] Alternatively, infants were said to be drowned in the waters (R. Chakrabarti 2009, 79f). Scandalized by administrative officers and accounts of missionaries, reports on these horrid practices fed into the growing attention to the abuse[74] of women in India (Arnold 2006, 72) and ultimately into the official abolishment of these practices in 1802.[75]

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[70] I emphasize this because it marks an important difference to the equally famous imagery of the pagodas of Jagernauth or Jaganath in Puri. This latter temple was written about as the locus of senseless bloodshed and superstition without nature taking an active part in it. Indirectly, via the climatic conditions favouring irrationality and the like, nature certainly took its part there too.

[71] It is interesting to note that to many other writers and painters, the monstrous height of tropical forests was threatening, while Graham seems to be relieved on reaching, as she says, "jungles [that] grew higher and lighter" further upriver.

[72] Reflecting on the figure of 'jungle' in European accounts of India throughout the 19th century, David Arnold notes (Arnold 2006, 81) "[…] this kind of multiple association between physical harm and moral evil leant itself to Christian representations of a landscape that was perceived to be both heathen and deadly, as entangled with rank, miasmatic, over-fecund plant life as Hinduism appeared to teem with primitive beliefs and convoluted superstitions."

[73] In the early years of the 19th century, the Scotsman John Leyden (Leyden cited in Arnold 2006, 71), composed the following lines:

"To glut the shark and crocodile/ A mother brought here infant here:/ She saw its tender playful smile,/ She shed not one maternal tear:-/ She threw it on a watery bier:-/ With grinding teeth sea monsters tore/ The smiling infant which she bore:-/ She shrunk not once its cries to hear!"

[74] Famously arranged around the motif of self-immolating widows, various other ways to subject women to deadly violence were anxiously discussed and publicly abhorred. It appeared, hence, that not only did widows jump into or calmly sat on-top of pyres, but that they were directly murdered by their male relatives. Complementing the awful imagery of widows being viciously tied to the inflamed corpse of their husbands, they were also reported to be killed in large numbers as babies.[74] Both latter cases emerged as ritually sanctioned depreciation or, at best, a valorisation as sacrifice (and nothing else) and were, therefore, taken as signs of idolatry-ridden, despotic races. Within orientalist legitimations of European rule these highly scandalised imageries figured, as postcolonial critiques have sufficiently shown, quite prominently. The 'white man's burden' to rule and to install rationality was expanded or aggravated through the self-awarded duty to lessen the plight of India's women. The philosopher Gayatri Spivak captures this discursive figuration evocatively with the phrase 'White men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1988, 296). One expression being devoted to the uplift and the quest for autonomy, mirroring today's struggles against the symbolic violence of gender, more prominent, perhaps, was the intent to stop related practices by force. Significantly so by public condemnation and prohibitive orders imposed by the Viceroy.

[75] In 1802 Lord Wellesley issued "A Regulation for preventing the Sacrifice of Children at Saugor and other places" which outlawed human sacrifices on the island.

The second motif relates to the presence of deadly animals in the jungles. Clearly alluded to in the account cited above, it is woven throughout colonial writing and has proven to be more adamant the rumors of infanticide. While accounts of deadly animals regularly included crocodiles and snakes, this diversity eventually gave way to the emphasis of tigers. In its disturbing elegance, the feline predator came to be seen as one of the paramount dangers to human conduct at the swampy edges. In his East India Gazetteer Walter Hamilton (Hamilton 1815, 711f), for instance, repeats the horrors of localized Hindu practices and closes his short account of the island thus:

> “On shore the jungles swarm with tigers of the largest and most ferocious sort, so that both elements are equally dangerous.”

Indeed, the identification of jungles with tigers has become emblematic to the think the mangrove swamps of the Sundarbans an all levels. Actually, it is one and only commonality shared across local societies, urban imaginations, touristic depictions and global environmental movements (Herring 1990, 3; T. K. Niyogi 1996; Jalais 2010b).

The invocation of infanticide and tigers and of the darkness embracing both, have not been the output of arcane criticism. Writings such as these informed and were intimately intertwined with the project of emerging British colonialism in India. They mirrored and fed again into, what Sivaramakrishnan (1999) called, the dynamics of ‘statemaking’ – that is, the production of legibility, rule and actual governance in encounters with material conditions. The crucial moment of statemaking in the Sundarban was, of course, the settlement of the swamps, the enlightenment of the darkness. To these I will turn now.

4.4. Into Aladdin's Cave: Settlement Operations

> It had been said, the island would be nothing but dense jungle, no town, no village and empty of people, only birds and dangerous animals were living there.
>
> Hossain-Mia let the forest be cut step by step to build a new colony with the help of deeply indebted, starving families. He awoke desires and hopes and brought the families – one after another – to the island. To the peasants he leased out lands that had never been ploughed since the emergence of the islands. He supplied oxen and ploughs as well as tools to cut the forest and arranged for shelter.
>
> Manik Bandyopadhyay, *Padma Nadi Mājhi*

Shortly after the Company had acquired the swamps in 1757[76] their transformation began to be envisioned. As early as 1770 the distribution of land began, but it gained momentum only several decades later. After 1875 the colonial government realized the need to protect parts of mangrove forest to ensure sufficient supply of timber and non-timber forest products for the growing metropolis (Richards and Flint 1990, 25 – 28; Grove 1997, 75f), the Sundarbans were divided in 1878. While one part was to remain forested under the auspices of nascent scientific forestry,[77] the other was earmarked for thorough clearances (S. C. Sarkar 2010, 86 – 89). Over the decades, the idea to safeguard vast tracts as resources became entangled with colonial predecessors of today's conservation drives.[78] With the Indian Forest Act (1927), the protected area was restructured as a natural reserve assigned for wildlife and the Royal Bengal Tiger in particular. Today's reserve shared by Bangladesh and India grew out of these jurisdictions: Roughly within the limits of what the colonial administration had set aside as Protected and later as Reserved Forest, on the Indian side of the border the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve has

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[76] The western parts of the Sundarbans fell among the territories the British acquired after the Battle of Plassey. Installing the Mir Jafar as Nawab of Bengal, he in turn bestowed the lordship (*zamindari*) over 24 territories (*24 parganā*) to the East India Company in December 1757. Only four years later, Clive managed to extend the hold over the territories from a mere entitlement to collect revenue (*zamindari*) into full ownership as military fief (*jagir*) (Mukherji 1981, 7). Thus, the Sundarbans served as the very fundaments of the bridgehead Bengal became in the quest for India (Marshall 1987).

[77] The protected forest amounted initially to 4794,04 km^2 and grew through later expansions (De 1983, 34).

[78] In his lucid study on colonial environmental thought, Richard Grove (1997, 39) notes: "On closer inspection, however, the hypothesis of a purely destructive environmental imperialism constituting a complete break with the pre-colonial past does not stand up well at all. Indeed this notion apparently arose out of a misunderstanding about the contradictory, heterogeneous, and ambivalent nature of the colonial's state workings. […] Thus, although it undoubtedly promoted widespread ecological destruction, colonial enterprise also helped to create a context conducive to rigorous analytical thinking about the process of ecological change and to the formation of a conservation ideology."

been created in 1973. In 1984 the Reserve was declared to be a National Park only to be re-constituted as ‘Sundarban Biosphere Reserve’ in 1989. Furthermore, it was included into the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1987.[79] Beyond the border – in what had become Bangladesh by then – the reserved forest was reconstituted as three consecutive Wildlife Sanctuaries in 1977 and similarly declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997.[80] Taken together, in 2001 the Indian and the Bangladeshi parks received, finally, a recognition by the UNESCO under its ‘Man and Biosphere Program’. While this latter step enabled further cross-border efforts, it also can be seen as heralding a growing concern for the ‘human habitat’ bordering the forests. Yet the tiger continued to eclipse the imagination of these forests.

The very mode of colonial and postcolonial governance at play here – enshrining nature in pockets and undoing wilderness everywhere else[81] – is mirrored in the approaches to tigers in the whole delta: The awaking sentiment to protect them at one place, had been complemented with the long-standing practice to pay rewards for every tiger killed on the surrounding islands. Attached to the murderousness and poisonousness, serving as frame to think the Sundarbans, others also emphasized an exuberant barrenness of the islands. There were at once imagined as overflowing with abundance *and* desolate. One administrator noted the “[…] evil fertility of the land […]” (Westland cited in Hunter 1875, 332), another emphasized an “[…] obnoxious wilderness […]” waiting to be brought to cultivation and eventually turned “[…] into a seat of plenty” (Huggins 1824, 3). But, alas, the latter writer concluded (Huggins 1824, 2),

> “I imagine the period is remote when Saugar Island will be metamorphosed into a Brighton, as many years must elapse before the jungle can be cleared away.”

These snippets signal the conflation of fiscal and aesthetic interests fuelling the ‘reclamations’. In addition, they had political overtones. Taking the embankments here as a shorthand for reclamations, Lahiri (1936, 39) wrote in his report on the settlement operations:

> “The embankments were necessary at a time when the Government wanted to improve the climate of Calcutta, to free the areas within the vicinity of Calcutta from the ravages of smugglers and pirates and from depredations of fierce animals and with that primary objects in view, efforts were made to reclaim a vast tract known as Sundarbans.”

[79] See http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/452, last access 8. August 2013
[80] See http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/798, last access 8. August 2013
[81] This mode has been underlying administrative approaches to govern India’s diverse populations, too. Thus, certain adivāsi groups were similarly subjected to well-meaning seclusion in order to safeguard them from the corrupting influence of Hindus and modernity (Shah 2007, 1810 – 1813; Damodaran 2013).

Landscape and politics emerge as intimately intertwined, both as a danger – jungle/pirates/predatory animals – and in the envisioned healthier state of expulsion. Besides the eradication of threats, the envisioned transformations involved productive dimensions of power relations in the sense introduced by Foucault. Thorough clearances would end the wanderings of collectors and woodcutters whose practices remained suspicious and subject unruly swamps to regular rule. Mirroring the twin dynamics of enclosure in Europe – primitive accumulation and control – the settlement of lands and the transformation of its dwellers or users into subjects of capitalist Empire were mutually bound up (D'Souza 2006). Indeed, the English noun commonly relied upon here is ultimately misleading. For these activities were not a reclamation – as the land was most likely not reclaimed from the fangs of an overgrowing nature to an earlier state of cultivation. Rather were these deeply transforming interventions that culminated in the production of a particular environment. It is therefore apt to frame these developments as 'colonizations'[82] and understand them as biopolitical interventions.

Sedentariness was a key to these developments. Drawing on an, ultimately illusionary distinction between forest dwellers and peasants (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000a) and negating subaltern mobilities, the settled lifestyle of the peasants emerged as the best way of combining the 'reclamation' of the forests with an increase in fiscal revenues. It stands to reason that this approach was based on the expectation that peasants would safeguard the private use rights of their taxable land and thus enforce individualised property relations against collective usages. Thus, as much as possible of the vast unprotected 'wastelands' was to be leased out to rent-paying subjects.

The ensuing settlement operations were arguably the most important development in localized environmental relations in recent history. Their consequences haunt the Sundarbans to this very day (Kanjilal 2000). From the early 19th century on, whole islands were embanked, drained, cleared and settled by poor migrants hailing from neighbouring districts. The earliest, officially sanctioned settlements on Sāgar commenced in 1812.[83] Pargiter (1934, 337) notes that the Collector Mr. Trower was instructed to reclaim the island. He "[…] began clearing in a central portion, named after him Trowerland, but finding that cultivation could be better undertaken by private persons, he convened a meeting of merchants and others in Calcutta in 1818." It took a few years, but in 1822 they founded the 'Saugor Island Society'. Uniting the capital from

[82] Interestingly, recent literature pertaining to Africa frames these processes frequently as 'colonisation' (e.g. Larsen 2010), where literature on India almost exclusively relies on the notion of 'reclamation'.

[83] For the sake of brevity I have to skip accounts of the earliest, scattered settlements in colonial times (see S. C. Sarkar 2010, 83f).

several British and Indian businessmen, the Society took the whole island as lease and began to subject vast areas of the island to colonization. Among them were the north-western parts of Sāgar. Called Mudpoint by then, these were the tracts that would eventually dislodge from the island and form the islets of Ghoṛāmārā and Lohāchara. In the extreme south of the island, the Society's workers cleared today's Dhobelat successfully. These and other works, were, however, entirely destroyed by the cyclone and storm surge hitting the island in May 1833. In face of the immense devastations, the Society gave up on Sāgar, sold some of its leases and ceased to exist (Pargiter 1934, 338; O'Malley 1914, 240).

In the meantime, the settlements had come to be subjected to the so-called Large Capitalist Rule. Accordingly, only wealthy individuals or groups of British citizens were given land. As only these were deemed capable of actually ensuring long-term and capital-intensive settlement operations. Land was leased on fixed rents due only after an spell of initial rent-free years. Throughout the largest part of the 19th century, the leaseholders were on their part responsible for a steady advancement of forest-clearing and certain rudimentary counter-measures against environmental threats. Among others, they were required to arrange for tenants, materials and the construction of embankments. The details of these arrangements varied greatly and are, in their localized applications, beyond the scope of this thesis.[84] The emphasis on large capitalists, who could later also be of Indian origin, introduced the notorious Zamindari-system[85] to the marginal forests and cemented it where it already had been in place. Interlaced with pockets devoted to experiments in social engineering – as Tillmann Henckell's efforts to install direct governance or Daniel M. Hamilton's socialist utopias[86] – the Sundarbans became a region suffering under absentee landlords.

With the grants mainly given to urban investors, the latter sought to minimize efforts and maximize profits by immediately distributing their land to intermediate operators who would take charge of the settlement and revenue. Almost inevitably, this was constellation was inviting further subleases. Complemented by ascending, capable cultivators, who accumulated land and capital and sought to expand their influence through the dependence of others, complicate

[84] Detailed accounts of the fiscal history and the ever changing rules of leasing can be found in the works of colonial and postcolonial historians (Pargiter 1934, 336 – 344; Ascoli 1921, 76 – 79, 142 – 156; S. C. Sarkar 2010, 83 – 86).

[85] The Zamindari-system shaped environmental and social relations in the Sundarbans until the official abolition in 1955.

[86] Henckell, devoted much experimental and entrepreneurial energy to eastern-central tracts of the Sundarbans. He envisioned thorough cultivation by farmers directly under the government, by-passing thereby feudal relations (S. C. Sarkar 2010, 55 – 69). His as much as Hamilton's more radical objective failed ultimately – indeed, the very route taken in the settlement of Sāgar negated their basic approaches.

chains of subinfeudations evolved. Common throughout rural Bengal, they took extreme proportions in the Sundarbans. Locally, chains of subinfeudation frequently involved five or more levels (S. Bose 2007, 15 – 18). While this allowed, certainly, for the social mobility of versatile cultivators within reasonable time frames, it amounted to extraordinarily high rents on the bottom of the chain (Richards and Flint 1990; S. C. Sarkar 2010, 97 – 101). But precisely because this particular articulation of landlordism was somewhat balanced by social mobility and a variety of powerful intermediaries, rifts between clear-cut classes hardly occurred. In his authoritative study on rural Bengal, Sugata Bose (1993, 17) notes with respect to the settled Sundarbans:

> "Though the tenurial scale spanned a wide range of inequality, the difference between each grade was minute and the dichotomy between classes blurred."

The responsibilities associated with the leases, on the other hand, tended to be blurred alongsub-lease patterns. Those contractual obligations that meant investments – steady embankments, reliable arrangements for drinking water etc. – were particularly contested. The material assistance subtenants were guaranteed on paper was, often enough, effectively denied. While few investors actually lost their leases due to slow or inefficient transformations, many met their obligations in a shady terrain of reduced surveillance and the unwillingness of the state to cancel contracts. Still others pushed successfully for more favourable leases.

Throughout the 19th century, settlement on Sāgar were uninterrupted, but limited only to certain areas of the island. The hazardousness of localized environments constantly hampered efforts. Either as endemic risk (tiger-attack, malaria, embankment failures) or as single events (storms, floods) 'nature' seemed to thwart human ambitions – and was in the same time, of course, partly constituted by these very initiatives.[87] Throughout the 19th century, roughly every decade a cyclone hit the island bringing immense destructions to men, structures and assets. I will engage these in the next chapter. Suffice to say for now that within the emerging agrarian regime and its punctuation with social disasters, the island and neighboring territories have obviously not lived up to the imagery of "[…] Aladdin's cave [ready] to despoil it of its riches […]" (Lahiri 1936, 39). Even there, where settlements were fairly successful, the soils proved to be of an overall inferior quality. What is more, the production of salt which had become a second pillar

[87] Beyond deteriorating the river channels, the embankments were also detrimentally affecting the ecologies within their boundaries. The relationship of embanked territories, increases in the number of stagnant water-bodies and the increase of tropical fevers outlined by social historians (Klein 2001).

of capitalist interest had to be abandoned with monopolization of salt manufacture by the government (Pargiter 1934, 340).
Slow and fickle throughout the 19th century, the pace of the transformations changed during the first decades of the 20th century. From now on, steady migrations appeared on a substantive scale, subjecting the landscape in the course of the century almost totally under an agrarian regime. Hitherto unknown, this steady and massive influx of population has been related, on one hand, to changes in official policies regulating the transfer of land titles. With the clear intention to fan the transformation amidst all difficulties encountered, the government eased the condition of the leases. Increasingly, not only Indian, but also 'smaller' capitalists were given leases with reduced or altogether cancelled rents. The regulations concerning the most expensive and controversial means of colonization – i.e. embankments – have also repeatedly been reworked in ways favouring capital interests.
Complementing these changes, increasing impoverishment and population pressure unsettled large parts of Bengal. Taken together, yet not simply causally interlocked, the latter two social developments gave rise to a multitude of landless, footloose labourers. While many swelled the ranks of an urban working class (see D. Chakrabarty 2000), many more took part in colonizations on the delta's southern edges. They entered feudal or sub-feudal relations, moved into the hazardous zones of the active delta and strove to implant rice cultivation here. Tragically, the social imaginations, everyday experiences and conditions associated with this mobilities are largely lost in history. Preoccupied with other trajectories and regions, they rarely figure in the works of social historians covering agrarian Bengal (see also Jalais 2010b, 4f). This amounts certainly to yet another marginalization – i.e. the marginalization of social experiences from a scholarship centred on another Bengal. However, the disposition to defy environmental hazards and to take on the risks of 'primary' settlement resonates well with the overall trend of impoverishment of the countryside emphasized by virtually every historian.[88]
Silenced by from historiography, these mobilities into and along the coastal fringes reverberate, furthermore, contemporary literary representations. The epigraph opening this chapter – borrowed from Manik Bandyopadhyay's influential novel on life along and in the mouths of the Padma River – may suffice as an example (see also Pokrant, Reeves, and McGuire 1998). While these scattered allusions insistently capture the workings of structural violence and are

[88] The immense increase in mobility into the delta of the early 20th century marks, therefore, a local or regional discrepancy with historic trends in rural economy that Bose formulated (S. Bose 1993). Analyzing the period between, roughly, 1920 and 1970 he observes an increase in population while the productivity and the area under cultivation stagnated.

in line with narratives I encountered on Sāgar. Yet the moment of a creative transformation, a sense of re-rooting are absent. I will return to these letter ambiguities in greater detail later in Chapter 9.

4.5. A Floating Laboratory

> Islands imagined as 'natural' laboratories embody positivism's powerful allies: certainty and closure.
>
> Carol Farbotko, *Wishful Sinking*

With their consolidation in Bengal, the British had to realize that many of the scientific rules needed a reformulation in, what appeared to be, the treacherousness of local climate. Rivers behaved in ways unknown in temperate England, deluges swept the land and storms shattered certain meteorological assumptions, too. Localized as modern sciences unequivocally are, the formulation of 'objective laws' depended on concrete encounters and narrow time-frames. Particular regions and places emerged, then, as bottlenecks for inquiries into the onslaughts of tropical nature – as objects and, similarly, as laboratories.

Against the background of colonial debates on the nature of nature in Bengal, the sharp increase in maritime traffic between Calcutta and the rest of the world and, finally, with the extension of agricultural activities into the Sundarbans, the lowest reaches of the Hugli became such a hotspot. Not so much with respect to large-scale events, but rather when it came to normalised degradations and, thus, the 'unruly behaviour' of the waterscape.

True, disastrous events shaped the perception and governance of older, 'mature' parts of the delta – but they did so largely as the Other of a bucolic idyll.[89] Quasi-paradisiacal were the conditions that favoured laziness as the population saw no need to wrest their fabled harvests from the soil, but were blessed with riches – so the story goes – almost without moving a finger.

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[89] It is interesting to note that the intimate relation of Bengal with environmental risks is certainly no modern invention, but harks, as something of dialectical counterpart to the famous fertility, back to earliest records. Hazardousness and spectacular wealth frame the image of this region well before Empire (B. Dasgupta 2001, 177 – 179). Thus, Hazards and adaptation are woven right into the name of the province and its people. At least, if we are to believe the etymology offered in the Ain-i-Akbari. There Abu'l-Fazl states, "[…] the original name of Bengal was Bung, and the suffix 'al' came to be added to it from the fact that ancient rajahs of this land raised mounds of earth 10 feet in height and 20 in breadth in lowlands at the foot of the hills which were called 'al'. From this suffix added to Bung, the name of Bengal rose and gained currency." (Abu'l-Fazl cited in N. K. Sengupta 2011, 11) Although not directly stated, it is very likely that these raised mounds are the same adaptation measure to flooding, which are still followed throughout Bengal.

The treacherousness and vile of the climate became particularly visible in disastrous disruptions.[90] In debates on Sāgar throughout the last decades of the 19th century, this imagery was turned on its head. Frequent and destructive, storms framed as impediments to growth and as repeatedly annulling the toils of several years. Thus, the island emerged not as a space of abundance repeatedly visited by disasters as the most of Bengal, but rather as an island ultimately to hazardous to prosper. In his settlement report Lahiri noted (1936, 118):

> "Tracing the history of the Saugor island consists largely of cataloguing a series of natural calamities and disasters which greatly hampered the development of the island until the last quarter of the 19th century."

With the exception of an earthquake in 1737 (Nath, Roy, and Thingbaijam 2008, 860 – 862), these disasters are all related to storms and ensuing surges. While the data generated throughout and after storms that had their landfall here might have contributed to the meteorological theory on tropical cyclones, their precise role remains uncertain. Henry Piddington, who introduced the concept of cyclones into western science in 1839 (Piddington 1839), witnessed cyclones in Bengal, yet drew his inspiration to mould a theory from cyclones in Southern India.[91] That being said, the detrimental effects on settlement efforts became obvious in repeated reports on devastations on Sāgar. Lists of cyclones, their respective dates and devastations began to be characteristic of every historical account of the island. To name but one example of very similar lists of destructions, Dampier wrote in his report on the cyclone of 1864 (Dampier 1864 cited in S. Bandyopadhyay 1994, 42):

> „[...] the cyclone has made a clean sweep of the island, 1488 people are left alive out of 5625 and of these 802 are only men. 7022 heads of cattle and 3365 houses are also gone."

While only one third of the population survived the cyclone, it took merely three years until the next one hit. In the aftermath of a cyclone and storm surge of 1867 that again brought havoc to the island, the safeguarding of the settling population itself received a more sustained attention by the government. What today would be called humanitarian needs were, however

[90] Delivering a circular argument, the colonial writers saw the Bengalis as effeminate because of the tropical abundance and in their unmanliness incapable of rationally engaging disasters and to effectively contain environmental threats.

[91] Piddington was Captain of the East India Company and later the founding director of the Company's Meteorological Department. For over a century he had been claimed to have invented the very term cyclone, which he described as a 'coil of a snake'. Later, however, it was shown that the term was used earlier also in the USA. In any case, the notion of cyclone remains intertwined with South Asia as it continues to be the regional designator for mature tropical cyclones in the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean as well as off Australia (see Longshore 2008; Sen Sarma 1997).

present, overshadowed by the interest to stabilise the settlement operations and, therefore, the treasury. In any case, the government revised existing leases as to burden lessors with the construction of protection measures (Pargiter 1934, 341 – 343). In his gazetteer, O'Malley (1914, 241) notes:

> "After much discussion it was settled that, in each estate in the island, a central place of refuge should be constructed, consisting of a tank surrounded by an embankment 16 feet high, that no habitation should ordinarily be built more than a mile from a place of refuge, and that embanked paths should be made connecting the places of refuge with the houses. Subject to these and minor conditions, the cultivated lands in the five estates already mentioned were granted free of rent in perpetuity in 1875."

Because most investors wanted to quickly reap in riches and were subjected to severly limited surveillance, the envisioned measures translated only partially into realities on the ground. In his revenue history, Ascoli admits their widespread evasion on Sāgar. He notes (1921, 78), "[p]rotective works were incomplete throughout; the water in the tanks was undrinkable; and no embanked paths had been constructed." While he readily admits that "[…] confusion then reigning in the Sundarban's office […]" was to blame, the denial of these measures remained. Nevertheless, these can be seen as early colonial incidents to invent architectural and administrative tools of the governance of hazardous environments. Thus they have to be related to an emerging biopolitics of disaster mitigation – that is, a mode of governmentality that uses disasters as sites of interventions into the social as well as the material (Sharma 2001; Mike Davis 2002; Nally 2008). Not the Other of politics, disasters emerge as figurations along which the improvement of populations and the naturalisation of control are aimed at.[92]

Rescue on elevated ground, safeguarding of freshwater resources for survival during and after the event and all this within close distance of settlements continue to inform practice of disaster management throughout Bengal. Although today, of course, rather in the form of concrete storm shelters and deep tube-wells elevated on concrete platforms to keep them out of reach of floods (see e.g. K. K. Bandyopadhyay 1990; S. Bandyopadhyay 1997; Nath, Roy, and Thingbaijam 2008; District Disaster Management Section, South 24-Parganas 2012). On Sāgar, where schools or pilgrim shelters (*dharamśālā*) make important storm shelters, the ruins of the colonial measures nevertheless remain depended upon. As, for instance, on Ghoṛāmārā where

[92] True, the production and contestation of subjectivities – in itself the critical moment of bio-politics – is hardly discernible here. This may be explained with either to the ascending state of disaster mitigation in late 19th century or the marginality of these regions within the horizon of British colonialism in India. In either way, it figured in the prioritization of peasants and an agrarian usage regime noted above.

the elevated flood platform with its own pond still peaks as a sole molehill above the low coastal area and promises some degree of safety (see also S. Bandyopadhyay 1994).

While cyclones disrupted the settlement operations, the amphibian traits of the island similarly thwarted colonial efforts – albeit in their less spectacular ways. Two problems continued to trouble the officers: the very instability and rapid transmutation of the waterscape; and, secondly, the problem of 'embankment collapse' as it was often called.

The first approach unfolded for long decades and did so until today along the trope of channel decline. The frustrations of quick transmutations of the riverine space, its utter unreliability and, at its worst, the very plausible option that it might soon be impossible to navigate it, pervade every administrative account. [93] Complemented by encounters with other South Asian rivers, they made a refashioning of hydrology necessary (see Avijit Gupta 2011). Flanking the most important channel of the harbour, Sāgar was among the few spaces where the knowledge to be gained about the channel coincided with that of the bordering landmass. In his 'Revenue History of the Sundarbans', Frederick E. Pargiter introduces a third, somewhat surprising element to the list of reasons why the island had to be transformed. He notes (Pargiter 1934, 336) that based "[…] on vague and conjectural data, [the project was started] with the intention of benefitting the navigation of the river Hugli." Although this hardly was the only one – indeed it does not surface again in his narrative – the assumption that a cleared and clearly-limited island would have a positive effect on the condition of the river is certainly important. It is nothing but a fundamental tenet informing the policy of the port authorities to this day (see Chapter 9.2.1.). The outer embankments of the island came, thus, to be objects and means of 'river training'. The latter denotes a variety of practices aiming at improving the navigability.

When applied to the island as settled space, however, the amphibian traits took a different, yet closely related form: the problem of embankment collapse. From what has been said so far, the crucial role of embankments on these lowest islands should be clear. With the voices of the early settlers effectively silenced in the available material, I have to turn to the elaborations of administrators and, again, imperial geographers.

[93] With the navigability of the Hugli and therefore the port's main channel severely deteriorating, the port authorities desperately tried to find solutions. For the continued existence of one of the most important, if not the most important port of the subcontinent was in peril. Roughly 140 years ago the construction of a new satellite port deep within the Sundarbans and connected to the metropolitan centre by an artificial channel was commissioned. Port Canning, as it was christened, failed miserably. Not only were the facilities destroyed by yet another cyclone, but the new channel was quickly choked by the 'unruly' waters loaded with sediments (S. C. Sarkar 2010, 112 – 118).

In the course of the 19th century, the port facilities have been extended to Sāgar Island. This involved te establishment a Lighthouse on the island's south-western edge and an additional office at it northern tip. Both facilities were integrated into state-of-the-art communication networks and enabled a permanent presence of port staff on the island. As such they became a source of 'reliable' data on environmental conditions.

It is telling in this regard, that the history of both facilities themselves emerged as crucial moments of this knowledge generation. Built in early 19th century, the office on the northern tip of the island, Mudpoint, had to be evacuated after the northern parts had been dislodging from the island and began to shrink rapidly. In the south, the Lighthouse was also severely affected by coastal erosions – and continues to be so. Due to its still essential role for the handling of marine traffic, it could not be left for good.[94] Built sometime between 1808 and 1810[95] it had to be rebuilt a century later on a spot that seemed (by then) safely removed in the interior. In due course, the staff meticulously measured, mapped and communicated the onslaughts of the sea to the metropolitan head office. These communications eventually became the sole available data sets to exaactly quantify the extent and timings of coastal erosions of Sāgar roughly a century ago. Fragments of the raw data sent for analysis to Calcutta has been suriviving in the Marine Archives owned by the Kolkata Port Trust.[96] I have compiled the available data in two tables given below. The first is excerpted from an internal note on 'Encroachment of the Sea on Saugor Island'. It substantiates that the deteriorations affected the area continuously over a stretch of almost 10 years. This dataset clearly suggests that both, the port facilities and surely also the silenced localized society were subject to times of slow devastations, if not to a continuing presence of shrinkages.

[94] The Lighthouse continues to be a point of embarkation of pilots guiding ships up and down the river.

[95] W.W. Hunter dates the constructions with the year 1808 (W. W. Hunter 1875, 106), while Carey notes the decision to build Lighthouse fell in the year 1807, while the precise locations was fixed only 1810 and the construction work set shortly after (Carey 1887, 123f).

[96] I am in no position to answer if documents fell prey to decades of neglect and are gone for good or if the Archive will unearth more of these documents in due course. The Marine Archives had only opened during my fieldwork and they were still in the process of sorting out and indexing their riches when I worked there. The enthusiasm and meticulousness of the staff, however, gives reason to hope that more will, as it were, 'come to light'.

Year	Erosion
1900	
1901	26 feet
1902	34 feet
1903	124 feet
1904	55 feet
1905	59 feet
1906	32 feet
1907	60 feet
1908	74 feet
1909 to 30.09.1909	41 feet

Total	510 feet

Figure 5. Erosions at the Sāgar Lighthouse between 1900 and 1909, excerpted from File 'Erosion on the Bank of Saugor Island', Marine Department, Marine Archives, Kolkata

While the data in figure 5 is shrunk to yearly amounts, the data compiled into table shown in Figure 6 offers a glimpse into the seasonality of the shrinkages. It is based on the monthly letters sent by the Lighthouse-Keeper posted on Sāgar, a Mr. A. Manuel. He exactly lists the effects of coastal erosion on what he calls the 'seashore-bund', that is, the outer embankment of the Lighthouse territory.

Reported month	Erosion in feet	Length of the embankment
October 1909	4	521
November 1909	0	521
December 1909	0	521
January 1910	0	521
February 1910	0	521
March 1910	0	521
April 1910	0	521
May 1910	0	521
June 1910	3	518
July 1910	2	516
August 1910	76	440
September 1910	93	407
October 1910	0	407
November 1910	0	407
December 1910	0	407
January 1911	0	407
February 1911	0	407
March 1911	0	407
April 1911	0	407

Figure 6. Erosion at the Sāgar Lighthouse between October 1909 and April 1911, compiled from File 'Erosion on the bank of Saugor Island', Marine Department, Marine Archives, Kolkata

Although the time period covered in the second table indicated stronger than usual erosions, they are not an exception, but merely the acceleration of a trend. The rough data shows, therefore, that erosions were rampant already a century ago. What is more, they were unfolding

along the same seasonality they have today: towards the heights and shortly after the monsoons. It is likely, furthermore, that these ruinations had to be witnessed without adequate counter-measures. Traces of localized measures to combat the processes appears neither in the data presented so far, nor in accompanying writing. Throughout those one and a half years documented in Figur 6 the embankments saw just reductions and no reconstructions. The latter had – and this is important to emphasize – to be undertaken with funds cleared in Calcutta: through the agency of centralized, urban organizations and not along localized networks or arrangements. This, of course, is no proof that there were no localized activities or measures in place. They may have been silenced to push the governmental machinery into action. Yet it is also possible that effective counter-measures were largely absent.

A further incident resonating within the urban headquarters was the very dislodging of the island's northern parts. With an office situated here, it was closely observed by port staff. Being of interest for the genealogy of knowledge about the volatile riverine space, this incident marks the birth of the islets off Sagar whose sinking is mourned today in the Colony. For this very Mudpoint came – as noted in the Introduction – sometime later to be known as Ghoṛāmārā. A few years later, Ghoṛāmārā was to give birth to Lohāchara dislodging again from the young islet. In his report on the incidents,[97] the Deputy Conservator E.W. Petley wrote in July 1906:

> "It will be seen that a year ago the Channel creek and the Hooghly River were divided merely by a narrow wall of mud, which the water washed over at high tide but in this year there is now an opening of no less than 1,700 feet between the two rivers and with depths from 4 to 20 feet. At the upper end of this neck the land has eroded 200 feet, the whole land disappearing straight up and down in that same burrowing action, I have described in my note of 30th May 1905."

While, on one hand, the incidents on the south-western and the northern edge of the island illuminate the long history of erosions in these parts, they fed into a growing sense of alarm about the developments south of Calcutta. From the beginning of the 20th century onwards, critical voices questioning the possibility of the enterprise to settle the swamps made themselves heard. In 1919, for example, Addams-Williams (cited in S. Bandyopadhyay 1994, 80) remarked boldly, that

> "[…] it must be the policy of the future to arrest reclamation in that area till the tidal spill has done its work [and] to avoid heavy embankment until the height of the land is a sufficient protection against the high tides […]"

[97] File *Mud Point Survey*, Marine Department, Marine Archives, Kolkata

Surely, his position was eclipsed by the more influential ideology of settlement and the colonizations forcefully underway. Yet, they point towards a reframing of the Sundarbans. Plagued by perennial collapses and overall worsening, not improving rivers, within learned circles the islands were partly understood as simply too young to settle. Thus, the futility of settlement operations became a matter increasing concern.

As one of the oldest and most visible architectural sites on the island, the main temple emerges in these debates, too. Albeit less as a laboratory and more of a silent witness. In fact, it emerges as a silenced spot in these debates, an instant of vagueness and secrecy where the logic of the laboratory would need data in its quest for knowledge. The silence is, I argue, twofold. On one hand, it rests in the effective closure of temple documents and the deep rifts between the temple staff and the populace. These are related to questions of authority over the important temple that erupted into direct contestations around 1960. Shortly after the legal case on the control of the temple's revenue was closed in favour of the Rāmānandī, West Bengal's state government assisted in the construction of a new temple. It is tempting to understand the governmental assistance in relocating the shrine and building a new larger temple as an effort aiming at the increase of control over the temple. However, the authority remained unchallenged and the temple had to be moved once again in 1974 (Māitī 2001, 20 – 25). Again with the help of governmental funds and consultations. The available documents on that last displacement of the temple strongly underscore the intent of state administrators to reduce the risks of pilgrimage and to make the festival a smooth affair. It had been a move into a proper concrete building removed so far from the waters that it would be reached only by the worst spring tide at the height of monsoon. Available documents[98] repeatedly refer to the very erosion of the temple, the amassing of pilgrims in knee-deep waters for ritual activities in-front of the temple and the dangers associated therewith. To improve the situation – and, as one engineer notes, to avoid 'disaster' – the possibility to stop the erosions by interventions in the waters were discussed in 1972. Yet they turned out to be too costly – particular when compared with the removal of the temple from the shore and the erection of a concrete temple (see also Bhaṭṭācārya 1976, 38f).

But in contrast to that final reconstruction, earlier shifts little documented. Besides, of course, by documents held under lock and key by the temple authorities. However, among the islanders it is widely known that the temple had to be moved before. The counts vary greatly and range

[98] File *Ganga Sagar Mela 1966 – 1975*, Marine Department, Marine Archives, Kolkata

between two to six times the temple had to recede from the encroaching waters. Some even claimed that the hermitage of the sage was actually beyond today's shore and deep within the waters.

Here the second silencing comes in: for the moves did not only become a secret, but also a subject of vagueness. In the absence of available pilgrimage narratives or comparable pieces of other-modern travel writing, I have to retort here to contemporary approaches and recent publications. In their respective ways all these texts gloss over what could be a huge theological problem: the erosion of a holy place, the loss of a *tīrtha* and, therefore, the end of the presence of a deity that is sought in this very place. It would be speculative and, even where not, beyond the scope of this thesis to engage these questions fuller. I will have to take up the thread when I discuss the role Kapil Muni plays among contemporary 'refugees' in a later chapter – suffice to say for now, that this eerie silence is rather incompatible with the quest for precise knowledge of coastline changes and, by extension, the quantity and quality of storms. This is not to say that epistemological orders are incompatible, but rather to suggest preliminarily that the vagueness of the netherworld and the shrinking of holy grounds *inhibits* exact mapping.

4.6. Sāgar within and beyond the Postcolonial Sundarbans

> … and always, as though some invisible force were directing their footsteps, drawing them into a darker heart of madness, their mission sent them south south south, always nearer to the sea, to the mouths of the Ganges and the sea.
>
> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*

So far I have engaged with precolonial and colonial pasts and the traces left in the discursive as much as the material fabric of the island. After more than six decades of Independence, it remains to be seen if the postcolonial condition emerges as an equally deep rupture. For amidst substantial changes, basic approaches and imageries remained intact. I will engage influential changes – as patterns of landownership, technological interventions in the waterscape and localized government – and continuities throughout this thesis. On the following pages, however, I will conclude the reflection of historical layers by outlining briefly some of the dynamics that tie and untie the Sāgar Island to the broader Sundarbans. These dynamics that entail in themselves a good deal of how nature is thought in postcolonial West Bengal. I begin with an ethnographic glimpse.

Working on mobile populations, ephemeral landmasses and unfolding disasters involved multi-sited fieldwork. In its extremes, my itinerary brought me to meetings of middle class initiatives held several hours away from the islands. In July 2009, I had been invited by a friend to an assembly of, how I was to learn, concerned citizens loosely connected through the shared sphere of little magazines, social movements and grassroots politics. As is typical for this sphere of action, the members were mainly part of the lower middle class, male and well educated (Nag 1997; D. Chakrabarty 2001, 209 – 211). The meeting took place in a southern suburb of Kolkata and was devoted to the plights of rural societies after cyclone Aila struck Bengal in May 2009. It aimed at developing smaller and larger schemes to counter social vulnerabilities. The discussions ranged from privately organized convoys bringing goods into devastated areas to grand development plans for the region. Throughout engaging approaches, the discussions were ripe with middle class concerns. After the meeting was over, over tea I told one of the most active participants about my research on Sāgar Island and the way the recent cyclone was engaged with there (see in detail Chapter 7). With some dismay, he asked me why I would do my research there and not go to the proper Sundarbans? Sāgar Island, he told me, is not the Sundarbans; the *real* Sundarbans being something different. Later on, throughout further encounters with middle class urbanites, these sentiments would reappear. Eventually, I made it a habit not to tell people that my research involved the Sundarbans and mentioned only the islands.

While Sāgar had been tied to the Sundarbans (or, earlier, the *bhatir-desh*) throughout it's history, and continued to be so in terms of administrative categories and global representations, in the eyes of urban middle class it was clearly set apart. With the label Sundarbans being reserved for the territory of and around the tiger habitat, Sāgar is left to be, as I was told on the same meeting, simply one of Bengal's rural regions. And as such a somewhat uninteresting, perhaps un-exotic space. The lectures and conversations during the meeting pointed implicitly towards two figurations powerfully shaping contemporary metropolitan perceptions of the Sundarbans. On one hand, they substantiated the bourgeois-aesthetic appropriations of the swampy delta front. Tightly related therewith, on the other hand, is the disintegration of settled landscapes from the Sundarbans proper. The latter move does not necessarily replicate conservationalist approaches which tend to negate all social presences. Thus, the margins of the forest were seen to remain within the Sundarbans proper, settled islands to the west, however, were not.

These postcolonial re-interpretations and bourgeois appropriations are mirrored in the politics of naming. For among the three possible transliterations of the designator 'Sundarbans' that of 'Beautiful Forest' was now clearly predominant – hinting emblematically at what the Sundarbans ought to be in cosmopolitan circles. Yet, the notion of beauty is paradoxically bound up with the idea of monstrousness inherited from British spectators. Mirroring, thus, the awe and the invocation of a sublime character that pattern elite engagements with national parks all over the world (see e.g. Cronon 1996; Neumann 1998; Luig 2002b), the Sundarbans are yet distinct. Beauty, monotony and the incitement of death are uncannily collapsed. The Sundarbans appear not as among those sites allowing to imagine and the nation through a particular landscape's promise and abundance. The Royal Bengal Tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*), has of course emerged as quintessential for elite perceptions.

In her remarkable studies on environmental relations within and on the immediate edges of the Biosphere Reserve, the anthropologist Annu Jalais framed the latter creature as the 'cosmopolitan tiger' (2008): As valorized by bourgeois actors and dialectically related to the experience of decolonisation. Stylized as *the* symbol of regional power and masculine inheritance of a sub-nation often deemed effeminate, the mangrove jungles had become the habitat of the Royal Bengal Tiger and, thence, intimately tied to postcolonial urban elites (Jalais 2008; Jalais 2010b). Fed, of course, by the growing national and international influence of conservationalism (Greenough 2003). The troubled insistence on the beauty of harsh swamps covered by monotonous mangroves hints, perhaps, at the identification with the ferocious animals and the beauty of their vigour to survive at odds.

All this the western islands are not: the last tigers had been shot dead or fled several decades ago; and mangroves were not engulfing a marginal presence of huts, but the remaining forests formed scattered patches within settled landscapes. There is no denying the fact. Likewise, the navigations of hazardous environments differ at times between those who have erratic access to forests and those who have to do without.[99] Still, the similarities between environmental conditions as well as histories of migrations and settlement tie the islands together. Indeed, they imbue the delta front with regional characteristics. Let me, therefore, outline two further moments mutually integrating the islands situated in the mouth of the Ganges. That is, one, the

[99] Annu Jalais (2010b) skilfully shows that the forest is far more than merely an essential economic resource. It also is a space where social hierarchies are negated and a sense of justice replenished among marginalised and extremely poor islanders. All this while access to the forest is restricted by permits and the high-handedness of the Forest department.

specific position within the political present; and second the extraordinary role attributed in regional and global debates on environmental and climate change.

The first moment amounts to a marginalisation. In contemporary West Bengal, the delta tracts south of Kolkata remain at the fringes of the hesitant economic development the state has seen in preceding decades. The agricultural intensification associated with the Green Revolution (Akhil Gupta 1998; Harriss-White 2008) have largely bypassed these islands: with mechanized irrigation impossible or too costly here, the tracts remain largely mono-crop. Nor have West Bengal's modest industrial developments of recent years yielded direct impacts upon the Sundarbans. Against this background the islands down south remain to be, as a figure of speech has it, the maid-servant of Kolkata (*kolkatar jhī*). In the sense of economy as much as of cultural politics. Hidden behind dysfunctional infrastructures and marginalized in the circuits of development practices, the coastal fringes have become yet another emblematic instance of the hinterland's stark poverty.

Intimately tied up therewith, a sense of social exclusion and low status prevails (see A. Roy 2003; Jalais 2010b). Jalais demonstrates how hierarchical conceptions of space permeate the everyday of the islanders she lived and worked with (Jalais 2010b). Rooting her argument on quotidian and artistic articulations, as well as the practice of outmigration, she emphasizes that residents perceive of these marginalized islands as 'low islands'. That is, they are peceived of as low not so much in the sense of geographical location but more with respect to development, affluence or education. On these terms, these islands are clearly differentiated from the northern, 'higher islands' bordering the metropolitan region around Kolkata. Now, even while Sāgar Island is at times framed as among the most developed island of the Indian part of the Ganges Delta, quotidian remarks here were pervaded by similar hierarchies, too. In spite of its high standing in sacral geographies, proud emphases of the islanders' high level of education or the longstanding entanglement with colonial statecraft, Sāgar was seen as inferior to mainland spaces. It came to be seen as situated at the bottom of spatialised hierarchies.

In addition, Sāgar was subjected to internal hierarchies. Among the island's *bhadralok*, for instance, it was not unusual to frame the interior spaces of the islands as higher and the parts close to the shores as lower. In ambivalent ways, then, taxonomies of social vulnerability have become intermingled with characterizations of island space rooted in the chronology of settlement and assumptions of cultural value. For the transformation of the island group proceeded with only a few exceptions from the interior towards the shores. Precisely because an outer barrier of mangroves was deemed vital from very early on. For the largest part of the

island, then, the immediate coastal zones are the ones transformed last. Settlements are youngest here and marked by smaller plots as the land scarcity has become more intense in later decades. Both, the overall hierarchization of the island within the archipelago as well as particular notions of space on the island itself have been reworked by the growing importance of the pilgrimage centre on Sāgar's extreme south. In a sense, the *melā* set Sāgar further apart from the Sundarbans as it awarded ritual relevance and routed flows of money here. Both can only be understood against the background of nation building, elite appropriation and the increasing relevance of tourism. While the rise of tourism including religious pilgrimage goes without saying, the other two dynamics seem to be tied to the specific religious content Gaṅgāsāgar has come to stand for. Its articulation of 'sanskritic' imagery and conceptions from the *Purāṇa*[100] allowed – more than other rural pilgrimage circuits – to be positively related to by ruling elites. Through the idiom of sacral inheritance and religious pilgrimage, the *melā* allowed simultaneously to articulate a regional identity and to integrate West Bengal into the still young nation state. Both becomes evident in portrayals framing the *melā* as a national festival (Bhaṭṭācārya 1976).

Rather neglected by the British, the postcolonial state began from quite early on to pay a closer attention to the welfare of the pilgrims. Through the *Ganga Sagar Mela Act* (1953) district authorities had become responsible for the safety, health and well-being of the masses attending the annual fair. Through a pilgrim's tax, which has to be paid by every festival visitor since, the district authorities were to arrange for the establishment of roads, facilities, electricity and so on.[101]

These efforts notwithstanding, the development of the *melā* unfolded along a series of mishaps that time and again brought the dangers surrounding pilgrimage to the fore – mirroring, of course, the theme of stampede and neglect that perennially troubling India's religious fairs. Particularly prominent here was the tragic boat accident of the 14. January 1969. Precisely on the most auspicious day and on the spot of the ritual activities, an unaccounted for, but large number of persons drowned by a sinking boat. In the wake of this dramatic event, which found a wide echo in regional press and was negotiated in court, the administration of West Bengal intensified its efforts.[102] It has to be noted that the prominence of this disaster is most likely not

[100] *Purāṇa* (literally the old stories) subsumes a body of texts which is, as the Indologist Axel Michaels notes (Michaels 2006, 75f), the main source of Hindu mythology. Being fed in by oral tradition they are of rather recent origin and have begun to appear probably only in the first centuries of the Common Era.

[101] File *Ganga Sagar Mela 1966 – 75*, Marine Department, Marine Archives Kolkata

[102] File *Ganga Sagar Mela 1966 – 75*, Marine Department, Marine Archives Kolkata

sufficiently explained with the number of deaths, which is negligible by Indian standards. But it became, what was henceforth called, the ‘launch disaster’ as it occurred directly in front of dignitaries and journalists. Either way, it turned into an impulse for regional development.

As a counterpoint to the dispersed audiences of pilgrims and tourists influencing everyday affairs on the island through flows of ideas, money and goods, Sāgar figures prominently in transnational debates on Climate Change. This more recent moment within postcolonial history, awards Sāgar and the wider archipelago a central and spectacular, yet dystopian position. If the islands have entered global discourses through the figure of ‘natural disasters’, then the spectre of Climate Change seems to be an actualization of this mode. For the islands emerge as being subject to dramatic deteriorations and being home to a new form of refugees: the ‘climate refugees’. It is interesting to note that the regional and international accounts of this new brand of displacement mirror the vagaries of the representations of environmental refugees in general: Here, too, are vague numbers brought forward and the role of environmental dimensions hotly disputed.[103] What is more: throughout various accounts the displaced populations appear mainly as victims, as hapless objects of nature’s whims.

To be sure, these flattening depictions are complemented by publications attributing a larger sense of agency and voice to the islanders. As, for instance, a range of publications by global environmentalist organizations making their case of the actuality and presence of Climate Change in India almost inevitably with reference to these very coastal islands. At the onset of a recent publication by the WWF, the authors emphasize their intention to reproduce, as they write (WWF-India 2010, 1),

> “[…] voices. Voices of individuals who have witnessed change and are living these changes, of those who are finding ways to survive and move on in the hope of a better future by adapting to climate vulnerabilities and alternative livelihood options.“

To be sure, this insistence on Climate Change’s *social* consequences by an organization that was spearheading pure ‘wildlife conservationalism’ (Lele 2012) not long ago is remarkable. However, in this and related texts rely on the islanders mainly as, what I understand to be, ‘proxy witnesses’ (Harms and Powalla 2014). They are included as voices and as agents precisely to prove the actuality of Climate Change to global audiences. Although they were at

[103] The numbers of displaced people given range between several hundred and several thousand families. With regard to explanations of the causation of and dynamics leading to the erosions, three approaches can be distinguished. One,an uncritical prioritization of Climate Change; second, a nuanced embedding of Climate Change in wider scenarios of hazardous environments; and, finally, outright denials of Climate Change for the shrinkages are brought forward.

times depicted as adaptative and resilient, they are of concern as witnesses to something that is beyond direct experience and witness by the readers of the publications: vulnerability, degradation and impending disaster. Surely, to tap into global debates and circulations of funds, environmental organisations have to rely on the strategy of giving a face to what they are fighting for. Similarly, it is certainly not off the mark to put a focus on victimization when writing on these marginalized coasts. That being said, I simply want to stress the mode along which the island becomes known to wider audiences. They are known only as nearly drowning victims and along an uncanny fascination for the spectacle of disappearance (see also Barnett and Campbell 2010, 162 – 174; Farbotko 2010). In this figuration, the voices and the islanders are insofar relevant as they *allow to imagine* the vulnerability of the wider world. This becomes blatanly clear when the authors of the above mentioned publication note (WWF-India 2010, 1), "[t]heir lives remind us of how precarious our existence is."

Beyond being a proxy witness for the onslaught of Climate Change, the coastal fringes have been repeatedly alluded to also as a being a barrier for the densely populated tracts upstream. Once again we see a continuation of long standing imageries and their actualisation in times of Climate Change. For in this regard it is precisely the functioning as a kind of 'coastal protection' established by mangroves and, more stripped-down, the very existence of landmass below the limits of the metropolitan area of Kolkata which is alluded to. Some authors fear the threat of submergence of Bengal's mainland due to an accelerating Sea Level Rise, once the coastal fringes are further depleted. Many others, however, emphasize intensified vulnerabilities with the dwindling of the islands. What is feared, to be more precise, are heightened vulnerabilities both to normalized pressure (for instance, drinking water depletion, sea water incursions) and to enhanced destructions during extreme events (storms and surges raging unfettered by mangroves and islands) (see also WWF International 2011, 17f). In either case, the coastal islands are seen to form the outer fringes of a buffer zone or a bulwark protecting the city and its hinterlands. I will show towards the end of the thesis, how this theme is taken up in localized figuration and invested with notions of sacrifice and protection to ensure political measures to safeguard the shores by its dwellers.

Seen from another perspective, global debates on climate change tie the Sāgar island group together with those tracts deemed as Sundarbans proper. Precisely In their victimization, dystopian fascination and as symbols of a wake-up call, the separation brought forward by urban circles are partly unmade.

4.7. Summary: Struggling with Clay

Although several writers claim the Sundarbans to be "[…] seemingly undisturbed from the waves of modernity […] " (S. K. Basu 1981, 61), the opposite seems to be the case. They are, as I have shown in this chapter, intimately tied to globalised mobilities, travelling images and contingent discourses. While they had been imagined by generations of writers and bureaucrats as largely empty, they were also dwelled in or, at least, used by various actors. To be sure, fragments of histories are lost to the ever-changing features of the waterscape and, thus, its denial of anything robust or outlasting. Yet the double regime enforced by British administrators proved to be durable for the time being: the agrarian regime on most of the islands and that other of conservation in the least accessible tracts contiued to shape the present. While nature had to be tamed, purged and stewarded through, as one writer noted, "[…] the absurd struggle with clay" (B. 1901, 419), it increasingly emerged also as something awe-inspiring and precious. Here a second axis set in: along diverse debates by game conservators, proponents of more equitable environments and climate change activists, the Sundarbans emerged as knot within entangled environmental discourses and practices. Uneasily tied to the region, the Sāgar island group oscillated, as I have shown, between an emblematic figure of doom, a spearhead of possibility and an exemption to the Sundarbans' assumed true character. Based on these elaborations I will now turn to the present which is a sedimentation of these hybrid histories as much as it transgresses to be merely so.

5. Entering the Colony

On one of these oppressingly hot July afternoons we sat in Noa's house. Outside, the sun was slowly sinking, sending golden beams through the gaps in the wall made of split bamboo. A few days ago, the rains had finally started. Soon, the rice cultivation would fully begin: now lying fallow, the land would transform into a lavish and sweetly fragrant green. The foretaste of abundance and beauty hovered through these days. However, in Noa's house, however, they were merely a distant memory and an equally distant future dream. To him, as to most other landless families, the rains marked a time of scarcity and risk that was not reversed in the promise of abundant crops and full granaries. The season was scarce because the *melā* – and with it one of his most important source of income – was almost as long gone as it would take for the next to come about. The money earned on the last *melā* had been spent, as much as the joy of modest conspicuous consumption coming with it, had long faded. Anxious and doubtful he waited for job offers as these entailed multifaceted risks.

With the rains deep sea fishing had begun all over again. Now trawlers were sailed from nearby harbours to catch the lucrative *iliś* fish and other varieties for which Kolkata's markets craved. Noa had been hired often in recent years: his muscles and skills, as well as his ability to tell stories and his chronic want of money surely made him a welcome member of various crews. Nevertheless, he had gone through rough storms in deep sea, empty hauls and wasted seasons and long months spent in Bangladeshi prisons. Not without some pride he showed off the tattoos made by Burmese fishermen he had befriended behind bars while waiting for extradition to their respective countries. Because of the gamble inherent in fishing, the hazardousness of the marine environment and the vagaries of national borders, to him the time of the rains was also a time of risks. But to this day his mobile phone had not been ringing nor had his inquiries at the harbour in nearby Kakdwip bore the fruit of profitable offers; and until now he announced with much zeal that this year he would definitely not venture into the sea.[104]

Today we were sitting in his house, stared out of the verandah, drank sweet tea and talked. Built onto the outer embankment his house was slightly elevated and the surrounding landscape spread-out before our eyes. A few days before we had been sitting here already watching and talking. Already then, I had had difficulties to follow Noa's speedy exclamations and the surprising, impulsive twists in his narrations. As usual, he enjoyed it greatly to speak and even more, perhaps, that his words were recorded by my recorder. On several occasions he

[104] Cash-starved he took on a contract a few weeks later and started fishing with an old crew for several weeks.

emphasized his satisfaction of being recorded and of the fact that his words would travel, would be audible loud and clear (*poriskar*) in a faraway place. Like so many times in those months, we had been speaking about environmental history, about collapsing embankments, loss and resettlements; and like so many times he answered my curiosity not only with long stories and explanations, but also with his curiosity. While I tried to delve into his past, he delved into that world which he imagined to be mine. Of course, he knew glimpses of 'my world' from that mud house in one of the neighbouring villages that served as cinema; as well as from the plays he loved to listen whenever broadcast on his radio. He could not read and those evocative, digital media that perhaps could have quenched his thirst were hidden behind the obvious 'digital gap'. Through stories, questions and answers we drew near to each other; our narrations and imaginations encircled each other. But then, on that afternoon a few days before, an airplane had crossed the sky high above us. Extremely distant, almost without a relation to anything and majestic, it had literally drawn its path into the clear sky. It had taken over Noa's imagination and reflections in but one instant. How different our world are, after all, he had said. We, who live in the mud (*kādā*), down here and you travel up there in an airplane!

In those days the everyday was, more than ever, characterized by mud. With the onset of the rains, the landscape had begun to soak water. The fields took on a darker colour, as if to show off their fertility and would soon hide first under puddles and then disapear altogether under water. Almost all paths were to vanish. Only bricks roads, lining the higher grounds of embankments were to remain beyond the water level for the whole rainy season. But they, too, would ultimately be transformed by the season: they were to turn into mud slides for the children, into considerable obstacles to the hurried and, ultimately, into prison for the infirm. Shoes in hand or leaving them behind for the time being, the residents had to literally feel for their way along these paths. Or better: through them. Deceiving puddles and holes in the mud had to be navigated and the splashing mud avoided if one wanted to keep a clean appearance. The life in the colony slowed, began to centre on layered inner spaces (the house, neighbours, the tea stall within the colony) and emerged as much more stationary. It suited my research well, as appointments tended to be followed more than ever and I could meet my interlocutors more often at their homes even without an appointment. Therefore, I took it happily on me to learn walking anew under the astonishingly beautiful monsoon skies. In contorted movements I slid along worn-out rails, waded through flooded, but less slippery fields; and had to pull – I don't know how often – out of hidden holes in the thick mud. Gurgling, it would set free my

feet and Noa's words reverberated in what bystanders sometimes laughingly commented: This is our world – will you learn to move around in it?

Up to Noa's house I had made it this afternoon, had washed my feet in the bowl that was kept for this purpose at his doorstep throughout the rainy seasons and now we sat and watched into the afternoon. After a while, he felt drawn outside. Together we waded to the plastered brick road and followed it into the direction of his favourite tea stall. Roaming there, now much more gloomily than before, he took up the topic of the different worlds. Our world is the mud, he said again and added bitter, and this is our *sonār deś*, our Golden Land. Whereas there from where I came, everything is *pākā*.

In localized speech patterns, both notions involve diverse layers of meaning. *Pākā* relates to a semantic field embracing ripeness, maturity, stability and robustness as well as quality. In everyday utterings it was most often reduced to buildings and roads made of brick or concrete, yet the notion clearly reaches beyond these. To speak of the *sonār deś*, on the other hand, is impossible in postcolonial Bengal without an implicit reference to Tagore's famous song 'Āmār Sonār Bāṃlā', My Golden Bengal, and the proto-national, aesthetic glorification inherent therein. As we walked into the evening, his reference was obviously cynical: the golden land of the mud; of a mud that the western world is elevated from.

Now, while Noa's comments could very well be interpreted as instances of occidentalist imagination or as parody of nationalist romanticism, I am more concerned with what underlies them. First and foremost they rest on a characterization of the place and its people, as much as the life that these people live within (the confines of) that place. Reduced to his formulation, they were the people-who-live-in-the-mud. Earth, clay or mud characterised the everyday in the colony. As peasants,[105] most residents felt deeply connected to its materiality, admired its fertility and riches: In its consolidated form as earth, but also in the murky fish-rich ponds dotting the land. Nurturing, culturally valorised and integrated into diverse patterns of interactions – as I intend to show – the mud was nevertheless a limitation. When used to characterize the locality or the people dwelling therein, the locality as much as the encompassing landscape became accessible in and through constraints symbolically tied to

[105] Throughout this thesis I will oscillate between the notion of farmers and peasant. Due to the strong connotations of exploitation and class pervading the notion of peasant (Orlove 2002, 59) I stick to the more neutral notion of farmer when I speak of economic dynamics. Yet the insistence of many of my interlocutors to be peasants (*cāṣī*) and the pride they took therein makes it necessary to use the notion of 'peasant' precisely to capture this latter dimension.

mud. Chronic endangerments and fluidities through which the island's fringes were experienced involved the ephemerality of mud and its ubiquity.

On another, yet equally symbolic dimension, the mud emerges as a marker of identity. Complementing, as it were, a whole range of other markers. Leaving the obvious, but in everyday rather insignificant markers of caste, religion or ethnicity aside for now, this relates indirectly to concepts of food and eating. In her work on marginalized groups in Ecuador, Mary J. Weismantel reflected on the entanglement of social group, distinct food and a specific epistemic order.[106] It struck me how much a motif she recorded in the Andes, resembles the motif that I engage with here. "What would we know of airplanes, we who eat *máchica*?", she cites one of her interlocutors (Weismantel 1988, 161; see also Orlove 2002, 62f). *Máchica*, a typical, if not quintessential food of the poor, becomes a material marker of these people and, what is more important, of their marginalization and seemingly irreconcilable distance to their emblematic other: the airplane.

Now, as much as the entanglements of food, collective identities and epistemic structure, destabilize in itself the western modern distinction of nature and culture, this holds true also for the identification with the mud, the society rooted therein and its perspective into the world. The mud here is not limited to be a symbol of social marginalization, but becomes in itself a marker of localized identities generated precisely in the social navigation of and embodied friction with adverse environments (Vigh 2009; Ingold 2011). Hierarchies, subjectivities and perceptions are, I argue, moulded and refined through the motif of the mud – towards an island or coastal identity. I will now turn to these dynamics. To do so I will on the following pages introduce the Gaṅgāsāgar Colony, outline three broad spatial practices along which the Colony has been settled, reflect on the politics of (earthen) embankments on the island's fringes and, finally, outline the social composition of the Colony.

[106] In contemporary Bengal, too, distinct foods and patterns of consumption are subject or instance within the negotiations of social hierarchies and regional identities (Mookherjee 2008; Strümpell 2008). So they have been on the islands. Differences between social groups were articulated along the eating patterns; social bonds established and replenished through feasts; specific pasts remembered through the availability, abundance and quality of specific foods; and the non-availability of the quintessential Bengali *machh bhat* (fish and rice curry) in distant parts of India emerged a common trope to communicate homesickness and the alienation of labour migration. On another register, to name a final example, was the advance of the sequence of the seasons made intelligible along the availability of particular foods.

5.1. At the Margins of a Sacral Centre

Against the background of Gaṅgāsāgar's fame and the risks of travelling there, a better integration with the mainland, as well as improvements in security arrangements and health facilities for the pilgrims emerged as the cornerstones of local development after the 1960ies. Large parts of the island's population benefitted from this new emphasis on smooth management of pilgrimage. The construction of the metalled road connecting the ferry ghāṭ in the north of the island with the sacral complex in its extreme south has certainly been among the most important interventions. Being one of the very few roads in the Sundarbans that is navigable by cars and busses, the road can hardly be overestimated in its consequences for the island. It considerably eased the pilgrimage routes and made the flow of goods and persons a great deal less dependent on the seasons or vicissitudes of the waterscape. Beyond that, it served as something of a lifeline of development measures that followed its trajectory. Conversely, these measures remained to a large extent restricted to the very corridor the road has established: In contrast to deep tube wells laid across the island and improving the water supply considerably,[107] electricity remained strictly limited to the corridor of the road. Through an off-grid system operating on diesel generators stationed the island's capital, Rudranāgar, within the confines of the road and only for three evening hours power was available (see Barth 2010). Along the road, businesses had multiplied and daily evening markets illuminated the road as pearls on a string – changing the value of land as much as the liveliness and the texture of everyday interactions along its routes (cf. Chattaraj 2010). Consequentially, the island appears to be divided into the better developed, crowded spaces along the road and the vast hinterland with a much more rural appeal. However, a wide network of markets, the influx of privately owned solar panels and, of course, spatial transition zones and quotidian mobilities soften this dichotomy. The Colony was a case in point: being off the power grid and beyond the sprawl lining the street, from certain vantage points at least it resembled rustic village life. Yet bordering the street and the sacred complex, its everyday life was intertwined with the street, its rhythms and politics. In other words, the transformations brought about by the development of the pilgrimage centre were resonating with Gaṅgāsāgar Colony. Its residents actively negotiated the opportunities and joys of the pilgrimage-related development. More than that, at night many of the Colony's male residents were flocking to the brightly illuminated tea-stalls

[107] To fetch water from the deep tube wells remains a time-consuming task for women and tap-water in the houses of the poor is still a far cry. Yet the density of deep tube wells, their reliability and, as far as the colony is concerned, the absence of caste-based exclusions at the wells has eased the situations enormously (cf. Crow and Sultana 2002; Danda 2009; Sultana 2011).

on ‘bus stand’: the huge concrete field where in the time of the *melā* buses were to spit out unending masses of pilgrims only to turn around with dramatic ado, but which seemed to be out of place during the rest of the year. Whiling the time away in their favourite tea stalls, connections were made and the distinction between the Colony and its environs unmade night after night; the latest announcement debated, local politicians engaged and news of jobs distributed. Laying almost naked in the approaching darkness and crisscrossed by men on their way to and from tea stalls, the ‘bus stand’ was in itself a symbol of the development shaping the southern shore; an instance of, what I understand to be, the infrastructural underbelly of the sacral complex.

5.2. Spatial Practices

Right beside Gaṅgāsāgar, within ten minutes walk from the busstand, a small channel (*khāl*) empties into the sea. Today this small channel is little more than a small natural harbor where local fishermen land their trawlers and along whose shores the catch is auctioned only to be hurried away to evening markets all over southern Sāgar. Several writers claim this *khāl* to be part of *ādi gaṅgā* (lit. the original Gaṅgā) – that is, the last leg and remnant of the ‘original channel’ (D. K. Chakrabarti 2001, 135).[108] In contrast to many water bodies all over Bengal – understood to be remains of the divine river’s original route and precisely therefore invested with sacral powers[109] – the *khāl* seems to have no significance in contemporary ritual. During the *melā*, its mouth actually serves as an officially marked, fenced and heavily used public latrine. Only the location of the cremation ground (*śmaśān*) in its immediate vicinity could be related to an earlier sacral significance. Yet the exact location of the *śmaśān* was uniformly explained to be related to the close proximity to the shore and, thus, the Gaṅgā.

However, within localized environmental relations *khāl* are particularly relevant. The notion *khāl* refers to a channel as well as to its surrounding salty swamps. While *khāl* are points of entry of the tides, they are also vital drains in times of excess rains threatening to flood the otherwise embanked islands. Since the 19th century, sluice gates have been implanted to

[108] Indeed, to speak of a ‘original channel’ is nothing but misleading in this rapidly changing landscape, reworked as it is by ever instable river courses. Yet, the story of Kapil Muni, King Sagar and Bhagīrath suggests that one particular route is original one taken by the divinity on her way to the ashes and the sea – and as such it is revered by some as bearing particular powers to this day.

[109] A particularly prominent example of this kind of ritual surplus is the water body adjacent to Kolkata’s famous Kalighāṭ temple. It is intensively referred to this day as remnant of the *ādi gaṅgā* although it hardly resembles a river anymore.

safeguard the sweet environment in the interior and to improve channel irrigation. Serving as physical borders between ecosystems and usage regimes, sluice gates are most often set back from the shore. The outer reaches of the *khāl*, cordoned off by gates and complementing embankments, are, therefore, among the most salty and last settled areas within the islands. They are literally fringes *within* the contours of flexible coastlines. As so-called 'wastelands' they had been under direct control of the state. Yet, under the not-so-watchful eyes of a distant state, the patches of mangroves and swamps had partly been leased as fisheries and partly used as Commons. In 1982, however, the officially acknowledged fisheries within these swamps were brought to an end and, with the exception of the remaining channel and small patches of mangrove, all of the salty land distributed by the government – establishing thereby Gaṅgāsāgar Colony.

Carved out of the swamps as a tongue of land, the colony has been well incorporated into the social landscape. It was well connected to neighbouring villages with the main artery of the island's – the brick-road[110] (*pākā road*) – being laid directly through the Colony. Furthermore, the primary school serving as education hub and as voting booth for numerous adjacent villages, has been located at the centre of the oldest parts of the colony. Here also the landmark mobile tower serving the south-central part of the island is located. The infrastructural integration mirrors, in fact, the recent advent of development in these parts and, in a sense, the mutual contingency of contemporary Gaṅgāsāgar and its Colony.

Most available accounts portray the colony as being established for and inhabited *only* by victims of erosions. Writing on the several colonies on Sāgar Island, for instance, the journalist Kalpana Bardhan[111] states,

> "Housing climatic refugees, these settlements have been established on land allotted by the West Bengal government. The more fortunate have migrated to mainland areas."

These portrays circulate the imagery of a somewhat 'pure' refugee experience. One, that invokes monocausal and unprecedented victimization culminating in homogenous resettlement schemes. Diverse histories and multiple causalities are collapsed into the uniform state of 'refugeehood'; as are, by implication, the places imagined to be inhabited by victims. This homogeneity seems to be enforced further by the very concept of the colony – intimately tied

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[110] Besides the very few tarmac roads, the Sundarbans are traversed by a web of inferior roads built on-top of inner embankments and made of bricks.

[111] http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=Articles&ArticleID=4989 (last access 30.3.2013)

to notions of exodus, modernism and surveillance (Scott 1998). Both – monocausality and homogeneity – are belied by the internal differences of the Gaṅgāsāgar Colony. These unfold not – as might be expected in South Asia – along the denominators of caste or *jāti*,[112] religion and ethnicity. They have rather to mapped along three spatial practices: frontier village, modernist distributions and squatter settlements. To disentangle these diverse routes, trajectories and accumulated presents, I will briefly turn to the household survey that I carried out to roughly map its composition.

Taken together, the Colony mirrored the demographical trends of rural West Bengal quite well: with highest *jāti* extremely rare and upper *jāti* virtually absent, it was clearly dominated by, what is often called, lower caste groups (see Figure 7 and 8). However, the number of Muslim Sheikhs is much higher than what is reported for the district in general or the island.[113] Yet, the quantitative similarities between Muslim Sheikhs and members of the low Hindu *jāti* (*Māhishya*, *Sadgop*, *Nāmasudra* etc.) mirror general trends of deltaic West Bengal. With the exception of the *Nāmasudra*, the said Hindu *jāti* are in Bengal commonly subsumed under the category of the *Sāt Sudra* – literally, the pure untouchables.[114] The mutuality of the said lower Hindu castes and Muslim Sheikhs has been often noted upon (see i.e. Nicholas 1962; Eaton 1996; Hauser 1998, 11f) – and could be observed in numerous ways throughout the Colony. To be sure, there are certain domains or performances unfolding only within the narrow limits of kinship and *jāti* – the institution of marriage, of course, being the best guarded. Yet, everyday work and leisure activities transgress the distinctions inscribed by figurations of 'caste' and 'purity'. Houses border each other with dear neighbourly relations frequently traversing between them. Similarly, I witnessed intimate friendships crisscrossing which at times also included commensality.

[112] Theoretical approaches to South Asian societies have been dominated by the emphasis of hierarchies, notions of purity and rather rigid divisions between groups. Steeped in orientalist constructions, these analytical foci have been challenged widely since Dumont's influential studies (Dumont 1970; Cf. Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994). To capture the flexible, yet not freely floating dynamics of social hierarchies, I will on one hand avoid the troubled notion of caste or *varṇa* and stick throughout this thesis to the signifier *jāti*. In signifying hierarchical social categories, *jāti* is locally used also by Muslims. Not only to index rank among Hindus, but also among Muslim.

I will emphasize, on the other hand, various other social dynamics (memory, environmental relations or politics) that limit the relevance of *jāti* in concrete lifeworlds. Srinivas' 'field view' on caste will, therefore, be enriched by attention to encompassing dynamics.

[113] The 1991 Census of India reports that 9.86% of the island are Muslim. On district-level the Muslim amount to 30% (Bureau of Applied Economics & Statistics 2012). While in the colony the Muslim presence is almost half of the population. Most of the Muslim of coastal West Bengal's are members of the Sheikh community.

[114] Being since the Middle Ages understood as "[…] partially combinable with the Veda […]" (Inden 1976, 32), they are deemed less polluting to the highest *jāti* (Marvin Davis 1983, 53f) and rural Bengal's dominant castes – how Srinivas famously called it (1955) – repeatedly emerged from their midst.

Among the three figurations accounting for the differences within the Colony, the *modernist distributions* clearly mark the majority – and have again to be internally differentiated into two distinct trajectories. One being the so-called refugees, the other being landless groups from southern Sāgar who managed to secure a piece of land without having become landless due to a coastal erosions. Interestingly, these latter differences can be clearly mapped in space.

Type of Arrival	**Houses**	**Residents**	**Average landholding**
Frontier village	6	50	6.2 bg
Modernist Distributions			
Resettlement after displacement	80	516	2.1 bg
Distribution to landless	79	505	0.9 bg
Squatter	7	65	0
Total	**166**	**1136**	

Figure 7. Houses and Residents by 'Type of Arrival' (Source: Household survey, December 2009)

To engage the aftermath of coastal erosions, I limited my interest by and large to those groups that were directly involved in environmental displacement. I largely sidestep pasts and everyday life of other residents.[115] Thus, I am in an awkward position: I prioritize one particular trajectory of mobility – i.e. environmental displacement – while trysing to avoid the trap of exotization. I do so by sustaining a critical perspective on the signifier 'refugee'. But to do justice to the Colony as a whole and its complex histories, I will introduce these spatial practices in chronological order.

The longest-standing presence in the area that subsequently became the Colony are six households lining its western fringes. Having carved out their fields and ponds from the jungle by themselves after they had bought the land from earlier landlords, these households mark the intrusion of the ordinary 'village' into the colony.

The large majority of residents in the colony were, of course, settled through the activities of a bestowing state. They amounted to 159 households. Consequentially, the better part of the colony is characterized by plots homogenous in size. But the uniformity ends precisely here. Not only had the size of the plots been subjected to reformulations over the years, but the quality

[115] I have included them in the household survey, which allowed me to map these differences in the first place, and covered everyday interaction. Yet most of my analyses sidesteps their particular past and present.

of the plots differed sometimes dramatically with their precise location in the landscape. These, my interlocutors insisted, had only been partially known from the beginning, as the location of the embankment had not yet been fixed effectively. The exact distance between owned plot and salty swamp and, therefore its chronic or flood-induced salinity remained uncertain for a long time. However, it soon became clear that the first settlers had managed to lay their hands on the better plots: The settlement operations extended from the first established area into the swamps. Whereby, an increasing distance between the oldest houses and the outer embankment and, thus, a relative decrease in salinity came to be established.

Jātī	**Frontier Village**	**Resettlement after Displacement**	**Distribution to Landless**	**Squatters**	**TOTAL**
Sheikh	1	23	39	7	70
Māhishya	1	20	6	0	27
Nāmasudra	0	8	5	0	13
Sadgop	1	5	6	0	12
Pandakṣatriya	0	6	4	0	10
Khān	0	2	5	0	7
Kayastha	2	3	1	0	6
Karan (HC)	1	0	3	0	4
Kadra (SC)	0	3	0	0	3
Paik	0	0	3	0	3
Bhũiyā	0	3	0	0	3
Tili	0	3	0	0	3
Shunri (SC)	0	3	0	0	3
Kattua	0	1	1	0	2
Bāgdi (SC)	0	2	0	0	2
Tanti	0	1	1	0	2
Ādibāsi (Sāntal)	0	0	1	0	1

Camilla (HC)	0	0	1	0	1
Sardar	0	0	1	0	1
Unknown	0	0	2	0	2
Total	**6**	**80**	**79**	**7**	**166**

*Figure 8. Jātī according to 'Type of Arrival' in Numbers of Houses (*Source: *Household survey, December 2009)*

The southern parts of the Colony have been distributed first and this exclusively to erstwhile islanders from Ghoṛāmārā and Lohāchara who had become landless due to coastal erosions. Over the decades, the ties to the neighbouring islets have often loosened families. With older members dying and new generations nurtured, the population had changed. Against this background, the relevance of the marker 'Ghoṛāmārā', 'landless' or 'refugee' was far from uniform. Many of the younger have stepped beyond of, what they perceive to be, the shadows of a hazy and ruined inheritance. However, the islands have not yet been forgotten; they continued for, the moment at least, to be important nodes of mobilites and belonging. While this ongoing significance is certainly rooted in the spatial ordering itself, it was nevertheless unevenly distributed in its confines.

With plots distributed along modernist practices, particular histories of state relations had become inscribed into the structure of the Colony. Plots had been allotted along brick roads engraving, for the beginning at least, straight lines into the swamp. Along these streets, locally labelled as *line*, new neighbourhoods emerged that were mainly outcomes of arbitrary distributions. Yet, a few knew their new neighbours from the sunken islands – among them, very few even looked back on mutual relations as landowners, later as squatters and now as resettled neighbours. But these intensive relations were rare.

Not only in the material reworking of the swamp and the growth of neighbourhoods, but also in the very naming of the new grounds the actual expansion, bureaucratic order and emplacement were paralleling each other. The streets had been named in continuation of the colonial practice to order spaces in the Sundarbans simply by numbering. On 1st line followed 2nd line and so on. The lines have become an index of distinct pasts. A rare moment of coincidence of administrative category, bureaucratic practice and emplaced ground, of map, territory and selfhood was achieved. As emblem of paper-backed claims, renewal and belonging, the numbered streets continued to structure present affairs in the Colony.

The production of place at the interface of materiality and bureaucratic practice has been continued in the establishment of domestic shrines lining the streets. Situated at the edge of

one's own plot, these shrines were constituted by two small earthen mounds with a plant situated on top. During the daily evening worship, these plants were addressed as symbols of two distinct deities. The *tulsī*-shrub (*ocimum sanctum*), on one hand, was related to Kṛṣṇa; while the *manasā-sij* (*Euphorbia neriifolia*), a particular cactus, was adressed as the snake goddess Manasā (cf. Maiti and Mishra 2000).

In the fabric of Bengali religious practice, these shrines have been spaces of a remarkable durability and continuity. Most other materials of worship are of a much more transient nature.[116] Only stones – understood to be permanent abodes of deites – have been more durable. To be sure, in the important temples of Ghoṛāmārā, as those in Mandīrtalā, stone *murti* formed an integral part of ritual activities. And it remains to be seen, how these stone will fare, once the temples themselves are threatened. Other temples and shrines, however, had been, so I was unanimously told, left behind or gone with the river. While this may be part of a silenced history – say, of more affluent Brahmins or care-takers moving away from the islands and taking the gods with them – it still seems likely that most other temples simply had been operating without such stones. Very much alike to all temples in the contemporary Colony. However, what had been travelling whenever possible, were the small plants to be re-erected in domestic shrines. I understand them to a means of emplacement. They had been important within the processual transformations of the salty land into, what ultimately was to become a garden. More than being the site of femal ritual activities intended to guarantee the welfare of the household unity, they had in themselves been part of the production of domestic units in the swamps. Thus, they were indexing in themselves colonization and the durability of a social life transplanted.

Throughout the formative years, the oldest parts of the Colony had become tightly integrated neighbourhoods and emerged as, what appears to be, its centre. This is mirrored and actually deepened by the fact that the sole public spaces of worship – both Hindu temples – have been located here. As simple constructions of mud, wood and bamboos both public temples were situated at central places (and not the outskirts) of the oldest parts of the colony. In contrast to many other shrines in the vicinity, however, both temples were managed throughout the year. While the former were empty structures dotting the landscape that awoke to life only with yearly fairs, both of the colony's temples permanently housed idols of deities typically worshipped throughout rural 'Hindu' Bengal (Nicholas 2003). The tenet of impermanence – underlying Bengal's famous ritual festivity and permeating the rhythm of emptying and reviving of these

[116] This transient nature seems to be related to the rarity of durable materials in the delta or in theological developments emphasizing the impermanence of all Being.

other temples – resurfaces here in the idols themselves. They are, in a word, akin to the anthropogenic and heavily beautified statues used throughout festivals. Made from mud, water and straw, the idols in these village shrines were, however, not quickly discarded but rather cared for and repaired; and attended for through various daily routines. The first temple (*ek nambar mandīr*), houses the snake goddess Manasā, while the second houses besides another idol of Manasā also the goddess of the poxes, Sitalā, and the complexer Biśbalakṣmī (pronounced *Bisolokkhi*). In the last chapter I will turn to these deities, the environmental relations addressed through them in greater detail. For the moment, however, I want to emphasize that against the background of the modernist figurations of the colony, generated as it is through lists, plans and administrative decisions, the temples in particular emerges as sites of localized agency and an active emplacement in the new environment. More than the laying of fields, the building of houses or the creation of house shrines; more than these activities that were intended to perpetuate the survival of families, the temples were related to the emerging sociality. Simultaneously, they figured as expression and continuation of a public – one that unfolds beyond the administrative category 'colony' and yet is dialectically related to it. This pertains, firstly, to naming: Again numbered, the temples were related to administrative oderdering of space. It everyday life it was tied, secondly, to the committee maintaining the temple and overseeing continuity of ritual practices.[117] And it became encompassing the whole colony, too: publics were nurtured and produced on festive occasions at the several days long festivals devoted to Manasā, the Manasā Pūjā; or the evening vigil of Śivarātri (see Chapter 9.2.3.). Both, the everyday and the festive ritual activity has been underlining the significant role of the temple for the texture of the Colony; and, more generally, the importance of these older parts for localized identities.

The northern and eastern parts of the Colony, in contrast, had been settled in subsequent years and were populated for the largest part with landless families that had moved here or hailed from southern Sāgar itself. However, these differences of the routes and events of migration are

[117] In the morning and the afternoon, for one, a ritual specialist, a *purohit* from the neighbouring village of Lakṣmībājār, commences various prescribed rituals for the deities present. And, then again, in the afternoon a person chosen by the temple committee again opens the temple and follows daily chores of cleaning. Customarily, the latter tasks are followed by women, but in the case of the colony's slightly larger, second temple (*dui nāmbār mandir*) they were undertaken by old Anil Seth throughout my field research. In line with the emphasis on *bhākti* pervading rural religiosity in Bengal, the latter tasks were considered to be not contingent on specific rules of caste. Although, factually, they were followed by members of the respected *Sāt Sudra jātī*, which serves as yet another hint at the workings of caste in contemporary Bengal. Furthermore, it hints at the dominance of the *Sāt Sudra jātī* in the colony – a compound that emerges, in a sense, actually as dominant caste.

yet again bracketed, I argue, by a sense of shared history, a broader predicament. That is, one of marginalization and poverty enforcing mobilities.

The squatters – to turn to the third spatial practice – have been a marginal presence in the Colony. Against the ubiquity of squatting or, how it is often called, encroachment in Bengal and on Sāgar's fringes in particular, this is far from self-evident. As risk-aversion strategy or, what is more often the case, as last resort after environmental displacements across the island, a considerable population has been dwelling on outer or inner embankments. And so did the few squatters in the Colony. Most, yet not all of them, had settled here after they had suffered environmental displacements in what is contemporarily Sāgar's fastest eroding village, Botkhāli, on the south-western edge. Most of them had jointly moved here some 8 years ago which makes them newcomers to the colony. As most likely everywhere else in the Sundarbans, their life on the embankment depended on personal rapport and informal permissions granted. Rumours had it that they had been allowed to settle as support, indeed as muscle, of a political leader who died shortly after. With his demise, their purported task had been suspended. The ongoing permission to live here had become a disputed matter. Having experienced very similar processes in the recent past and sharing the broader predicament, the squatters were obviously subject of more tense and uncertain emplacement as their neighbours off the embankments. The spatial practice through which they have been dwelling in the colony, hints at the complex politics of embankments. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to frame the latter as fundamentally important object through which the state is encountered on these marginal fringes. These relations will be discussed in the next chapter.

With younger generations seeking to form their own household constrainted by poverty and land scarcity, both, families and buildings had been growing in uneven ways. Across all spatial practices, the colony was marked by population density.Sometimes buildings and household were clearly separated. Most often, however, the small houses had to accommodate new married couples or simply grew by, what was at first a shed and later became an additional room. The ideal of the nuclear family, pervading much development policy and being in a specific tension with the politics of resettlement on these coasts (see Chapter 8.4), continues to be belied in these conditions. To engage this ambiguity in a measured way – after all the household survey was intended to quantify some assumptions, to map histories, economic strategies and ensuing developments of the land – I chose to stick to the notion of the 'house'

(*ghar*) indexing a household.[118] As a social unit – that is, of course, embedded in wider networks and hardly autonomous – a *ghar* is constituted mostly by a kin group sharing space and eating the food cooked over the same hearth (cf. Satadal Dasgupta, Weatherbie, and Mukhopadhyay 1993, 342f).

I was further encouraged to do so by the validity of this notion in everyday parlance measuring villages or when alluding to primary spatial categories of persistence and belonging. In figurative speech, to name but one beautiful instance, the end of a family is commonly expressed as 'darkness in the house' (*ghare andhakār*): pointing, thus, clearly towards the entanglement of social practice with space that culminates in the ambiguity of the notion encapsulating both. However, the widespread use of *ghar* and its predominant application to the houses in the Colony is in itself important. For the place of origin of one's family and, therefore, oneself would in colloquial Bengali be indexed with the notion *bāṛi*. This approach was followed in the colony – yet the notion of *bāṛi* was hardly ever applied to the houses in the Colonies, but most often to distant Medinipur or the sinking islets.[119] In other words, origin, roots and a sense of belonging tied to place pointed therefore to spaces beyond the Colony. While the residents had clearly emplaced themselves in the colony, the latter was still somewhat ephemeral and ever new. This is far from trivial: it articulates the ambivalences of belonging, the short roots of being in place evolving from mobilities.

The varieties of spatial practices notwithstanding, the numbers still underline the relevance of the notion of 'environmental migrations' as an analytical window into the present of the colony (see figure 7). No other trajectory of mobility brought so many people here. Except broad, all-encompassing idea of ancestral roots in the nearby mainland, no place was as relevant for constructions of belonging as the lost islets of Ghoṛāmārā and Lohāchara. To be more precise, no other *retrospectively amalgamated* number of places.

Very often, my interlocutors simply framed themselves as hailing from Ghoṛāmārā or Lohāchara. In the beginning, when I was still assumed to be unfamiliar with the map of the lost territory, this may have been reasonable. Over the months and with my deepening familiarity –

[118] Both the 'house' and the 'household' figure as ambiguous categories straddling the categories of nuclear family or extended family. These categories have caused a great deal of confusion in scholarly literature (Inden and Nicholas 1977, 7). The houses I have counted in my survey and related to further datasets, therefore, do not mirror families or family units in a unified way. In this sense, the value of the data is seriously flawed. I believe this judgement applies in fact to most household surveys. Being a shorthand and, for me, a tool, this procedure has its clear limitations: it conflates the categories of shared bodily substance with the sharing of a house. While the former constitutes 'family' (*parivar*) in Bengal, the latter does not automatically.

[119] These usages are in a clear contrast to the interchanged usage of *grha*, the colloquial *ghar* and *baṛi* noted in the treatise on kinship in Bengal written by the historian Inden and the anthropologist Nicholas (1977, 7).

both with the remains and the sunken non/places – this became in itself astonishing. Indeed, the 'islandness', if I may call it this, figures so dominantly that it was very often overshadowing the respective village on the islands as place of origin.[120] But while Lohāchara was during my research remembered as having not been divided into various villages, Ghoṛāmārā was. The initial omitting of villages emerged in itself an outcome of a particular interplay of remembering and forgetting – forging, as it were, an amalgamated place in retrospective or from a distance. To be sure, if asked for the precise village everybody except the youngest could tell to which village exactly one's house once belonged.

5.3. On the Politics of Embankments

Throughout the last two centuries, the archipelago has been characterized by the twin dynamics of existential dependence on and neglect of the embankments. To account for the complexities involved, I have to outline patterns of the political ecology of embankments.

On a conceptual level, the embankments can be understood as a state-managed antagonism between land and water, between estuarine commons and private plots (D'Souza 2006; Danda 2007). In a sense, they appear as an always imperfect, ultimately imaginary refusal of the waterscape. At the same time, they emerge as central moment within the legibility of the state – of its contours and actions. In encounters with the state's local and regional actors the embankments emerge as the most intensively contested subject. In this sense than they are comparable with their gargantuan counterparts, dams. Yet while the latter have turned out to be tied to elite appropriations and an utter disregard for the poor, embankments seem to be different: as a "[…] straightjacket [to] most Indian rivers" (Baviskar 2003, xi) they mark a porous border between different materialities, opening up the possibility of agrarian lifestyles and emerging as fields of polyvalent contestations.

In the waterscape of Bengal, embankments preceded colonial rule. The British government initially continued with shifting management practices that had characterized earlier rule. Regulations were, thus, marked by rather undecided and situational approaches towards their construction and maintenance (Harrison 1875, 1 – 8; Sarkhel 2012, 3). Most importantly, the

[120] In rural Bengal, as elsewhere in South Asia, villages certainly are important foci of ancestry and crucial within dynamics of belonging (Madan 2004). Complementing ties of kinship and 'caste', and not being overshadowed by these as Dumont famously argued, villages and neighbourhoods are units within and beyond the ties of consanguinity and affinity (see e.g. Randeria 1999a, 96 – 98; Lambert 2000).

regulations remained deliberatedly decentralized and largely the responsibility of landlords or absentee urban investors. There hardly can be any doubt that the holders of large leases tried to cut costs by denying or thinning contractual responsibilities. Similarly, through complex chains of subinfeudations and, hence, the blurry nature of responsibilities and gains, efforts or dynamics to institutionalize embankment control were locally seriously thwarted (T. Roy 2010, 16). Pursuing the double interest to increase revenues by colonizations and, increasingly also, to fashion itself as a benign ruler and protector of vulnerable populations, the colonial state eventually took over the responsibility for maintenance with the Bengal Embankment Act (1875). The Public Works Department, established in 1856, has been the first in a long row of state institutions burdened with the regulation of Bengal's ever growing number of embankments (T. Roy 2010, 18). While this centralization falls well in line with the emerging bio-politics of hazardous environments (see below), it also laid the foundation for tense state interactions through the very figure of the embankment. Likewise, colonial authorities have been subjected particular embankments in specific spaces to an even tighter control for, what seemed to them, the Greater Good. Due to its proximity to the port channels, Sāgar has been among these somewhat distinguished spaces. Ascoli notes (1921, 120),

> "In the 24-Parganās, however, where reclamation is in progress, and where river and flood problems are of such great complexity and concern to the Port of Calcutta, complete control of embankments is of vital importance."

Beyond construction type and positioning, the integration into centralized governmental control figures as yet another continuity from colonial times to today. After Independence the maintenance of the embankments came to be a responsibility of the *Department for Irrigation and Waterways* (DIW) and was later *also* included into the portfolio of the newly found *Department for Sundarban Affairs* (Kanjilal 2000; Danda 2007; Mukhopadhyay 2009). To make matters more complex, in the last two decades at the lowest end of the state apparatus a further tier was included: the institutions of the Pañcāyati Raj or, how it is mainly addressed today, the Pañcāyat. The latter officers are elected separately – that is, they are not sent from the state government yet still bound up with the machinations of party politics dominating West Bengal – and are conceived of as guaranteeing a sense of localized government countering the powers of the regional or central state (C. Wagner 2006, 98 – 103). The routing of funds for embankment maintenance is contemporarily and throughout the Sāgar island group among its most important roles. In practice, the Pañcāyat has become a mediator between villagers and various state institutions: it not only distributes funds by arranging for workers and materials,

but identifies the particular embankments to be maintained and controls the work done. In this double role, the officers of the Pañcāyat are, for all practical purposes, governing the embankments of their constituencies. The presence of the above mentioned ministries has further thinned out – removing, thus, the application of specialist knowledge of engineers only further. Yet, this authority has important consequences for everyday usages of the embankments; and the practicalities of embankment maintenance.

That being said, the embankments in the Sundarbans were to remain by and large neglected and technologically inferior to this very day. Being simply mounds of mud, they have been enforced by a skeleton of wood, split bamboo and in very rare occasions also by sandbags only in particularly difficult terrain.[121] While the roads and pathways traversing the immediate coastal stretches figure as minor embankments, only outer embankments are the focus of a heightened governmental care – and not, as is the case in comparable delta scapes, whole patterns of protective lines (see Sijmons 1999; Nienhuis 2008). A recent quantitative study on eroding villages a few miles up the river from Sāgar Island showed, for instance, that the large majority of villagers understands the embankments to be in a abysmal state and this due to insufficient maintenance by the government (Ramakrishna Mission Lokashiksha Parishad 2009, 29 – 31). Similarly, yet clad in the demure language of a petition, the Ghoṛāmārā Pañcāyat underscored in a recent plea to higher offices that the maintenance of the ring embankment is, by far, the most pressing concern of the islanders.

Everyday usages of the embankments, on one hand, bear little tension with state actors. As spaces beyond private grounds, yet still available and dry, the embankments were regulated by localized arrangements complementing official sanctions. Or to be more precise: it was the absence of official usages in most of the year that let localized regulations make themselves felt. While they have been important pathways connecting villages, meeting grounds and leisure areas, they were for all practical purposes integrated into the territory of the village. Particularly as grazing lands, the embankments were open only to the residents of the Colony, yet were also a source of conflicts among residents.

But while everyday usages in their very flexibility and ephemerality have hardly collided with state-sanctioned practices, more permanent settlements of squatters on the embankments did. Their very possibility, ubiquity and durability articulates – to borrow a term from Michel

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[121] Some of the rare exceptions are, for instance, the brick and concrete enforced stretches off Doblat, a few minutes' walk away from the colony. Due to money constraints, the innovative, yet now already crumbling structures which resemble a seawall proper, were and are not installed on a large scale (S. Bandyopadhyay 1994).

Foucault – 'tolerated illegality'. Reflecting on laws and their enforcement before the advent of, what he was to call, modern governmentality, he noted widespread practices and spheres along which laws were routinely evaded. Poor populations in particular, he argues, transgressed property and other laws to survive in conditions of deprivation. He (2012, 82) notes, "[…] the non-application of the rule, the non-observance of the innumerable edicts or ordinances were a condition of the political and economic condition of society." Being a feature of pre-modern power, the tendency to tolerate illegal practices within shifting limits came to an end, he claims, with enclosure and the rise of bourgeois classes (Foucault 2012, 84 – 86). To be sure, tolerated illegalities have neither ceased with the near total completion of enclosure nor with the onset of postcolonial rule: they continue to shape everyday life and state relations by marginalized populations. So they did in the Sundarbans. Here, too, survival was tied to toleration of illegal practices – with squatting on embankments being the most visible and, in a sense, essential outcome. The tolerations or ignorance by absent authorities were limited and bent by localized power structures.

Of course, the literal destruction of the land by encroaching waters left an increasing number of islanders no choice but to move with their belongings out of harm's way. As hospitable grounds which are by virtue of their heights fairly safe but still crop-free, embankments have been a welcome option to most. Particularly in the most rapidly shrinking villages, the embankments were crowded by newly landless groups. What might appear as the state turning a blind eye on the settlements, has to be understood as fragile tolerations of encroachments. Being governed, in theory, by the two ministries mentioned above and in practice by the local Pañcāyat officers, access to the embankments was bound up in localized politics. Put simply, the newly landless villagers had little difficulties in making their illegal squatting tolerated by local politicians. By the same token, however, settlements on more distant and less vulnerable embankments has been involving political bargains with those controlling distant embankments. In practice, tolerated illegalities were hence bound up in localized arrangements for which class, victimization or refugee-hood was much less important than localized identities. The evasion of state control was, in other words, complicated by further webs of politics.

Bound up in these dynamics, squatting emerged as controversial *and* ubiquitous spatial practice. Neither transient nor marginal phenomena (Malkki 1997), a considerable part of the population has been dwelling on the eroding island as squatters; and most of those who settle now legally in the Colony look back on long histories of squatting. Yet, squatting is more than an outcome

and perpetuation of victimization. It emerges rather as a form of dwelling that amounts to reworkings of the social and material under volatile political conditions (M. Ray 2002; R. Sanyal 2009). Within the parameters of tolerated illegalities and complementing localized power structures, squatting has became an ephemeral re-rooting. As a practice of 'homing' it involved the materiality of politics as much as the fragility of the dividing line between land and water.

I will now turn to the constantly fraught issue of embankment maintenance. As noted above, at present the maintenance works have been routed entirely through the Pañcāyat and along, what is locally simply called, Hundred-Days-Work (*eksau diner kāj*). The latter indexes is the enormous programme set into motion with the *National Rural Employment Guarantee Act* (NREGA) of 2006.[122] Aiming at the alleviation of rural poverty through a guaranteed employment for hundred days every year in localized development measures. Throughout the well-funded criticism of the scheme, there hardly can be a doubt that has been wielding profound impacts on rural lifeworlds and on the contours of the state in rural India. Indeed, it has emerged as one of the mechanisms along which the state fashions itself as an entity that distributes goods and services – and not or not only as the troublesome agent of extraction and primitive accumulation.[123]

In either case, the experience of the localized state and the patterns of engagement with it have to a certain extent been shifting. Particularly in areas like the Sundarbans which have had to put up with chronic neglect. Appearing to be merely forgetful and ineffective, the state is actually, what Shalini Randeria frames, a 'cunning state'. As such it capitalizes, she notes (2003b, 306) notes, "[…] on their perceived weakness in order to render themselves unaccountable both to their citizens and to international institutions […]". While certainly not being a remedy to this figuration, it is somewhat balanced by the scheme.

On Sāgar the social life of this poverty alleviation scheme became, first and foremost, bound up with embankment maintenance. As other development measures it became tangled up with

[122] Limited initially to the poorest districts of India, it was gradually extended and applies now, in theory, to whole India. In 2009, the law and programme was rechristened as the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act* (MGNREGA) – cementing thereby the hold the Congress Party claims over the scheme. Throughout this thesis I will stick to the older and shorter variant of the name as this was commonly used during my fieldwork in Bengal.

[123] Among political scientists, anthropologists and economists working on India, there is an extremely interesting debate ragingon the subject. While one faction argues that the developments indexed here are the outcome of a new form of governmentality (K. K. Sanyal 2007; Chatterjee 2008) others argue that they are merely an addition that does not alter the high-handedness and violence inherent in state policies (Baviskar and Sundar 2008; Akhil Gupta 2012).

the domain of dirty politics (Ruud 2000).[124] This meant, on one hand, that political pressure to receive means to maintain embankments or to rebuild defunct parts came to be levelled on the officers of the Pañcāyat,. The Pañcāyat emerged as a node in contestations between villages or parts of villages competing for scarce resources on the village level and struggling about the particular whereabouts of maintenance. Similarly, the particularities of distributions and the fraught question of who receives workloads and wages has become a conflictive field on the village level. Only well-connected individuals – and not, as is officially claimed, every needy person – actually managed to secure jobs as workers on the embankments. I argue that precisely because labour relations around embankments have been crucial for the generation of income, the embankment became in its frailness a resource.

I will give one example. As I have mentioned above, the colony has been directly bordering on mangrove swamps. With only the outermost ring embankment dividing salty mangroves from (ideally) sweet fields. Almost every rainy season breaches were occuring in the ring embankment and every summer parts of it were heightened and enforced. Since the embankment is – by localized conceptions – only mildly threatened, bamboo poles, wood and sand sacks were not deemed reasonable here. Maintenance has been little more than heightening and widening of the embankment with freely available mud intended to counterbalance both, the contraction of the embankment and normalized erosion during the rains and spring tides. During summer 2009 this normal routine was followed once again. Over days a small group of workers, employed through the scheme of Hundred-Days-Work, toiled to make the existing embankment sturdier. The works had to rely therefore on mud taken from the immediate environs and simply put on-top the existing the bank. To extract the mud needed, the workers had to turn to the commons beyond the embankment: the small patches of Mangrove. They relied, thus, on the old strategy to take constructing material directly out of the mud flats which would fill up again by sediments through the next rain season. This approach has locally been framed as neither weakening the embankments nor enhancing coastal erosion. Most of my interlocutors, yet not all, understood the salty mud to be an equally robust building material as the sweet mud taken from inside the confines of the transformed landscape. But as they needed large quantities of mud, the workers effectively cut a wide breach through the mangroves. Workloads consisted of particularly sized holes to be dug. To meet the requirements of Hundred-Days-Work, the workers would cut quadratic holes with teir hoes into swamps, fill

[124] In southern Sāgar, the scarcity of shifts, work-loads and means to distribute has been less severe, as the Hundred-Days-Work has become part of public works required for the annual *melā*.

baskets with the clumps and empty the baskets on the very embankment. Width, breadth and depth of the holes has been measured and documented by a present employee of the Pañcāyat. To fulfil workloads and to be paid accordingly, it was impossible (and as we shall see in a moment also not fully intended) to go on with this work without razing trees in the very process. Thus, the increase in strength of the embankment entailed the weakening of another safeguarding barrier: the mangroves themselves. Cutting holes and uprooting trees, the workers put considerable damage to the precious jungle. The strict rule issued by the Pañcāyat to not harm or cut the trees – announced regularly and strictly enforced – was obviously suspended. It might be argued that the impairment to the mangroves, had been due to bureaucratic fault or, perhaps, the lacking quality of the works themselves. I take another approach. I argue that the unfolding of the works had been, both, a moment of 'resilience trade off' (Lauer et al. 2013) and an instance of the materiality of politics. To enhance the robustness of one measure (the embankment), the increase of another layer of vulnerability was accepted – pointing thus to the contradictions inherent in environmental interventions and Disaster Risk Reduction measures addressed by Lauer. The *practice* of earthwork accentuated, at the same time, power and influence. For the workers had not only been capable of securing the work for themselves, but they managed to claim the wood that was left over for themselves, too. Female members of their households followed the group of earth workers, cut the uprooted trees and quickly transported them to their respective homes. While the trees had been too young to be sold or used as building material, they were good enough as fuel for the cooking. Against the background of scarcity in wood and cow dung, the freshly cut trees emerged, therefore, as a significant resource that was effectively tapped in along the same good political connections. Put the other way round: The social exclusion from poverty reduction measures, and broader: from the benefits of a giving state, were furthered in the exclusion from the utilization of forbidden, yet officially sanctioned cutting of wood. This underscored, yet again, the relevance of the embankment as resource precisely in its fragility and negligence (see also Mukhopadhyay 2009, 148 – 151).

In sum: The governance of the embankments has been bound up in a paradox. While the official regulations and practices were split up among diverse, often conflictive actors, the limited surveillance and maintenance opens the embankments as space to take refuge on; and as important economic resources for some. The restructuring of rural governance along the lines of participation and localized governance, which have changed the landscape of politics without

fully addressing the twin dynamics of the state's cunningness and localized power relation, have most likely fuelled conflictive dynamics around the embankments.

6. Fields, Boats and Pathways: Relations of Work

As a set of meaningful actions situated within economic and ecologic conditions, work relates to as much as it shapes particular environments (Ingold 2000; Spittler 2008, 13 – 17). In both ways – as a navigation and a reworking – the procedures and outcomes of work are fragments of social resilience.

Among the residents of the Colony one broadly defined and heterogenous set of labour relations kept being alluded to: i.e. the practices of what I want to call earthwork. Locally it was subsumed under the generic term *māṭi kāṭi*, literally the cutting of earth. For analytical purposes, this field of encounters with the muddy materiality of life on the island could be differentiated into domestic earthwork, parts of agriculture, 'unskilled labour' at home and during circular labor migrations. The actual relevance of these practices to sustain households differs greatly between individuals and seasons. With exemption of 'unskilled labourer' in all its guises, these practices generated only very limited income if at all. Nevertheless, earthwork served as an important figure within localized figurations of identity and belonging.

6.1. Agriculture

Domestic earthwork involved, most importantly, the elevation of fields and homesteads to make them less vulnerable to floods and to move them beyond saline groundwater levels. Every few years, fresh mud was piled on barren fields and gardens. To ensure sweetness, the mud is taken from ponds. As composite pattern, it involves, therefore, the cleaning and deepening of fresh water ponds used for household purposes and subsistence fishing. Both are capital-extensive, yet arduous interventions resulting in adaptation and an ongoing transformation of the landscape.[125]

Domestic earthwork remained firmly vested in male bodies. The repeatedly invoked prowess of male bodies relates to a sexualised logic of penetration and embodied purity (see e.g. Ferrari 2005, 127 – 129). In the case of absent men, the works were postponed.

[125] Under the rubric of 'land shaping' similar practices are propagated by regional NGOs. It adds to the establishment or deepening of ponds and the heightening of lands the dimension of planting schemes. While the latter coincide largely with long-standing local practices (paddy, vegetables), they add wooded constructions spanning the ponds. Facilitating the cultivation of certain, creeping varieties of vegetables these constructions could certainly intensify yields and reduce vaporizations of scarce sweet pond water. Heralded as a measure of rural development (Interview with Mr. Santhia, 7. May 2009, Regional Headquarters of Ramakrishna Mission, Kakdwip), it adds yet another layer to hybrid agricultural relations (Akhil Gupta 1998).

Agriculture is bound up in a paradox. In a landscape of scarce water and even scarcer land, agriculture has been one economic activity among many. For the great majority of my interlocutors, agriculture had become overshadowed by a range of other economic strategies. Yet, it had become a powerful marker crosscutting caste or religious diversions and emerged, thus, as a backbone of localized identity. Even those of my interlocutors, who had been earning most their money in deep sea fishing or on construction sites all over India, understood themselves primarily as peasants (*cāṣī*). Against this background, I will briefly outline the two dominant pattern in agriculture and their limitations.

The great majority of fields in the Colony were subjected to wet rice cultivation. Among the three generic varieties of paddy (see Nicholas 1962, 33 – 35; Greenough 1982, 27f), only the summer rice, *aman*, was planted on every rice field. *Aman* needs flooded fields for the most time of its growth: seeding was conducted, therefore, in the beginning of the rains or the weeks preceding them. Growing with the rising waters or transplanted from a seedbed into lake-like fields, *aman* ripens longer than the other two varieties and had earlier been harvested only in the winter months of December or January. Both, its high productivity and its superior nutritional value, made *aman* the most popular and important crop of the year. In the wake of the Green Revolution and with the introduction of modified seed varieties (*hybrid*, *bideśi*) growth cycle and nutritious value have, so it was locally argued, dramatically decreased. Taste, sweetness and strength of the new varieties was unequivocally seen as far inferior to the older, local varieties (*deśi*). However, all farmers I spoke to farmed *bideśi* variants. While this is, most likely the outcome of complex dynamics (Akhil Gupta 1998), the shortening of the growth cycle certainly has been an important reason. Reduced by roughly two months, the rice would flourish even in years of extremely late rains and could be harvested well before most work on the *melā* ground was to set in. Yet, seeds of the high yielding varieties had to be bought with every season anew and demanded considerable inputs of fertilizer and pesticides. Besides all environmental concerns, the costs involved in cultivation have thus been significantly increasing –often enough paving the way into debt relations with seed dealers.

The great importance attributed to rice notwithstanding, none of my interlocutors was in the position to harvest enough rice to sell it or to rely on it for subsistence throughout the year. Depending on time and strength of the rains, on rice varieties chosen, the impact of storms or embankment collapses and the size of the family, the rice harvested lasted anywhere between three to six month. Afterwards rice had unequivocally to be bought from the market.

Boro, the winter variety was cultivated only by few residents. Planted after the harvest of *aman*, it depended on regular doses of water which were difficult to come by months after the rains, in a salty waterscape and without proper irrigation facilities. The cultivation depended on enough water in the ponds; and on arrangements with neighbours willing to sell their water. But even when neighbours were willing, the price of the water and the pump rental made it a risky enterprise. Common throughout southern Bengal, the use of deep tube wells for irrigation had not been fostered on the coastal fringes. Mainly because it was feared that once water deep below the surface was massively tapped in, this would lead to further compaction of the landmass and, thus, a human-induced lowering of the extremely low-lying island. Thus, most abstained from *boro*, planting vegetables in their garden and leaving the fields fallow for the better part of the year.

A second agricultural pattern involved the cultivation of betel leaves (*pān*). Grown in permanent tendrils (*pāner boroj*) and being in setady demand, it proved to be a much more lucrative venue. But it had two constraints. One is that the plants needed soils of a reduced salinity to grow. On the high lands of Ghoṛāmārā and the interior of Sāgar, where the soil were sweet by localized standards, *pāner boroj* were a common sight. However, in the Colony it was cultivated only on a few of the innermost, longest cultivated and, thus, comparably sweet plots. The second impediment were the high investments needed initially as well as costly fertilizers required throughout. Loans were hard to come by. Against this background, only very few residents have been able to set up tendrils. Those few who did, however, were among the very few who followed only one economic strategy. Growing throughout the year, the tendrils needed continuous care, but brought also enough profits for modest wealth.

In addition to cultivation on one's own plots, a few of the residents were employed as daily labourers on larger fields in the interior or on those owned by Gaṅgāsāgar's numerous temples and pilgrim shelters. Nevertheless, these labour relations are quite rare (both in availability and in actual workloads) and are much less significant, economically speaking, than earthwork distributed by the local state: the regularized repair at the embankment, constructions of new roads or most of the activities available on the *melā* ground.

I had to introduce the complexities of earthwork on embankments already in the preceding chapter when I engaged the political dimensions of embankments. Therefore I will now turn to another closely related domain of earthwork: works around the pilgrimage traffic culminating with the annual festival, the *melā*. For literally all workloads secured by the male residents fall under the latter category.

6.2. Pilgrimage traffic

While pilgrims arrived throughout the year, economic opportunities associated therewith peaked with the annual pilgrim festival.[126] The Gaṅgāsāgar Melā is the second largest Hindu festival after to Kumbh Melā. Within the spell of four days between 400000 to 600000 pilgrims arrive in the sacral centre. While this would allow for fascinating analyses of, what might be called, temporary urbanism, indeed: the social life of an interim city,[127] I have to limit myself here to its assemblage, ephemeral infrastructure and the relations articulated therein. The following statement by Sombhu Kajli will have to suffice to indicate the joys of the ephemeral city:

> "The melā is the best time of the year. Then they [the pilgrims, external visitors] come from all parts of India here. The whole India is here, it is like watching TV. And we are sitting here and indulge in the hustle and the colours."

Besides being onlookers, the residents of the Colony were as much as other villagers of the isnland's extreme south involved in the breathtaking speed of its growth and deconstruction. Weeks before the pilgrims were to begin to pour in by vast numbers with public or chartered busses, with cars, trucks or tractors, the preparations to handle all this set in. Water canals have been dug, electricity re-installed and toilets erected. On the otherwise empty wide beach a tent town of temporary offices,[128] Hindu monastic orders, and regional charities sprung up catering to the needs of administrative officers, distributing medicine or offering food and shelter.

At present, the works on the *melā* grounds have been commissioned, organised and distributed in the complex interplay of different administrative layers and institutions. These complexities and ambivalences are mirrored, in a sense, in the diverse patterns along which actual shifts were distributed among workers. According to administrative channels, the micropolitics of competing institutions or corruption, the work loads were distributed along three broad patterns: as Hundred-Days-Work routed via the Pañcāyat; to daily labourers arranged for by contractors; or distributed directly as wage labour. According to availability, the residents have been

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[126] Several residents of the colony tried to earn money pulling cycle-rickshaws (*bān*) or selling coconut or devotional articles to the pilgrim when there were no other source of income. Yet because of the high competition in the sacral complex, these relations were overshadowed by the massive influx of money, shifts and, finally, pilgrims around the four climactic days of the festival.

[127] Already almost 200 years ago a British traveller was taken aback by the bustle of the ephemeral city during the *melā*. He noted: "Words fail to give a description of the scene. Here an immensely populus [sic] city has been raised in a very few day, full streets, lane, bazars &c. &c. many sorts of trade going on with all the hurry and bustle of the most flourishing city." (Chamberlain cited in Bandyopadhyay 1997, 107)

[128] These include fire brigades, police and border security forces etc. and therefore a host of governmental institutions that otherwise show a near to zero presence in the southern villages.

engaging diverse labor and were at times quickly changing between different jobs. With the sole exception of digging and cleaning of toilets – a work thought to be polluting and delegated therefore to low-caste groups brought in precisely for this work –, caste or pollution did not (directly) structure the labour market. That is, caste and kinship certainly influenced the general access to and the specific character of shifts offered (see also D. Roy 2012). Yet, shifts or types of works were not directly tied to, nor taken on based on notions of purity or caste.

In comparison to other economic activities, the *melā* work was characterized by comparatively great control over payments, reduced travel expenses or other hidden costs.[129] The greatest difference in esteem and earning has been rooted in the lesser powers of the middlemen – balanced, as it were, by micropolitics and a localized sense of belonging. Both are related to the institution that by far distributes the most workloads and wages among the residents of the Colony: localized trade unions.

While some of the works on the *melā* ground have been organized directly by the Pañcāyat, localized trade unions were entitled to distribute the huge number of shifts before, during and after the melā itself. That is, they routed assignments handed down by various state departments as Hundred-Days-Work to the islanders. West Bengal's trade unions have been intimately tied to party politics and the two trade unions present on the *melā* ground were no exception. During my fieldwork, one linked to the CPI(M) and another linked to the TMC were competing with each other.[130] Being deeply involved in the vagaries of party politics they were building and enforcing exclusive loyalties; but also, and this is crucial here, localized identities. They have been doing so in a negative way: on a poverty-stricken island situated in marginalized region, the trade unions guarded the entitlements to shifts very well. In what seems to be a grey zone of localized contestations, only islanders from Sāgar's southern parts were awarded shifts and wage. Claims of others have been marginalized as 'external' (*bideśi*). While, of course, the exact limits are difficult to ascertain and extralocal persons may be included along the affiliations of politics, kinship etc., the entitlements to *melā* work builds upon and reinscribes these localized identities. I will return to this moment – which I understand to be one of emplacement – towards the end of this thesis.

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[129] One of my younger friends in the colony, Svadesh Seth, who was not yet out of his teens, but already been working in distant sites, estimated his mean, monthly salary in a factory of Hyderabad or in a brick kiln close to Odisha somewhere around 3000 Rs. His earnings on the *melā* ground were, so he said, as high as 2000Rs for 14 days of work.

[130] From the perspective of political science, these activities by trade unions might be surprising. For they are situated far beyond the classical field of trade unions: the industry and the third sector of service economy (see C. Wagner 2006, 159 – 162). Their activity here only underlines the tight integration of trade unions into party politics (ibid) and their usage as a means to intervene into the everyday of diverse populations.

6.3. Fish Work

The insistence on peasant lifestyles notwithstanding, fishing has been an ubiquitous practice in the Colony. While some tried to hide the fact, others made sure that the very survival in the Colony depended on it. Available historical evidence suggests the presence of unmechanized riverine fishing all along the lower Huglī since, at least, colonial times.[131] Although these are still common in other parts of the Sundarbans still common, the practices followed by the Colony's residents differed. Of a very recent origin, the fishing practices had become the most important economic strategy. Yet, they were related to in ambivalent ways. Furthermore, fishing was either bound up with highly exploitative relations to boat-owners; or it involved the feeding into global value chains from the very bottom. Against these social and economic dimensions, I will subsume the variety of fishing activities here as 'fish work'. Through this notion I hope to capture the sense of alienation and ambivalence bound up therewith.

Fish work involves trawler-based coastal or deep-sea fishing; the production of dry fish; and the manual fishing for prawn seeds along the shore. The former two patterns were seen to be brought here with the influx of Bangladeshi refugees (*bāṅgāl*) during partition.

While, both, the historic roots and the largest contemporary market shares are identified with a rather narrow ethnic group – Hindu fishermen from the Chittagong region (Raychaudhuri 1980) –, caste plays only a limited role for *deep sea fishing*. To be sure, a small number of higher and middle-ranking castes avoided fishing, but others took part in it regularly. This might surprise against the influential body of scholarship underscoring caste, purity and value as the central analytical instruments to make sense of India.[132] According to what Srinivas called the 'bbok view', the polluting practice of fishing would be deemed proper only for certain groups because of and as further cementation of their low ranking status. However, set against the political ecology of resource access, the partaking of wide populations in fishing activities is not surprising at all. Dramatic increases in population met by stagnating agricultural development, reframed the estuarine and marine commons as central resources. Only to be stimulated by the increasing demands in fish. Islands that were primarily settled as agricultural spaces have

[131] Historical Works (e.g. N. Mukherjee 1968), contestations along the port's channel (File *Petition of fishermen of the districts of Hooghly and 24 Parganas*, Administrative Department, Marine Archives Kolkata) and colonial travel writing (e.g. Lady Nugent 1839, 1:197f) all prove the obvious spread of artisanal fishing in these rich waters.

[132] Yet, it deserves emphasizing that fish and fisheries play an overall significant role across Bengal. In the watery landscape – interwoven with water bodies, disappearing under annual floods (*barsā*) during the rains – fish is as much a famine food (see e.g. T. Beck 1994a) as it is staple food to almost all segments of society. Most rural households across deltaic Bengal have their own pond regularly fed with young fishes – eventually to be caught as food and only rarely as commodity. The proverbial dependency of Bengalis on fish notwithstanding, fishing as a practice and profession is certainly thought of as polluting and denigrated along the logic of caste and purity.

eventually been turned into the hinterlands of coasts and fishing ports feeding their workforce from societies that imagine themselves as nothing but peasant.

With the arrival of *bāṅgāl* refugees, the town of Kakdwip (see figure 2) began to transform into a bustling fishing hub serving Kolkata's markets and beyond. The boom was fuelled by the high demand in particular fish varieties – most noteworthy the costly and cherished *iliś* (*Tenualosa ilisha*). As migrants from the eastern shores of the delta they came from regions where fishing had, so it was locally claimed, a long history and wider currency than in the west (see also Raychaudhuri 1980). Through the boom, however, the *bāṅgāl* refugees have become emblematic for superior knowledge about marine fishing, risk aversion and effective organizations of the trade. At the same time, they managed to concentrate a considerable amount of economic and political power. Particularly the flows of capital and licenses needed to enter and stay within business appear to be kept in close circuit.

Thus, most of the trawlers venturing into the Bay from Kakdwip were owned by Partition refugees and their descendants. Conversely, if at all directly involved in fish work, the latter appeared only as pilots (*mājhi*). All other workers hailed from diverse geographic and social backgrounds. All residents from the Colony had been working on trawlers as ordinary laborer. Even after years and decades, none of them had managed to step beyond being a hand. Depending on size and range of the trawler, more or less fixed crews of 6 to 15 men worked aboard each ship. Although they were receiving an advance payment for every trip, the actual earnings had to be calculated at the end of the season according to size of the actual catches and market value. Against this background, debt relations with boat owners (*mālik*) were rampant which secured the owner a ready workforce.

Women were explicitly excluded from the fish work in deep sea. Based on notions of embodied impurity culminating in menstruation, the presence of women aboard was perceived as a threat to the crew. Polluted or insulted through polluting bodies, Gaṅgā herself would, so it was believed, unleash her wrath on the respective boat.

In contrast to other South Asian fishing societies, the relevance of environmental knowledge was itself contested. With respect to navigation and the avoidance of risks, the knowledge of the *mājhi* was frequently underscored: it involved the detection of fish swarms through the colours of the surface waters as well as meteorological prognoses along cloud patterns (see also S. Chakrabarti 2009, 50). Yet with respect to rich catches and safe return the role of his knowledge was limited – and vested rather with luck and modern technology (GPS, Sonar etc.).

In any case, specific knowledge was always attributed to the *mājhi* and seen as stemming from their *bāṅgāl* origin.

While several residents have been working on trawlers throughout the year, most did so only for the peak season of *iliś* fish. The latter season falls neatly into the rainy season (*barṣā*) and, thus, into months of heightened cyclonic activities in the Bay of Bengal. Storms and cyclones were, therefore, the greatest risk of deep sea fishing. Once again, the East Bengalis appear as particularly skilled here. In general, fishermen relied very much on science to explain and technology to avoid storms at sea. Of single most importance to survival strategies at sea were communication through radio broadcasts or mobile phones and, to a lesser degree, costly GPS navigation systems.[133] Weather forecasts, especially by Bangladeshi broadcasting stations were consulted constantly, as were the governmental Warning systems in the harbours themselves.[134] These technologies were widely overshadowing, and at times even displacing localized environmental knowledge of the seascape invested exclusively in the *bāṅgāl mājhi*.

Even if these measures may have significantly reduced the casualties among fishermen, deep sea fishing remained a very risky enterprise. Especially as the trawlers were frequently caught by news of imminent storms too far from the shore to return in time. Every fisherman remembered hours and days of storms offshore well; and some looked back on narrow survival in tumultuous seas. The hazards at sea were explicitly or implicitly for many a reason to abstain from fish work aboard deep sea trawlers. Some directly mentioned fear for their lives or of their loved ones. Others spoke with deep anxieties of the vast emptiness of the sea, the terror to die alone under the sun – both imageries culminating in the figure of storm and shipwreck at sea. Many other, however, spoke of seasickness and skin problems at sea and invoked these as a bodily hindrance that kept them ashore. Both, nausea and blisters, did not emerge as being part of or accompanying a liminal phase, but became general, embodied disabilities.[135] I suggest to read these as being related to socially-mediated fears. Especially when brought together with the social life of the stomach and the skin in popular Bengali culture. For both are – as has been

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[133] GPS-systems, allowing for a precise location and navigation of trawlers, are used on some of the larger and better equipped trawlers, owned by wealthy merchants and operating from the nearby fishing harbour of Kakdwip.
[134] The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) issues among others "Fishermen Warnings", which are widely broadcasted and communicated through activation of warning lights in the harbours. If cyclonic activity is recorded and cyclone warnings issued, the authorities shut down the harbours (see also C. Gupta and Sharma 2009).
[135] This allusion to seasickness as a general, embodied disability marks a direct contrast to the way the sea is engaged with by particular fishing societies through the trope of seasickness. Take, for example, the Icelandic communities researched by Gisli Palsson (1994). Here seasickness marks the time of a rite de passage and, at the same time, an obstacle to overcome. Nausea, thus, emerges as a bodily process that has to be suffered through to gain membership among and to belong to the group of fishermen as well as to gain specific skills.

shown in healer-patient interactions and in religious encounters with smallpox – intimately mirroring self-hood, anxieties and control (Ecks 2004; Ferrari 2010). All notions that are threatened by the sea (as it is engaged with on these shores) and, most dramatically, in the notion of storms at sea.

A second grave risk relates to intentional or accidental border crossings. With the fishing grounds off Bangladesh being considered far richer,[136] several fish workers had ended up in Bangladeshi jails only to be released several months later (see also C. Gupta and Sharma 2009). In the wake of these developments, smaller trawler enterprises have come up around Gaṅgāsāgar itself, too.[137] Relying on smaller boats and feeding only partly into urban markets, they still emerged as important sites of earning. With a clear peak in the rainy season, many work throughout the year and in shorter trips. During the winter most of the boats went and returned daily, reducing the risks and the annoyances of deep sea fishing.

After the rains, the season of *dry fish production* began. It was centred on ephemeral settlements of huts erected right on the beach for the duration of winter. Named after the camp-like appearance (*kuṭi*) or its organization in fishing units (*sābār*), the dry fish production unfolded along comparably tight capitalist relations. It is arranged in unit-like business (*byabsā*) neighbouring each other on the beach but working autonomously: each has its own hut, drying ground, workers, boats and nets.

Put abstractly, on-board of trawlers the sea had to be managed and navigated as a hazardous space in order to survive and bring home a rich catch. The production of dry fish relied, instead, on the regulation of space: on the beach and, what is more important, in the regulation of fishing grounds off the shore. Particularly the latter set of regulations exemplified localized patterns subjecting estuarine spaces to precise tenure and usage right; that integrate the amorphous waterscape into maps and intimate knowledge (see also Cordell 1989a; Cordell 1989b; Hoeppe 2007). Resulting from the rather recent development of the *kuṭi* and the penetration of localized arrangement by party political and governmental institutions, these regulations were bound up with the committee governing the *sābār*.[138]

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[136] This relates back, once again, to the geomorphology of the delta. The lucrative *ilish* is mainly caught while being on his way into estuarine water to breed there. Being less and less fed by rivers rushing in, the dying estuaries of western Bengal are visited by fewer and fewer swarms. Taken together with the widespread overfishing of *ilish* and other varieties, this only increases the pressure felt by crews to risk being stopped by the Border Patrol.

[137] Indeed, in the 1990ies the state government built a comparatively huge fishing harbor facilities to instigate yet another boom (after Kakdwip and Diamond Harbour) on the western shores of the island. Yet due to severe infrastructural restrains, the facilities are heavily underused.

[138] Named the 'Organization of Marine Dry Fish Fishermen Co-operative of the Confluence with the Sea' (*Sāgar Saṅgame Marine Matsyajibi Kuṭi Samabayī Samiti*), the committee is registered by the Ministry of Fisheries and

Yet, the committee itself did little more than govern the marine space endowed to it by state officials: that is, the waters stretching between the coast and the parallel channel plied by cargo ships on their way to and from the port. The buoys signalling the way for the ships, hence, marked the limit of possible fishing grounds and the border between different sets of usages. While these outer limits were non-negotiable, the positioning of the fishing grounds of every business within them was a matter of competition. In imagined rows connecting the channel with the shore and running parallel to each other in large distances the sea space was parcelled and attributed as tenure for one season – by way of lottery.[139] It is interesting to note that the quality of the spot (in terms of quantity and quality of fish to be gained) was largely unclear beforehand. Surely, the tenures at the outer limits of the space were regarded as good: larger quantities of fish were expected here then within the field. Yet even this might not be the case. What is most important, I was told, are the currents (*srot*) and channels along which fish tends to move through these rather shallow waters. But since both changed quickly due to the muddy ground and the transformative character of the delta landscape that extends well into the seabed, the quality of the position could be evaluated only with first rounds of catches.[140]

The marine scape emerges hence as an intricate field structured by individual claims, currents and limits toward other usage patterns. Tightly integrated with the rhythms of the tide, the *kuṭi* fishermen set out to or fixed the nettings twice daily and hauled in the catch at the short plateau of equilibrium right before the tides begin to flush out. They did so, as the fishes are understood to be fleeing easily out of the nets with the waters pouring back into the ocean. Brought to the coast, the fish had to be sorted and left to dry in the sun for several days. After that, they were sold off to wholesale buyers supplying urban markets.[141]

Not far from there, and with their Saṛī or Luṃgi rolled up, countless women, men and children traversed shallow waters with wide, yet tightly meshed nets and caught the tiny tiger prawn

itself not beyond local party politics. What is more important, it figures prominently in the organisation of the annual Gaṅgā Pūjā by all local fish workers that I will engage in Chapter 9.

[139] Names of business holders (*mālik*) and nets were penned on pieces of paper, mixed and publicly drawn for each position. I did not have the chance to attend such a meeting, nor to investigate the deeper politics and conflicts in the *sābār*, but, needless to say, rumours on and accusations of cheating regarding this process were not difficult to find.

[140] Particularly urgent conflicts can emerge, so I was told, when the tenure holder gather only extremely little catch. In these cases they may be given another tenure nested somewhere in the pattern of fixed plots and without the customary distance between individual plots. With the quantity of fish to be hauled in by those holding claims to the tenure in the vicinity, the tensions arising from such measures are obvious.

[141] Smaller fish and that of lower quality is simply spread on mats on the ground; while larger and better varieties are tied pairs and hung up. In both ways, the fish has to be taken in for the night and monitored for the dryness which accounts for a great part of the labour.

seeds (*Penaeus monodon*). Almost daily[142] and on a massive scale. I am now turning to the third pattern of fish work, the collection of *bāgdā* or *mīn* (most often transcribed as *meen*) as it is locally mainly called. In contrast to other forms of fish work, *mīn* collection has not been introduced here by *bāṅgāl* refugees, but followed from a burgeoning global demand for tiger prawns and the introduction of aquacultures close to Kolkata. It has become ubiquituous as the large-scale production of tiger prawns still depended on live prawn seed to be inserted into aquacultures and, thus, the collection thereof along the estuaries and coasts.

Fishing for *mīn* consisted, basically, of two procedures. The harvesting of the prawn seeds with nets in shallow waters; and the (at least) equally time-consuming sorting out and counting of the fragile catch. Both procedures could certainly be pursued by one and the same person. In that case the person would traverse back and forth between the fishing in waist-deep waters and counting at land. Single women – either unmarried, abandoned, widowed or left temporarily back by migrating husbands – not infrequently worked alone: Accentuating, thus, the plights of those left behind by men following labour migrations (see also Massey 2009). More often, however, the work was shared in pairs – be it couples or kin related women – and utilizing a larger netting to be pulled through the waters with two bamboo poles tied to their respective endings.

These practices had their seasonal fluxes, too. For the quantity of the catch was thought to rise with the increasing force of the waters pushing in. Therefore, the rainy season was the most promising one. Within each season, the spring tides were deemed to be the most promising. The shores were populated and depopulated with the rhythms of the moon. Anticipating later chapters, this beneficent, promising role of the full moon – enforcing the tides and signalling good catches – stood in a tension to other, more threatening layers of meaning.

With only few investments needed (netting and a few cheap canisters to sort and sell the catch) as well as the steady demand in distant aquafarms, the promise of the *mīn* trade for poor individuals and households becomes immediately clear. Particular among landless islanders it emerged at present as one crucial and often fundamental strategy to eke out a living.[143] And equally so throughout most of Bengal's coastal parts (Jalais 2010a). The recent implosion of prices nothwithstanding. This boom, however, did not spring alone from the little capital, skills

[142] The time when the earth is thought to menstruate (from the seventh to eleventh day of *āṣāṛh* [June-July]), was one of the very few occasions when the collection of prawn seeds was totally on hold.

[143] In fact, only the residents of two houses in the colony pursued *mīn* harvesting as their single livelihood strategy. They were the only who fished in shallow waters on the coast even in periods when *mīn* fishing was generally abstained from due to unpromising weather conditions.

needed nor the stable demands. But also from the rather anarchic logistic organization of the trade; and the, generally speaking, comparatively loose social restrictions applied. The latter relates mainly to gendered notions. While estuarine and marine fishing has been strictly limited to men, the fishing of *mīn* was often and, at times, foremost pursued by women and girls. Not simply being a means of survival, it has become one of the few means available to earn cash beyond the risky and humiliating labour as servant in middle class households. Enabling a greater deal of economic independence, this dynamic is counterweighted, in a sense, by a widespread distrust and distaste levelled against the practice. Locally I repeatedly became aware of depreciations and humiliations involved. The imageries of manliness and proper conduct of work were clearly intermingled: *mīn* collections were seen as unmanly, as not really fishing, the rather un-risky nature of the business and, of course, the strong involvement of women. Similarly, approaches by regional civil society groups aiming to address environmental unsustainability were in themselves ripe with references to greed fanning, as it were, the boom.[144] Stepping beyond unnecessary accusations of greed, the unsustainability of *mīn* collection and prawn cultivation goes without saying. Due to technique and precise location, *mīn* collection doubtlessly spells environmental disaster. The shallow coastal waters of subtropical delta figure as hatching areas for numerous varieties of fish. Intensive fishing with extremely fine-meshed nettings does in these zones translate not into the interruption of reproductive cycles of a hardly measurable number of fishes, crabs, prawns and so on and ensuing food chains (D. Bandyopadhyay 2000, 3927).[145]

6.4. Labour Migrations

To ensure survival, labour relations have not bee not limited to the locality or to riches of the sea, but have spread out into distant parts of the subcontinent itself. As yet another mobility, it followed its own logic and trajectory. It did not replicate or invert earlier migrations and lead into other regions. Here, as in many other comparable contexts, the patterns of mobility have to

[144] Characteristic are, therefore, phrases as 'the ready availability of cash' and 'the living dollars of the Sundarbans' (see Jalais 2010a, 5).

[145] In their attempt to quantify the immediate damages, the marine biologists Bhattacharya and Sarkar arrive at the stark estimates. They note (Bhattacharya and Sarkar 2003, 73), "[...] that in order to catch 9586 tiger prawn seeds, collectors destroy approximately 1 562 862 juveniles of other prawn species, 56 000 fishes, 1.9 million crabs, 8000 mollusks and a huge bulk of holoplankters (copepods, chaetognaths, mysids, lucifers etc.) and meroplankters (megalopa, alima and anomuran larvae)."

be distinguished along the lines of gender. Female islanders have been moving mostly along pre-existing networks into urban middle class households to take up positions as domestic help. Tight relations between employers and employees were understood as leading to a greater sense of security on both ends. On one hand, thence, urban employers tried to manage rampant fears of thievery servants[146] through the control supposedly entailed in tight relations of kith and kin. Among sending families, on the other hand, the notion of lasting relations and an often enough fictive ability to accurately locate the workspace was used to evoke a sense of security, too. Both, as security for the women sent and to uphold a sense of honour through the fictive extension of patriarchal control.

Lacking infrastructure effectively negated the much more respectable and confident commuting into urban households as it is daily undertaken by large numbers of women from other parts of the Sundarbans (see A. Roy 2003).[147] Against this background, female work migrations involved the nacessity to stay in the employing household – circumstances that entailed hazards and humiliations. The migrations remained, thus, tied to notions of powerlessness. Sending families had no choice but to send women and were depending on the money earned. To be sure, as maids in urban households the women had certainly neither not remained powerless, nor simply objects of distinction (R. Ray and Qayum 2009). Yet, these migratory patterns remained much less visible than male labour migrations precisely, I suggest, due to the humiliations and powerlessness involved.

The highly visible male migrations, in contrast, unfolded along fundamentally different relations and networks. The majority of those who move into volatile and short-term contracts did so as earth movers and unskilled construction workers (subsumed as *māṭi kāṭi*), lending a further layer to the significance earthwork had locally.

[146] The imagery of thievery servants certainly has been troubling Kolkata's middle classes for a long time. Virculation in rumours, but they translated into and are fed by countless news items in English speaking, read middle class newspapers. Fed by ubiquitous rumours and news items in the papers, the imagery illuminates, as Ray and Qayum rightly conclude, a sense of discontent in the postcolonial present (2009). At the heart of it, they argue, lies the realization of the evaporation of an imagined order resting on the reliability of service relations and mutual trust across the classes.

[147] Based on a multi-sited ethnography among commuters moving back and forth between city and the central Sundarbans, Ananya Roy shows that the sorry state of suburban trains allows for economic viability of commuting (A. Roy 2003). It has become direly depended on by the commuting poor throughout all the inconveniences and harassments involved. She shows that the sheer density of human bodies crammed into these trains, marred with inattentive ticket inspectors – largely skipping their duty –, make it relatively easy to catch free rides regularly. And, thus, to keep a larger share of wage. The private busses and rather tightly controlled ferry points between Sāgar and the mainland are an effective impediment to free rides and, hence, to commute daily. Generalizing, the constellation of governmental neglect and the possibilities for marginalized populations rooted precisely therein mirrors the practice of squatting along the embankments.

Crucial for these networks have been the notorious middle men (*kantraktar*); and the wide spread use of mobile phones.[148] Serving as an entry point into the market of labour, the middlemen were in themselves also the greatest danger.[149] The details of the contract, the actual work and workload as well as hidden costs (food, accommodation, charges for meal preparation etc.) were always named, yet remained uncertain whenever the workers migrate to a new site. While the cost for travelling had to be borne by the labourers anyway, the actual payment of wages was very often delayed, reduced or they were cheated altogether.[150] To reduce risks and counter powerlessness, men travelled mostly in groups (see also Schendel and Faraizi 1984, 55; Mosse, Gupta, and Shah 2005).

Only a small number of older men followed labor migrations into more specialized, long-term arrangements. Being considerable less risky and better paid, the latter men spent a few months each year in the same place. These long-term relations involved a greater amount of contractual obligations and skills achieved (see Schendel and Faraizi 1984). Long-term relations unanimously involved, thus, employments as skilled labour (*rājmistrī*), in industrial livestock breeding[151] and rarely also into trade enterprises.

Interestingly, the *melā* and the encompassing pilgrim traffic served as a crucial node within the national circuits of middlemen and labour demand, too. Relations followed often from employments on the *melā* grounds where, as I have noted, external *kantraktar* facilitated considerable assignments. Other relations were established during individual pilgrimages by middlemen themselves. A third, equally widespread figuration involved stints from entrepreneurial individuals who used the touristic facilities of Gaṅgāsāgar to access a region widely known for its abundance in cheap labour.

Beyond the exploitation, risks and income generation, the journeys to distant labour markets offered, finally, possibilities to sidestep social control, to indulge in pleasures of the city and to

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[148] While the spread of mobile phones across rural India is frequently invoked by politicians as a stepping stone of economic development, this remains highly uneven (see also Tenhunen 2009; Doron and Jeffrey 2013). The evidence from Gaṅgāsāgar shows, for instance, that mobile phones have only influenced, but not fundamentally changed centuries-old survival strategy of labour migrations. The assurance of work and contracts facilitated by the communications has replaced older arrangements only to make demands, routes and networks more swift and flexible. Yet, uncertainties and exploitations remained.

[149] Actually, however, the boundaries between middlemen and friends were much more flexible than the term and its usage suggests: islanders quite often made arrangements for friends and others to follow suit, to find employment where they found one themselves and, of course, keep a share.

[150] Many of my interlocutors had experienced disappearing middlemen and the cheating of wages. Others complained about the shuffling back and forth of responsibilities between the middlemen and the actual employees – and assumed these to be staged ones only to maximize profits.

[151] To what degree ethnic stereotypes have shaped these long-term relation cannot be answered along the research design of this thesis. Against the high number of employments of Muslim men in what was called ‘chicken farms’ (using the English term) this seems to be not entirely unfounded.

spend the money earned on conspicuous consumptions. Recent analyses have shown that labour migrations certainly are experienced as heterotopic moments by, at least, some of its subjects: as opportunities of amorous adventures (Shah 2011) or as temporary escape from rigid social structures and into more egalitarian orders (Strümpell 2008).[152] Taken together with the constraints of life on the island's edges, it is hardly surprising that a considerable number of migrants simply do not return. In fact, the large number of widows in other parts of the Sundarbans – often cited to indicate the deadly threats men encounter in their struggles to make ends meet (see e.g. Chowdhury et al. 2008, 65 – 71; S. C. Sarkar 2010, 11) – seems on contemporary Sāgar to be replaced by a large number of wives left by their husbands while working 'outside' (*bideś*). Those staying behind have been constantly worrying about their kith and kin: be it because of the dangers involved or because of temptations and perceived moral vices of distant work sites. In either case, such worries were powerfully shaping the imagination of the elsewhere, too.

To this another hazardous dimension has to be added – indeed, it is little less than the underbelly of labour migrations. Here I am referring to the mobilities and largely silenced experiences of women married off to distant parts in Northern India. In line with a general trend of coastal Bengal, a considerable number of women from the Colony had been married off to regions around Delhi and Aligarh without dowry. The lack in women in one place – due to widespread abortions of female foeti – and the inability to pay dowry on the other end coalesced into perilous, translocal marriage arrangements (see also Blanchet 2005). Marriage networks, then, parallelled the networks of labour migrations: Opportunities had been arising through labour networks and several interlocutors tried to hold on to a sense of control by insisting that they were visiting their daughters during labour mobilities. Yet, these particular circuits were only reluctantly talked about and elusive.

6.5. Summary: Volatile Resilience

In this chapter I have shown that work relations emerge as a complex and inconclusive field. Economic strategies are marked by flexibility and seasonal rhythms much more than by neat

[152] Rather than fulfilling the socialist dreams of thorough egalization in and through industrial projects, these examples draw their powers particular from the temporally and spatial deviation. A moment of liberalization, both authors note, is contained in the spaces of labour and is explicitly hindered from being introduced into the workers' villages – villages that are deemed as morally superior.

social distinctions. The practice of deep sea fishing seems to be the only exception here: it has been guarded by rigid gendered norms and avoided by a small number of residents on what appears to be ritual grounds. All other work relations were engaged across social distinctions. While this seemed to pose little tensions, the fishing of *mīn* emerged as of a somewhat troubling nature. It involved few risks, was continuously striding the edge between land and water and, finally, not fully appropriated to gendered norms. Its inherent ambivalences feed, I suggest, into powerful depreciations articulated along tropes of improper conduct, greed and destructions.

That being said, the flexibility and seasonal sequence of work relations account for the persistence of local societies on these hazardous, shrinking coasts. Throughout the struggles and risks involved, these diverse patterns make survival possible (see also Stonich 1993, 126 – 150); and allow, for the moment and for large parts of the islanders, to not flee to the cities as the alarming rhetoric of the 'climate refugee' has it. The opposite seems to be the case: in all its fragility and vulnerability, the locality emerges a node in networks; as imbued with social ties and potentials; and a place of shared identities rooted also in the very practice of work. As such the marginal fringes are not only vulnerable, but offer means to engage the uncertain present and its bleak futures.

The fragments of social vulnerabilities and resilience introduced so far are, furthermore, bound up in tension. To engender social resilience, extremely risky work relations have been taken up. This applies, among others, to the risk for survival involved deep sea fishing or the grave risk for physical integrity and honour as domestic servant. in Conversely, some of the practices outlined do only further social-ecological deterioration even while they entail a sense of resilience in the present. Today's social resilience may translate therefore into greater vulnerability across wider temporal scales. This applies not only to the heavy overfishing of the Bay, but also to the ongoing transformation of the island as agricultural space. For the very settlement patterns enhance the vulnerability to floods or the encroaching sea. In the following chapter I will engage these dynamics and the texture of the disaster.

7. What is the Disaster? And when?

An enormous discrepancy on the nature of disasters lurks between global and regional perceptions, on one hand, and local perceptions, on the other. This is related, I argue, to the temporal and spatial pattern of cumulative processes experienced as disasters. To make sense of these, I will now outline their texture and ontological state within localized lifeworlds.

To do so, I have at first to step, figuratively put, one step backwards and ask out of a greater distance: What is a disaster locally? What is its temporal structure and how is it inserted into the perception of everyday life or its suspension? To find an answer to these questions, 'temporalizing' notions of the punctual disaster, of gradual disasters and, ultimately, the future or utopian disasters will form the starting point.

7.1. Storms, large and small

Storms figure prominently in accounts of environmental hazards in the Global South. Out of the various kinds of storms troubling Bengal,[153] only subtropical storms and cyclones concern me here.

As distinct meteorological formations, tropical storms and full-grown cyclones emerge in the deep sea. Both, in terms of appearance and force the Bay of Bengal emerged as a global hotspot (Nath, Roy, and Thingbaijam 2008; Flather 2009, 78). Subtropical storms generally emerge here throughout the year, yet are concentrated in the months of and after the rainy season.[154]

When in the heat of summer the sun warms up the water's upper layers, pressure fields emerge in the air above that may develop into proper storms (*jhaṛ*), which in turn may develop fully

[153] The first one being the 'Nor' Westers' or 'Kāl Baisākhi'. They occur mostly in early summer and therefore in a much more limited timeframe as the cyclones. Not only is their season comparatively short, but their lifespan and actual dimension is, too. Developing quite often into violent hailstorms that bring considerable damage to crops and houses, each Kal Baisakhi affects only very limited regions, and leaves as quick and surprising as it showed up. Their very unpredictability as well as the fall in temperature they bring in an otherwise hot and dry season, is related to the ambivalent character these particular storms enjoy in popular Bengali conceptions. They are, to cut a fascinating connection between rain and love or life in Bengali prose short, talked and written about in a ways that highlights irresponsibility and childishness. 'Nor' Westers' appear, therefore, clearly distinct from the imageries that mere rain evokes in much of Bengal's popular culture. For rain is used as a motif to invoke separation from the lover as well as to address the awkward similarity of joy and pain of longing. The latter pervades, what has been called, Bengal's 'rain poetry' (Choudhuri 2012).

[154] In a review of historical data covering the interval between 1851 and 1950, Bandyopadhyay showed (K. K. Bandyopadhyay 1990) that most cyclones hit West Bengal's coast in the month of October (16.7%), November (14.9%) and July (14.7%).

into cyclones (*ghūrṇijhaṛ*, *baṛa jhaṛ*).[155] Since in localized speech both varieties are mainly referred to simply as storms, I will follow suit and use the designator 'storm' throughout this thesis also for what meteorologists would frame as a cyclone.

Localized perceptions of storms are exceptional in many ways. Not only have storms been interpreted rather uniformly, but also through a decidedly western-modern perspective. Certainly, exceptions and discursive variations made themselves felt and I will unravel them in due course. The influence of latter explanations rests most likely not only in the long-standing signifance awarded to cyclones in colonial and postcolonial disaster mitigation, but is related also the very space where storms are understood to originate. To islanders the remote deep sea has been largely irrelevant for everyday affairs, (so far) politically unproblematic and only marginally integrated into localized environmental relations. It is, in other words, only loosely integrated into cultural appropriations of nature and it's terrors.

While it is most likely true that cyclones unleash their force most visible and devastating only with landfall, they also affect marine ecosystems and severely also, of course, seafaring activities. In this connection, cyclones have been woven throughout mythic accounts: less than a danger, but rather as decisive incidents catapulting travellers to unknown shores.[156] Mythic accounts aside, today only particular fishworkers dare the sea. But since the lucrative months of deep sea fishing coincide with the better part of the storm season, the effects of storms on society begin, so to say, long before they actually make their landfall. It is precisely here, I argue, that cyclones make their most dreaded impact on the islanders.

Upon landfall, storms affect whole social-ecological systems and entire landscapes, albeit within a short interval of time. Being of a large spatial magnitude and tremendous force, the event is a matter of hours or days at worst. This might be an obvious point, but the eventfulness and the production of a collectivity of survivors – routed, as it were, along social vulnerabilities – sets storms clearly aside from the texture of that other disaster, the erosions.[157]

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[155] Once generated, they follow either a northern route to the Eastern parts of India and Bangladesh, while fewer take a western route toward the southern part of India (Islam and Peterson 2009).

[156] Obvious examples would be the role of the sea in coastal Bengal's most widely known mythological narratives. The figure of Chand Saudagar is one famous example. Appearing in the Manasā Maṅgal as refusing to worship the snake goddess Manasā and as father of Behulā (see Chapter 9.2.2.), he is depicted as a seaborne merchant who is catapulted by storms across the sea.

[157] Each storm's destruction of live, things, assets, and so on has to be understood as a function of its own characteristics (force, time of the day, time of the year, direction), as well as those social, political and ecological figurations, shorthanded as social vulnerability. Regarding storms and cyclonic activity, social vulnerability is by most of the existing literature dealt with (see e.g. S. Bandyopadhyay 1994; Nath, Roy, and Thingbaijam 2008) in terms of early warning systems, suitable built environments and survival or the so-called livelihoods in the wake of destructive storms.

As well adapted as mud houses locally are, with respect to intense storms and cyclones they are not thought to be safe by any means. Yet, the advice to take refuge in concrete houses – such as those of the wealthy, of schools or of storm shelters – seems on many islands of the Sundarbans to be rather pointless, if not cynical. For such safer constructions are very often non-existent, in a dismal state or too far between. Southern Sāgar and especially Gaṅgāsāgar with its many concrete temples and facilities to accommodate large numbers of pilgrims is a significant exception in coastal Bengal.

But even in Gaṅgāsāgar where the storm warnings could be meaningfully translated into action – i.e. flee into multi-storied concrete buildings to avoid the force of storms and storm surges – their creditibility is highly contested.

Not simply growing out of a – how it was repeatedly called – 'fatalistic mind-set',[158] the dismissal of Indian warnings and often also, I was told, of Bangladeshi news, is related to, what appears to be a history of rather mild storms. Or, to approach the problem from another angle, the workings of a particular forgetfulness and cultural adaptation.

With two notable exceptions, my interlocutors were hardly remembering cyclones hitting Sāgar island. Of course, there were the distant, yet very lively memories of the Midnapur Cyclone that had rolled over coastal Bengal more than 70 years ago and that I will have to engage in much greater detail in a later chapter. On the other hand, there was the fresh memory of cyclone Aila which made its landfall in May 2009 right on Sāgar island. But beyond these, so it seemed, there was little to remember. Or if anything to remember than rather the absence of disastrous events; a 'disaster gap', as the environmental historian Christian Pfister (2009) has labelled a similar phase in his work on Swiss history. But was it really a gap?

Based on scientific data, the Indian Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has calculated that tropical cyclones hit the immediate vicinity of Sāgar island on average every three years (see also Hazra 2012, 8). These numbers resonate with the accounts of other scientists and are very well in line with the long history of dramatic cyclones. Framed by the very different, yet vividly remembered events of 1942 and 2009 respectively, in conversations with islanders, traces of two further cyclones surfaced. One being a cyclone that roughly struck in 1985 and, another, even hazier cyclone that was remembered by several residents as having caused

[158] Tied to ideas of tradition, fixity and resistance to change, the notion of fatalism has for long decades dominated the perception of rural India and the theorization of its peasantry in particular. Early works by Oscar Lewis, Robert Redfield triggered debates across the social sciences that eventually arrived at the deconstruction of a supposed inertia (see i.e. Harvey and Reed 1996; Wadley 2008). Yet these notions continue to have a powerful hold on the popular imagination and the dealings of the state with its rural subjects (Akhil Gupta 2012).

suffering some five years before Aila. Both remained nameless and somewhat formless – not shrouded in mystery, so to say, but rather thinned out by forgetfulness. It was simply, I was told on repeated inquiries, that there was not much to tell: they were just storms.

On one hand, do these scant memories mirror Bankoff's elaboration on disasters in the Philippines (2003). Here, too, storms or cyclones appear to be 'frequent life experiences'. Localized societies emerge as well adapted – both, in terms of survival and in terms of perceptions and expectations. Storms are, as was commonly observed, simply an integral part of living on Bengal's coasts and part of the seasonal routine. While several of these had translated into immense suffering, many others obviously had not. At least, not on a societal scale.

Attached to the conception of their regularity, two further localized perceptions of storms have to be noted. One pertains to the dimensions of morality, theodicy and surveillance often closely intertwined with living through disasters. Only extremely few Hindus related storms to the *cākrā* of the god Viṣṇu and pointed to moral dimensions of why he had sent it.[159] On very general terms they blamed, for instance, nudity in media or the neglect to follow proper marriage rules as misdemeanours that were to be punished. That being said, the vast majority explicitly denied the dimension of punishment. Pariman Bebā, for instance, claimed:

> "It is a thing from God (*uparvālā*), but why he sent it I do not know … But it is not a punishment. How could it be a punishment when it is affecting everybody in the same way? In this way nobody would know who is punished."

Her claim stands in for many others. It illustrates nicely that precisely by virtue of its large scale and, what appear to be generalized effects, storms were perceived as unrelated to personal wrongdoings of any kind. The same applies to large floods. For – so the subtext goes – to be a form of communication, the recipient needs to be identifiable. But, again, religious explanations of the *occurrence* of storms and floods were not uniformly shared among the islanders (see Chapter 9). Most relied on scientific imagery and not everybody accommodated these with transcendental dimensions.

Another, widely shared assumption related to the effects and consequences storms have for localized society. Throughout the partly considerable economic difficulties and social conflicts storms may unleash on given localities, they were, ultimately, not understood to be truly

[159] Viṣṇu's *cākra* is – as Hindu conceptions have it – one of his weapons. It is understood to be basically a fast-turning wheel that he spins around one of his fingers, ready to be thrown at his enemies. Its very form (fast-turning and being pierced by a hole) certainly resembles the shape of cyclones.

disastrous in themselves. The prevailing sentiment had it that roofs may burst, trees fall and livestock perish, but these damages were all more or less easily undone. Hhouses could be rebuilt, trees replaced and livestock newly arranged for. All that meant hard labour and drawn-out struggles, but it was possible. While, so it was directly or indirectly implied, the erosions could not be countered so easily – could actually not be countered at all.

While erosions seemed to be situated on another register, the storms were nevertheless tightly related to the advances of land loss, to the actualities of shrinkages. For storms and cyclones were known to dramatically accelerate the erosions at the islands' outer shores: erosions advanced, as I will show, through localized, contained flooding following embankment collapses. More embankments collapsed during storms; similarly has more mud been washed away by rough waters during storms. Therefore it is necessary to distinguish analytically between two different spheres of storm impact: destruction of things and lives through the storms brute force or the absence of shelter on one hand; which is set against the shrinkage of the landscape on the other. Conceptually differentiated, they are still closely connected. It is precisly here that storms were unleashing their frightful potential: not as themselves nor through the destruction of property, but through their intensification of embankment collapses and erosions. It is characteristic for the localized encounters with and perceptions of tropical storms that the two fragmentarily remembered cyclones (1985 and 2004) were both remembered as events that caused embankment collapses and, hence, intrusions by brackish waters. They were remembered not as storms alone and also not predominantly in the imagery of storms, but rather in the imagery of coastal erosions. That, and not the possible destruction of houses, livestock or trees, is what made them memorable. Against this background, I will now turn to localized encounters with and meanings of floods.

7.2. Floods, large and small

Floods are an integral part of large river systems and especially so in South Asia, where most of the annual rainfall occurs in the, only three month long, rainy season. Being mostly without rain for the remaining year, South Asian agricultural cycles have adapted to these floods and do in fact 'traditionally' depend on them. Since centuries, swollen rivers and flooded landscapes have been a manifestation of enough water to manage water intense paddy cultivation. Similarly, immense silt-laden floodwaters have been valorized as an important part of local fertilization schemes.

But while rains, swelling rivers and certain floods were so much welcomed that they are widely used as metaphors for love and prosperity in regional literary traditions (see e.g. Mallabarman 1993; Choudhuri 2012), other flood types are feared. Throughout rural Bengal, normal, annual floods (*barṣā*) are differentiated from destructive floods (*banyā*). According to localized conditions, the respective timing, depth and duration of the floods determines to which category they belong to. Writing on Bangladesh, the geographers Harun Rasid and Bimal Kanti Paul (1987, 168) observe:

> "The normal annual flood is an ideal event that commences at the right time, lasts for the right duration and has the right magnitude […]. Thus, three types of floods – early, late floods and abnormally deep floods – can cause serious damage to crops as the deviate from the normal flood. A fourth type, a prolonged flood that commences prior to the early limit and recedes after the end limit, may also cause extensive damage."

But as the river approaches the sea, agricultural consequences and perceptions of floods change dramatically. This relates to the tidal flux and, thus, to the increasing salinity of the water. How far the tides reach up the river and, thus, how salty the water is, depends on the timing of the day, the season and, most importantly, the overall condition of the estuarine complex. At the mouths of the dying Hugli estuary, the water is always extremely harmful to crops.

This general destructiveness of floods is reflected in an absence of the otherwise widely used term for a normal, a good flood (*barṣā*) on the coastal islands. In everyday relations, floods here are always spoken of in terms of the dangerous variety (*banyā*), which is subdivided into sky flood (*ākāsh banyā*), that is, waterlogging after intense rain, and river flood (*nadi banyā*). While ā*kāsh banyā* were seen as having no destructive potential, they were not beneficial either: excess rain water does not nourish the soil and can efficiently be flushed during ebb tide. The haphazard *nadi banyā*, on the other hand, was, then again, subdivided into two forms that are not neatly conceptually divided: the floods after storm surges; and the normalized inundations of particular strips of land behind collapsed embankments. Thus, after each flood the fields remain unfit to cultivate until the ensuing rains have washed enough salt out: rendering harvests impossible, thus, for at least one season.[160] In their respective ways, these floods are tied to workings of coastal erosion, yet the latter normalized and uneventful flood is the more characteristic as it affects the coasts ceaselessly.

[160] Only fields that were rather mildly affected by floods before the onset of the rains may bear fruits in the same year – granted the rains affect a sufficient flushing and, thus, a sweetening of the respecting plots.

7.3. Boundless Disasters: On the Workings of Erosions

Shrinking landscapes entail more than the destruction of livelihoods: they are, literally, the evaporation of multidimensional resources, the vanishing of places. Yet, as potentially boundless chains of chronic occurrences, 'only' interspersed with eventful moments of heightened erosions – e.g. storm surges breaching weakened embankments in their fury – coastal erosions fall beyond the conventional disaster imageries. Emerging as an existential threat of its own kind – eating away the ground under one's feat – coastal erosions have a complex and baffling, even paradox temporality. The difficulties unfold, I argue, through the boundlessness and dispersal of the erosions; their predictability; and, finally, their ambivalent implications in events. In outlining these complexities, I will engage the particularities of this 'disaster' as well as its challenges to environmental theory.

7.3.1. Chronicity

Broadly speaking, two patterns of coastal erosions have to be distinguished – patterns that involve distinct experiences and account for partially divergent interpretations and narrations. One refers to, what is locally called, high land (*ucca jāygā*) and, therefore, to lands having risen beyond the high tide line (see Figure 9). Here the shores have taken the form of slopes which are slowly and continuously eroded by the river. As the river is gnawing at the land, loosened or undermined portions may break in chunks at any time. Although the greater force of the river during seasonal peaks translated into increased land loss, the erosions on high lands were less predictable than the second type. At its worst, the river had been undermining large chunks of land leading to instantenous collapse. In due course, several of my interlocutors had to witness

Figure 9. Erosion of 'high land'

whole fields being sucked away in, what appeared to them, as one single moment. While these transformations were uniequivocally framed as horrifyingly swift, they had still been announced by cracks in the land and loud noises. For these reasons as well as, of course, due to effective localized knowledge, even large collapses translated only extremely rarely into deaths. Yet, the landscape has been perceived as changing dramatically in a small time frame.

To illuminate the prolongued effects on everyday life unfolding in the shadow of eroding slopes, I will briefly turn to the present village of Bāghpārā on Ghoṛāmārā's northern shore. Writing of Bāghpārā, I have to tread an awkward tense: still existing by name, the character of the village has been changed tremendously through the twin dynamics of coastal erosions and ensuing small-scale mobilities within the confines of the village. Dramatically eroding, today's ruins of the village are more than ever a node in various patterns of mobility, with the ongoing relations to those who managed to secure a plot in one of the Colony being among them. Following personal relations and stories, I repeatedly visited Bāghpārā and it became an important node in the landscape of my research.

Many of those who had lost their land to the waters in the last few years and decades, had to move Bāghpārā. To them it had become an interim endpoint, an ephemeral 'home' in unfolding, contingent patterns of mobility. While labour migrations marked the present and envisioned resettlements loomed on the future horizon, the settlements here were enfolded in a migratory past. To be more precise: in capricious patterns of departure and arrival. I will unravel these patterns in the next chapter. For the moment, I will engage the immediate past that washed them to Bāghpārā's edge where they are now.

Today's guise of Bāghpārā – a dense conundrum of huts so untypical for the Sundarbans (see A. Banerjee 1998) –, is rooted in the obsolescence of a risk aversing strategy altogether crucial for the organization of the Bengal delta. That is, the fragmentation of lands into dispersed plots and along kinship relations. This fragmentation is frequently framed as main impediment to development and as reason for economic stagnation and rural poverty. Economists have argued that the fragmentation would hinder labour efficiency as long distances had to be crossed to reach the field; or that it would hinder capitalization as the spread of fields called for diverse crops and not the monocultures deemed necessary for a good position to compete in global markets. To the contrary, the fragmentation of lands has been shown to actually be a strategy "[…] to counter poverty […]" (Schendel and Faraizi 1984, 33). Throughout Bengal, long distances and varieties of soil conditions between fields as well as diverse crops have actually proven to be well adapted to hazardous conditions. Floods, for instance, hardly ever affect

dispersed plots in the same devastating way; uncertainties of the market could be countered through crops variety; and the fragmentation has been a means to extend agriculture into remaining ‘wastelands’. Since these strategic diversification and extension rested firmly in large families and, to be more precise, many sons, the increase in population was rather a stepping stone than a stumbling block (see also Randeria 2006a). However, the strategy reached its limits with the decreasing availability of land to be cleared. With fewer and ultimately no jungles available to drain, clear and transform into fields, risk could be less efficiently averted and population became a pressure on localized societies in the first place.

Confronted with shrinking landscapes, the fragmentation of land holdings emerged as useful yet again. Although it did not help to avoid impoverishment, it still helped to slow down its effects and to keep the looming threat of landlessness in check for a time. With outer plots vanishing in the water, affected families could, in the beginning at least, move their homestead onto interior plots and survive with crops harvested in a safe distance from salty tides. Today, after several decades of dramatic erosions, with large groups of landless populating the island and with no jungles to cut, the risk aversion strategy of fragmentation has ceased to be effective. More and more victims of erosions have seen all their land vanishing and have had to seek shelter elsewhere. In contemporary Bāghpārā, many had no other choice but to stick to what little is left from the village; and thus to settle in heightened density in the most hazardous zones of Bāghpārā: its centre positioned at present right on the crumbling shore. In doing so, the villagers have been relying on a sense of belonging, solidarities and a tolerated illegality to navigate the ruinations. Added, as it were, by strategic bets on future resettlements which could be claimed, as it was perceived, only by those staying aback.

figure 10. Erosion of 'low land'

That being said, I will now turn to the second type of coastal erosion encountered along the Sāgar island group. Young as the islands are by any geological standard, most of it remains to be made up of, what is locally called, low land (*nicu jāygā*). That is, land below the high tides and often even below the mean sea level. Therefore, it has to be hidden behind higher embankments keeping the waters of spring tides and, at worst, even of diurnal tides out.

Along these lowlying shores, the waters attack the embankments and cause eventually breaches in particularly endangered zones (see Figure 10). The breaches occur mostly during the fortnightly spring tides and during the rains when the water reaches overall higher levels and is generally rougher. In these hazardous times, the tidal waters push in strongest and meet swollen, rain-fed rivers. During the rainy seasons, several of the islands' embankments seemed to collapse almost inevitably (see also Danda 2007, 51 – 63; Mukhopadhyay 2009).

Among the various endangered stretches of Sāgar, Botkhāli has currently been affected worst. A large part of the village disappeared during the last few years into the ocean, following the fate of Biśvālākṣmīpur village that once was located between Botkhāli and the shore (see also Māitī 2008, 101). The complete disappearance of Botkhāli has, therefore, become a very real threat. To briefly engage its ruined present will help to better understand the texture the disaster, as it was experienced at present and as it had been suffered throughout preceding decades by most displaced islanders.

I visited the ruins of Botkhāli for the first time shortly after cyclone Aila's landfall in May 2009. By then it resembled a warscape. Not only in, what seemed to be, its directionality toward that edge lurking and marking an embattled zone (see also Lewin 2006), but in the particularities of the destruction. Surely, the cyclone was freshly imprinted onto the landscape – it had arguably hit Botkhāli harder than any other spot on Sāgar. But over the months and years I realized that the cyclone had been but a severe incident in a long chain of devastations; and that the ruination characterized the everyday.

Due to repeated embankment collapse – occurring at least yearly and in bad years even more often – the sea water had reached deep into the village. Between a collapse and a closure achieved with the erection of a new embankment, the tides have been entering the village with all the force they possess on this sea-facing shore. Waters gush in and waves roll; fields turn brackish and the heightened grounds on which formerly houses were erected are washed away. In May 2009, when Aila passed by, the comparatively low storm tide still broke through the embankment and flooded the villages beyond Botkhāli. Having been washed out in May – that is, well before the dangerous rainy season – and having been rebuilt only more than a year later, the village lay literally open to the spring tides of the ensuing months and was rebuilt again only more than a year later. Almost the whole area of Botkhāli has therefore been repeatedly flooded and agricultural activities proved impossible throughout my fieldwork between 2009 and 2011. The explicit consequences of dramatic environmental changes had, on one hand, become visible in the overt devastation of buildings, patterned landscapes and trees. Most strikingly visible were the ruined houses and camp-like shelters housing their erstwhile residents on the village's streets (see figure 11). These ruinations were, furthermore, imprinted on the place itself as deep changes in the quality of lights and colours had occurred. For the brackish waters had deprived the area of almost all its vegetation as much as it had dramatically darkened the colour of the stripped earth and ponds. Turning them literally black. Thus, there was a sense of doom enveloping the shattered remains of Botkhāli. Less subtle than Rachel Carson's influential invocation of silence as absence of life (Carson 1962), the present landscape was marked by a tangible 'negative presence' (Nixon 2009, 459; Stoler 2008).

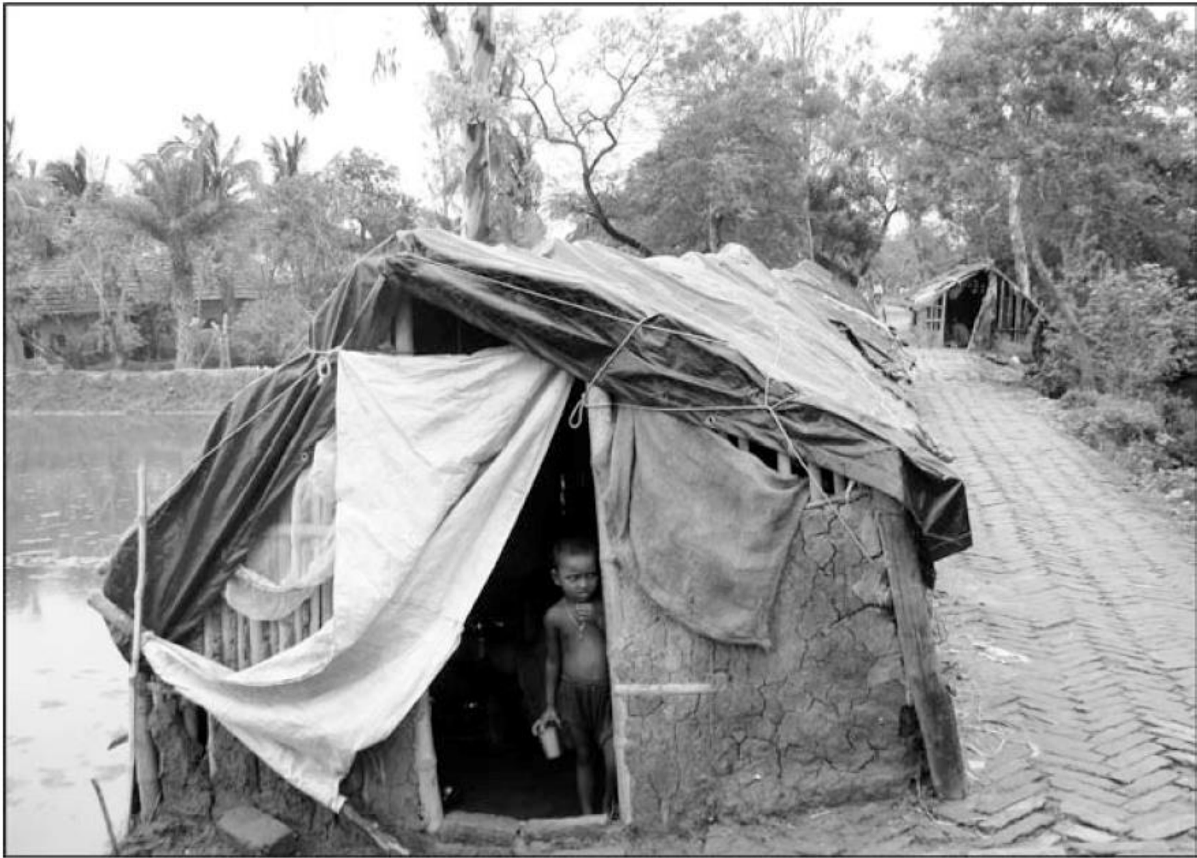

Figure 11. Living on the Road in Botkhāli (photo taken by Partha Kayal)

Against this background it comes to little surprise that mobility had become a pervasive everyday strategy to live with the shrinkages. Beyond ubiquituous circular labour migrations, a considerable number had left for good. Several wealthy villagers had bought land elsewhere. However, many others had been trying to gain a foothold in other localities and used the latter sites as nodes in further mobilities. As, for example, the squatters in Gaṅgāsāgar Colony had done. To ensure a place to dwell for themselves or as part of a fragmented family structure divided across various places, they had arrived on the comparably safer outer embankment of the Colony. Yet they had secured these spaces, I emphasize, at the price of intensified political dependence: their arrival was not based on place-based identities; but rather tied to micro-politics of power and patronage. They had exchanged, in other words, the vulnerabilities in a dramatically eroding village for the vulnerabilities entailed in the messy play of localized politics on safer embankments elsewhere.

Many of those who could not arrange for places in other villages were living in the ruins of Botkhāli. Several families lived in high alert in what was left of their houses on their own plots. While many others stayed on as squatters in huts lining the remaining streets. Relying on permissions to dwell in tolerated illegality and on wider solidarities, they stayed back in

extremely vulnerable condition. As so many others, they hoped for rehabilitations to eventually set in. Conversations in packed tea stalls and beyond were permeated by dire predictions and a search for strategies to level pressure on the government. The relentless struggles for a 'master plan', reaching beyond the yearly ritual to rebuild an utterly insufficient embankment; as well as the rumours of a concrete embankment only fed into the determination of some to stay back in ruined landscape. Simply because to live in the 'disaster zone' (Ethridge 2006) was seen as translating into the heightened possibility to secure modest rehabilitations by way of a piece of land. Hence, these ruined and highly vulnerable fringes of the coast emerged, too, as spaces that were depended upon to lay claims onto otherwise scarce resources.

It is noteworthy that monetary rehabilitations for those on whose ground the possible concrete embankment or the yearly wood-enforced muddy wall was to be built, has never been alluded to. In a similar vein, Amites Mukhopadhyay noted recently that this otherwise prominent mode of rehabilitation for land subjected to forcible acquisition by the state, was obviously denied when it came to the reconstruction of embankments in the Sundarbans (2009).

After these elaborations on life within zones of shrinkage, I will now turn to the texture of the disaster itself. Since several decades, a number of families lost *parts* of their land due to increased erosions during the monsoons. Furthermore, every year a number of families lost *all* what remained of their land and have become landless. While there was, therefore no clear-cut disastrous event related to larger social units, the disastrous devastations were unfolding along uninterrupted chains of events. Frayed and scattered as the shrinkages have been affecting homes and coastlines, considerable populations have in no single moment been involved. Nor were at any given moment *considerable* devastations to be noted – at least from an macroeconomic perspective. Of course, by those affected, the shrinkages have been experienced as nothing but devastating. Indeed, they had become a disaster in the sense introduced by Peter Grey and Kendrick Oliver (2004, 7), insofar as the shrinkages involved "[…] the aggregate realisation of a profound sense of cultural disruption across the members of the affected community." Yet this community had been arisen only over several years and decades: the erosions have been affecting at any given moment only single social units and narrow strips of coastline. Across a wider temporal scale, however, processual erosions involved the impoverishment and displacement of large populations, culminating, as it were, in the sinking of whole islands. Thus, as a sense of rupture and a past they have come to be shared by – what are now – huge populations.

These slow and hazardous environmental change served, I suggest, as conditions for social practices. That is, the encroachment of brackish waters and, conversely, the erosions of the land are not to be framed as a *moment* of devastation or an *interruption* of normality. But better understood as a slowly destructive, contingent normality. They amount to chronic crises related to the slow violence of environmental degradation – to use the notions introduced above (Vigh 2008; Nixon 2011). Before I turn to the very navigation of these states, I have to outline their eventfulness. It may sound paradox but, as will be shown, the chronicity has been made sense of along a series of events. Indeed, they were experienced as drastic, severe and ultimately disastrous events. Events, I hasten to add, which still seem to be too small to figure as disaster in a sociological or geographical sense of the term (cf. Rowntree 1974; Furuseth and Ives 1984). Yet, they culminate in the experience of moments lived through as rupture and dramatic losses; that condense impoverishment and suffering. In that way, the latter are decisive for the emergence of, what I understand to be, dispersed collectivities rooted in these chronic crises. On, both, the level of closely-knit groups and larger entities as islanders or displaced persons affected across temporal and spatial scales.

The slow violence of coastal erosions began to unfold, so much I could reconstruct, long before land had actually seen to be lost to the muddy waters. With the distance between one's fields and the outer embankments gradually shrinking, the future, to say the least, turned increasingly bleak. Direct economic consequences began to be felt. Threatened as the land was, it lost economic value – which made outmigration difficult for those who had no other assets or networks. Eventually agricultural productivity began to recede: the high salinity of the soil, characterizing the whole region increased even more. However, a further salinization affects the fields unevenly and quite unpredictable: it differs according to height and quality of the land; to the incursions of brackish waters onto nearby fields; and the momentarily effectiveness of counter-measures. Be this as it may, the important point is that these reductions of fertility and value had been affecting the cultivators long before the plot's very existence came to be threatened.

When the distance between river and field had literally evaporated and the divide upheld only by fragile embankments, environmental relations turned critical. Again, not so for those who saw only parts of their belongings threatened; although also they entered a downward spiral and had to accommodate the thought to be eventually caught up by the waters. At one point or another, respected individuals or groups found themselves on the outer line of the island, indeed

they marked the outer line. Their erstwhile neighbours had already been displaced. Once this happened, their everyday had become enmeshed in chronic crises.

A threshold was crossed, however, with the first flood entering one's fields or the first part of high-land fields broken away. To be expected against the horizon of wider environmental transformations and only a matter of time, the collapse meant a devastation of crops and, possibly, also things; it turned lowland fields unfit for cultivation for a period of time; and heralded, literally, the advent of coastal erosions at these fields. Beyond the immediate losses of crops or things, these collapses established environmental relations that were to prevail from now on. In most cases irreversible. From now on minute gnawing or repeated embankment failures were to affect these particular islanders continuously. Figurativelly speaking, they had arrived at the frontline. From now on they were directly worked upon by the sluggy waters, paving the way, in a sense, towards the plots further interior. In the lives of affected islanders, the erosions have in their very chronicity and criticality, thus, to be understood as enduring presence. However, within these the moments of embankment failure, of flood (*nadi banyā*) deserve critical attention: they articulate a complex entanglement of process and event that structured the texture as well as the afterlife of erosions among islanders.

In many cases, the complex temporal pattern of coastal erosion was mirrored on the household level yet again – albeit not in its boundlessness, but rather in its dispersal. Those who had no fragmented fields, experienced impoverishment as continuing process. Among the owners of fragmented plots, on the other hand, coastal erosion had not been avoided, but the experience of landlessness merely been postponed. It turned, approached differently, the experience of eroding fields into one that is laid out across years and decades; and into one that is structured by a simpler pattern of onset, losses and aftermaths. One plot, to elaborate, emerged as threatened, turned unproductive and fallow, went into the river or was, perhaps, partially transformed into the ground beneath an embankment, and ultimately lost to the waters. But with the house moved onto interior plots and with cultivation steadily in progress on other plots, life returned almost to normal: only to be affected again years later. Thus patterned, the loss of the last plot and, therefore, the moment of utter landlessness emerged as crucial, disastrous moment. With the fortunes deteriorating this event and that moment marked the beginning of dependence, the need to make a place on the side of the road and, therefore, of a heightened fragility.

The experience of erosions along patterns and through episodes remained valid also when the land owned or cultivated was all gone. Those who did not have the means to move away from

the island or to buy safer plots in the interior had, as noted above, to settle in a tolerated illegality and had to carve a place on the side of the road for themselves. I will engage the fascinating question why people remained in these volatile conditions and carved out places for them in a hazardous locality in greater detail later. For now I want to merely point out that these patterns amount to yet another entanglement of event and process of actual experiences by individuals or small scale units. Accompanying the decisive moment when the floods entered fields for the first time, the moment when the land was gone in its entirety marks, in a word, another, a second threshold to be crossed. It comes, however, to little surprise that the second moment seemed to be etched into social memories much deeper than the first.

7.3.2. Prognoses and Consequences

Predictability of coastal erosions add yet another layer to their awkward temporality. In contrast to most classic 'natural disasters', coastal erosions befall localized societies not out of nowhere. Indeed, contemporary risk society is characterized by the expectation of disaster and considerable knowledge about it (Beck 2008). Yet, the actual occurrence of triggers turning vulnerable conditions into disasters are sudden and in their precise timing most often elusive. In contrast to earthquakes, storms or destructive floods, coastal erosions in deltaic Bengal are not only part of daily life, but often precisely foretold and delimited (see also Schmuck-Widmann 2000, 153 – 160). I will turn to immediate predictions at first and only then turn to the more contested matter of an overall progress of erosions and the threat of subsidence of whole islands ultimately entailed therein.

Exact prognoses were limited to the immediate future and rest on a mutual integration of time, place and the 'nature' of currents. Walking along the embankments of Ghoṛāmārā or Botkhāli and talking one could repeatedly hear precise, dire prognoses. In uncannily calm voices, prognoses were given in what felt like standardized phrases. "This [plot] will go in [this years'] rains or in the next", stated old Pratāb Dās hinting at a neighbor's plot as we were strolling on Ghoṛāmārā's ring embankment. Countless times, threats and certainties had been bound up with each other in statements like this – underlining, as it were, inevitability and futility.

Islander's rognoses of imminent collapses rest on localized knowledge evolving around these conceptual axes of season and timing and are enriched by temporal layer pointing to preceding erosions, their speed and timings (see Schmuck-Widmann 2000).

Individual prognoses reflected on the position of the land within the currents; the latter's speed, velocity and the presence of swirls; as well as on the composition of the soil in the respective position. Expected scenarios could differ considerably, both in the mechanisms attributed and the temporal patterns implied. Two examples will help to illustrate.

On the banks of Ghoṛāmārā where high land prevails, for one, the speed of water flows and the quality of the respective soil types is emphasized. Particularly those zones that are directly hit by outflowing tides or building the flanks for these powerful currents are obviously threatened and expected to erode quick. To be more precise, the northern and north-western areas of the island. However, the greatest velocity of the river is most often located in its intermediate layers and not in the uppermost, visible layers. With the speed also the effects were expected to be most dramatic in these deeper layers. Along threatened stretches of high land, therefore, those sections are seen as eroding still quicker where lower layers of the island are made up from sandy soil (*bāli māṭi*). Although improving the fertility of the land, the sandy soil is not as sturdy as clay layers and erodes quickly (see Sillitoe 2000; Sillitoe, Barr, and Alam 2004). Undermined by the distraction of sands, the upper layers ultimately break. These processes were further expected to accelerate when swirls occur in the water close to the banks. For two reasons: swirls were, on one hand, taken to be signs of a high speed of the water. While they caused more sediments to be eroded through the circular alteration of flow, on the other hand. Swirls, therefore, visibly marked threatened points and future losses.

In or relating to Botkhāli – which is entirely of the low-land type introduced above – prognoses were articulated in somewhat different terms. According to localized conceptions, the greatest danger here are the waves and their intensified attacks during the rains. At present, these attacks seemed to build pressure on the ring embankment guarding the village in almost its total length. And even while certain spots were known to have a higher risk of collapsing as others this does not account for great differences – for the low-lying and defenceless village behind is almost uniformly affected by the waters rushing in. A second line of embankments was not in place – or, to be more precise, overrun and not rebuilt due to missing funds. While the next functional line of embankments has been located several hundred metres inland. Hence, localized prognoses featured two fundamental certainties: that there will be collapses and that the largest part of the village will be suffering from this. Based thereon, what concerned localized prognoses more was the question *when* the affected lands will ultimately disappear and when the next line of inner embankments will become the outer.

Obviously, the drawn-out erosions are not bio-physical processes alone, but were actively negotiated by local and regional actors. Not only the nature of the flows, but also the actual shrinkage of the landscape has been managed (see Chapter 9). In most conversations, reports and engagements with state actors, the main attention has been focussed on the quality and sturdiness of banks and dikes. In order to negotiate threats or to claim counter-activities, prognoses emphasize weaknesses and impeding collapses. Underlining, thus, a certain singularity of the banks – as they are the sole material formation that can be worked upon. In contrast to the depth of river beds or the velocity of currents, the texture of the banks was, as I have shown above, within immediate reach of social practices and, thus, subject to the contestation of localized politics. Only marginally relevant on high lands, the management of shrinkage gains centre-stage in tracts that owe their existence to embankments. While they collapse repeatedly, in some instances yearly, and are often enough entirely washed out, the decision to rebuild the embankment reaches into the domain of party politics. This is relevant for the temporal layers of erosions as only the very decision to abandon a particular embankment and shift the outer defence line further interior, translates into shrinkage. Only then will the new outer stretch be washed away within the next few years. The predictability of erosions stands – as this apty illustrates – in an uneasy relationship with prognoses by political actors. The former pointing more to the temporality of the hazard, the latter to the room to manoeuvre actors cling to. In a sense, the agency of the waters is plotted against the agency of society. These prognoses entail, therefore, two temporal modes. They can be mapped onto, first, the seasonality of erosions; and, second, the actual progress of shrinkage.

Besides political activity and the quest for exit strategies, prognoses involved envisioned consequences for cultivators. The implications for agriculture within the reaches of expected erosions are perhaps self-explaining and, so much is clear, allow for a sense of agency. Here, once again, one would have to differentiate between capital-intensive agriculture and 'merely' subsistence patterns. In the former, as for instance, when lucrative betel nut farms were threatened, their owners certainly found means to combat and slow down the erosions as much as possible: working themselves and paying others, they strengthened the embankments and weak points of the shore. Producing and harvesting to the last moment, they banked on the year-round harvests of the leaves, yet reduced the investment of expensive fertilizers.

When it comes to the imminent loss of lesser developed fields, i.e. the ubiquitous paddy, the calculations were somewhat different. Not only because their owners often did not have the means to uphold safety measures. But also because of the long periods between the purchase of

seeds and the expected harvest – a time that coincides partly with the hazardous rainy season. To uphold the possibility of a harvest even on plots whose disappearance was imminent, farmers on today's Ghoṛāmārā proceeded in the same way as the now resettled islanders did decades ago: they planted cheap rice varieties in the parts of the fields that are most distant from the shore and as early as possible (Danda 2007). While the varieties sought were thought to limit the losses when the land should disappear before harvest, timing and position of paddy cultivation has beeen done to harvest at all. Enabling harvests in sinking plots, these measures nevertheless implied dramatically reduced yields as they bypassed well adapted agricultural patterns under the impression of impending disappearance.

7.3.3. Interlude: Chars and Peasants

> Earlier I was on the land. Not on the sea, on land.
>
> Kānai Pātor, *Interview in Gaṅgāsāgar Colony*

Reflecting on the environmental history of Bengal and the topography of the delta, I have mentioned in passing a rich body of scholarship devoted to erosions along Bengal's riverine banks. Unfolding across disciplinary boundaries, these works focus for the largest part on one pocket of eastern Bangladesh and can be differentiated along the trope of conflicts (Lein 2009). Engaging moving river banks and displacements, one strand of the literature emphasizes intense conflicts resulting from forced mobility: Conflicts between the displaced populations, with villagers wherever they settle and, most importantly, in taking possession of newly accreted lands (e.g. Zaman 1991). The second strand of literature emphasizes the opposite: moments of hostile, yet peaceful co-existence between 'forced migrants' and villagers from the mainland, precise rules and regulations along which the sunken as much as the newly upcoming lands are owned (e.g. Schmuck-Widmann 2000). Analyses of riverine erosions in the Indian part of the delta follow similar agendas: Here, too, several studies emphasize adaptations and distinct lifeworlds (see e.g. Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2007); while others emphasize conflict and turmoil (see e.g. K. Bandyopadhyay, Ghosh, and Dutta 2009; S. Iqbal 2010).

To set coastal erosions into prespective and, particularly, to engage its disastrousness, I have to briefly revisit these debates. I have to include two further moments: One, the intertwined notions of flexibility, adaptation and hybridity; and, second, what I want to call, the obvious

incompatibility of these hybrid lives with environmental relations rooted in bureaucratic and modern peasant approaches. These concerns can be followed best by focussing on what is, perhaps, the most important and, indeed, surprising addendum to general theory that this scholarship has got to offer: the concept and lifeworld of the *char*.

The Bengali notion *char* indexes fragile upheavals of sand that may emerge anywhere between the banks of wide rivers in the active part of the delta.[161] At first sight it might seem to be justified to frame them as islands of sorts – yet, the Bengali notion of *char* encompasses a great deal of ephemerality, of un-readiness and inception, and therefore layers of meanings clearly distinguished from the English ‘island’. This distinction is mirrored in their materiality: Only few of them grow into proper islands, while most vanish as quickly as they have come up in the first place. Emerging in the midst of streams and through freshly brought sediments, *char* are extremely fertile soils that have been attracting poor rural populations since centuries (Schmuck-Widmann 2000, 13; see also T. Banerjee 1978). They are at once heavily depended upon and ephemeral. As distinct environments, in both an ecological and social sense, they are truly hybrid. Belonging to the river, yet being not water; being lived on by people who populate and depopulate the *chars* as they disappear with the seasons or shift altogether. What I have noted earlier about the active deltas, seems to be condensed in the *chars* in its most radical form. To such an extent that people and sandy formations may be understood, as Kuntala Lahiri-Dutta and Gopa Samanta suggest, to be dancing with the river (2013): moving with the rhythms of appearance and disappearance, they are harboring lives firmly rooted in the flow. While this emerges as an entry point to timely discussions on alternative ecologies, it also invites a reappraisal of, what I understand to be, the slow violence of coastal erosions. Where, in a word, is here the disaster? Or, to put in another way: why are processes experienced as disastrous by the islanders I spoke to, yet are managed so efficiently in other parts of the Bengal delta? Is it just a matter of maladaptation?

One fundamentally important difference points, of course, to the condition of the waterscape around Sāgar Island. Although the estuarine vicinity marks, how geographers label it, a sediment sink, *chars* or islands seem hardly to emerge here. The possibilities to claim land and to settle down, are thwarted. On those rare occasions that land came up, it actually had become politically off bounds. But even if chars would emerge in greater numbers, the very brackishness of the water is the greatest obstacle to qenching thirst and settled agriculture. The

[161] Similar, yet much less researched assemblages are the *diara* further up the river before it enters Bengal (P. Sen 2008, 6–9).

movements on and along with the *chars* and, therefore, the development of societies of *char*-dwellers is doubly made impossible: neither are islands emerging, nor are they in any way immediately hospitable or fertile. On the very coast and in a dying estuary, erosions hardly can be engaged with in the same hybridity. For it is possible to move along with floating islands only there, where islands emerge and where the encompassing waters are sweet.
While this reasoning underlines, to a certain degree, the idea of nature's limitation of social figurations, another approach seems to be equally pertinent. That is, the entanglement of environmental relations with administrative approaches and cultural politics of identity. Writing in the wake of modernity, the former dynamic is as elusive as it is self-evident. With enclosure and the thorough re-ordering of property relations along individualized modes of landownership, hybrid spaces floating with the waters seem to threaten order itself. For they defy, on one hand, the grids, lists and maps of administrative apparatuses. Appearing and disappearing, they are an in their mutability an offence to the imagined stability of political territory figuring as spatial counterpart of modern states (see Elden 2007; Lemke 2014). Furthermore, the forms of dwelling they harbor as well as the modes of living with shrinkage relate uneasily to, what might be termed, a peasant mode of environmental relations. Being themselves, partly at least, the outcome of entangled histories and modern statecraft, these figurations ultimately collide with the hybrid lifeworlds characterizing the *chars*. This is made clear in deep rifts between *char*-dwellers and, what is in the mentioned scholarship on *char*, subsumed as mainland populations. While the former move along with the islands, the latter distance themselves from these mobile lifeworlds and their environmental practices. Firmly rooting their lives in place, the mainland populations suffer nothing but a disaster when their land is succumbing to the movements of the rivers (Indra 2000; K. Bandyopadhyay, Ghosh, and Dutta 2009). Now, the islanders I came to befriend have been uneasily situated between these two ideal-typical figures pervading debates on riverine erosions in Bengal. On one hand they look back, as I will show in greater detail later, on complex histories of migration, yet they struggled to firmly root themselves in peasant approaches to land and the future. To them impermance was, in a word, anathema. Beyond the material conditions of the salty and dying waterscape, it is this approach which turned, I argue, the shrinkages into the disaster they have become. To groups that literally banked on fixed ground and not dancing floats, the sight of vanishing lands was a calamity; and not a widely embraced character of the environment as it is among *char*-dwellers. But let me add another dimension to this.

Throughout this thesis I show that the immense waters of the river and the sea intimately shape life on the island's edges. In terms of material entanglements of the landscape with brackish waters, their interpenetration and the resulting 'salty-amphibian' form, the islands are to be understood as ephemeral figurations in a seascape. Among the frictions and entanglements flowing from here, I want to point at a paradox figuration of cultural poetics.

Drawing on the work of Michael Pearson, the island societies could be partly described as 'littoral societies' (Pearson 2006). That is, as societies that may better be engaged with from the sea. In contrast to Pearson's typology that includes, among others, a lively exchange networks and particular cultural formations, the islanders negated the marine dimensions of their lives to a surprising extent. Put simply: Although local societies have materially and economically been deeply imbricated in the seascape, they were, in a sense, averting the sea. Be it through their addressing of the marine waters as 'river'; the perception of the open waters as nothing but a threat; or, more hidden, the negation of localized environmental knowledge about the seascape proper. One of the main tropes to do so rests on, I argue, the imagination of local groups as predominantly, if not entirely peasant (*cāsī*, *krisak*). To be sure, the peasant character of local society is ultimately an imagined one, because the present predicament left little room for strictly peasant lives to be lived. Similarly, the mere idea turns out, as critical works have shown, to be a fiction – albeit a fiction that enjoys a robustness and has evolved as a powerful label traversing global scapes (see i.e. Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000b).

Set against the peasant character and the general ambiguous role of the sea in Bengali popular culture, it is little surprising that the sea is a subject of profound fears. Several of my interlocutors spoke of anxieties and voiced these in narratives that were intertextually intertwined with imageries of flood and shipwreck – solitude, dying alone, objectification by waters. Others, as noted above, mentioned fear as direct hindrance to take part in the lucrative deep sea fishing or spoke of nausea as an embodied hindrance to venture out onto the sea. Economically crucial, the sea appeared either way in rather monstrous and negated terms. These perceptions did only aggravate, I suggest, the disastrous nature of the shrinkages. Indeed, they fed into a sense of suffering of being positioned at sea.

This leaves me to briefly reflect on the land formation just off Ghoramara that seems to fall into the category of *char* by virtue of its name: Nayachar. On clear days within hindsight from Ghoṛāmārā's northern edges, Nayāchara is the sole massive accretion of sediments within the surrounding waterscape and carries its youthful promise right in its name. For it would have to be translated as the 'New Char'. Nayāchara only underscores the ambivalences and paradoxes

of the archipelago. As the emergence of new landmass is by no means a contradiction of or pointing toward an end of the widespread shrinkages. Neither is, quantitatively speaking, the accretion givin rise to Nayāchara balancing the erosions. The emergence is rather tied to the concomitance of rapid losses on the shores with the swelling ground.

On the other hand, it seems to invite, what is dreamlike and obsolete elswhere along the coasts: i.e. yet another actualization of the old strategy to migrate into 'wastelands'. In the existing literature, *chars* are framed as being either subjected to unambiguous ownership structures or as intensely fought over. Neither seems to hold true with regards to Nayāchara. In fact, the landmass has become an instance of encompassing regional conflict dynamics: Neoliberal projects, ephemeral usages and traces of violence were shaping its present. Its social life is, therefore, clearly set apart from the mobile lifeworlds of *char*-dwellers dominating the literature on erosion in Bengal.

Legalized settlements on the island or its the extension under the plough seemed neither in official documents nor in the initially scarce media attention an issue at all. Its fate seemed rather to follow industrial interests. In documents of Port authorities, the island appears since 1982 and then as a space to be managed and 'trained' to keep the old and new docks navigable.[162] Performing their unparalleled powers over the waterscape between Calcutta and the Bay, the port authorities followed suggestions by Dutch engineers and trimmed parts of the landmass and built walls on other. As much as both these measures were thought as being useful interventions to guarantee the future of the port, the island remained uninteresting in itself. This changed roughly two decades later when the island emerged as an space ideally suited for the establishment of industrial complexes.

Detached, unclaimed and empty, yet in the vicinity of a bustling industrial port, the island became an ideal canvas for neoliberal development fantasies. Since 2009 Mamatā Bandhyāpādhyāy argued for the establishment of yet another Special Economy Zone on the island – first as opposition leader, and concomitantly as Chief Minister. During Mamatā's contestation of the decade-long dominance of the CPI(M), the island held an important promise. Spearheading a successful agitation against forced acquisitions of fertile lands for the construction of multinational industries in nearby, now famous Singur and Nandigram (see e.g. A. V. Banerjee et al. 2007; Patnaik 2007; Nielsen 2009), the plans for the island helped to counter criticism portraying her as 'anti-industrial' or 'anti-development'. Particularly in its

[162] File *Review of Amelioration Scheme for Hooghly River*, Administrative Department, Marine Archives Kolkata

emptiness. Devoid of legitimate farmers and other inhabitants, the industrialization could, so it was argued, advance without forced acquisitions and displacements.[163]

When this ambitious project to situate industrial compexes on the island will be realized, indeed, if at all, seems to be unclear. What is important, however, are the consequences of these neoliberal fantasies for landless population on Ghoṛāmārā. Subjected under the administration of the neighbouring district, legalized settlements of the island seem unlikely, yet not impossible. For the governing administration would certainly rather distribute among its direct subjects than to those from another constituency – here I am alluding to localized exchange routes in the electoral politics of present India (see also Chapter 8.4.). That being said, the ambitions of the state government to settle industries here, however, remove the vast lands permanently beyond the scope of legalized settlements. Approached the other way rond, they make the island meaningful precisely within the context of controversy and violence accompanying recent state-enforced industrializations in India. The most recent episode of these conflicts – those around the proposed factories in Nandigram and Singur right across the river – were, of course, closely observed on Ghoṛāmārā and Sāgar. Both, the development of these Special Economy Zones (SEZ) and the clashes around it affected life on the islands intimately. The agitations around the acquisitions and crooked pattern of development were, partly at least, quelled by either civilian muscle or paramilitary groups associated with the then ruling CPI(M). Marked by red armbands and allied, even guarded by the police, armed groups looted, raped and murdered, so eyewitnesses insist, in pockets of tense resistance against the acquisition (Sanhati 2007). These events resonated widely on Ghoṛāmārā and Sāgar. Among the quite distant witnesses on Bāghgpārā, for instance, the armed bands were repeatedly framed as *harmad* – a notion invoking the Portuguese pirates of the past. On the surface, the designation of harmad entails a sense of violence, of bloodshed and plunder that struck given localities as an invasion of outsiders. But it frames the perpetrators of violence, furthermore, as agents of a more distant power, in this case the distant and often mistrusted state.[164]

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[163] Scientists, civil society groups and writers have repeatedly voices their critiques of the proposal (see e.g. Rudra 2007). According to one strand of arguments the position of chemical industries on a shifting island that would chronically be haunted by tropical storms appears nothing but heedless. While a second strand of arguments levels at the over-all, normalized detrimental effects of a chemical industry in the immediate vicinity of the sensitive Sundarbans. The fear of leakages and uncontrolled disposal into the open water and therefore the sustained damages to the Mangrove habitat are certainly not easy to dismiss.

[164] Complemented by the denial of relations between armed 'outsiders' and local party workers, as well as the denial of violence by protesters, which both were evident, the locality is through this arrangement effectively sanitized of violence. In other words, it emerges as homogenous, victimized and abstaining from violence.

In fact, the bloodshed around forced land acquisition had become related to Nayāchara and was cited as one of reasons why it was practically off-limit. Rumours had it, the CPI(M) had burried the bodies of protesters killed during a 'massacre' on this very island. Making it a haunted place: haunted by politics and murder.[165] As ghostly presences the victims appeared as impeding mobilities onto this very island. While it stands to reason that many would most likely move when given the chance, it still illuminates the tight integration of space, politics and environment; and underscores the deep rift between the *charlands* upriver and these islands at the edge of the sea.

7.4. Utopian, dystopian disasters

As particularly unstable space at the fringes of rising seas, Bengal is included in literally every listing of global hotspots of climate change vulnerability (see e.g. McGranahan, Balk, and Anderson 2007; Oliver-Smith 2009a, 31 – 34). More than that, the southern, sea-facing edges have repeatedly been framed as spaces where climate change is not only a threat, but already experienced in the present. Set against the maze of interventions, transformations and inherent instabilities, these assumptions are difficult to prove. Several of the claims – as, most importantly, that of the first climate refugee – are nothing but misleading.

Among urban middle classes, heated and anything but conclusive debates on climate change have been ranging: Does it exist? Is it a hoax to slow down Indian economy boom? What should be done and by whom? While climate change appeared to be elusive on the islands down south, too, it did so within another discursive formation. I will engage the social life of climate change along three motions. First, difficulties of translations; second, the relevance of Aila as a point of entry for the debates; and third the ensuing imagery of disaster. As an undercurrent to these, I want to emphasize the entanglements of what needs to be understood in terms of climate change with a sense of normalized degradations. This relates, first and foremost, to the erosions

[165] These rumours invoke, similarly, the bloodshed taking place on another island in the Sundarbans. That is, the massacre on Marichjhapi (Mallick 1999; Jalais 2005; D. Sengupta 2011). Then, in 1979, partition refugees had defied rules by the Indian government to be resettled in semi-arid central India, and had begun to settle on one of the islands of the Tiger Reserve. After several warnings, the Communist government had sent police and paramilitary forces who massacred a considerable part of the refugee population and exterminated, so it is reported, all human settlements on the island. As an implicit warning not to try one's luck and take up land that was not distributed by the state, the incidents of Marichjhapi were narrated several times during my research on Sāgar. Be it as islands of massacres or as islands that, arguably, harboured victims of bloodshed, they remained off-limit. By way of politics and an overtly powerful state.

themselves. Being in their magnitude and intensification over the last years – so it is argued – a dramatic reminder of the actuality of climate change, by most islanders they have been made sense hybrid constellations tying environment and politics together in other, somewhat more localized ways (see Chapter 9). Suffice to say for now, the ongoing nature of degradations over the last several decades made it difficult to identify tipping points. The problem of shifting baselines[166] made itself felt in a slightly reformulated terms: it is not that earlier resources have been lost due to slippery transgenerational transmissions, but rather that it is difficult to measure change amidst all the changes. However, several of my interlocutors pointed to times several decades ago, when currents or waves had begun to become troubling and more voracious, when the shrinkage quickened up. And it might stand to reason that thence detrimental consequences of climate change set in. But who can ever know?

To debate climate change across discursive and cultural boundaries complex issues of translation have to be tackled. For the concept is neither self-explanatory nor has it straightforward equivalents across languages. Adding to the biophysical elusiveness of the matter at hand, the talk of 'climate change' may be uneasily intertwined with localized taxonomies of weather, seasons and environment. Throughout most conversations on normalized changes, current weather or climate I had on Sāgar, labels as 'climate change' or 'global warming' were entirely absent. Conversely, when I intentionally incorporated those notions and asked directly what my respective interlocutor was thinking about it, most often the conversation took unexpected turns. Most would affirmatively speak of 'climate change' and 'global warming', yet used it, as would become clear, in a completely different way. The former was related most often, then, to the cyclical change of seasons, the routine sequence of cold, hot and rainy seasons. Both understandings – that rooted in western science and that in localized taxonomies – certainly were implying a change in weather patterns; and still talked past each

[166] The problem of shifting baselines was introduced to environmental theory by Daniel Pauly. In a short essay he argued (Pauly 1995, 430) that "[…] each generation of fisheries scientists accepts as a baseline the stock size and species composition that occurred at the beginning of their careers, and uses this to evaluate changes. When the next generation starts its career, the stocks have further declined, but it is the stocks at this time that serve as a new baseline."

From there on the phenomenon has been demonstrated in various settings within and beyond academia. Studying fishing communities in the Gulf of California and, thus in a seascape characterised by dwindling stocks and decreasing biodiversity, Sáenz-Arroya and colleagues found parallel developments (Sáenz-Arroyo et al. 2005). Focussing on generational differences they showed that number of varieties known and the estimates of what made a bountiful catch were significantly reduced among the younger generation. Yet the younger generation did not perceive of the sea and they swarms they knew as a degraded, although it clearly was in the eyes of the older fishermen. What Pauly called (Pauly 1995, 430) the "[…] gradual accommodation of the creeping disappearance of resource species […]" can thus be seen at work here.

other. My most of my interlocutors, the notion of global warming has been used along the same line. That is, as a warming related to the flow of seasons.

Observing parallel dynamics during his research in the Pacific, Peter Rudiak-Gould (2012) understands them to be part of, what he calls, 'promiscuous corroboration'. He suggests that some of the evidence brought forward by scientists to make the case for a widely shared sensibility, an awareness of 'climate change' across the world may actually rest on these dynamics. To be sure, the problem of translation is nothing new in anthropological theory, neither is the conflation of well-meaning political interests with what emerges as a silencing of localized voices. That being said, I do not want to simply emphasize the limited currency of these labels, but rather trace their entry and usage into localized debates wherever they were found. For this will shed light on the dynamics along which these discourses arrive among a people and in a space that clearly marks centrepiece in regional and global debates on climate change.

Quite a few of my interlocutors, however, were somewhat familiar with the concepts: Once brought up the concepts 'global warming' and 'climate change' clearly rang a bell. Other's narrations were infused with fragments of the imagery most often used to encounter climate change in public debates. It is particularly noteworthy here that in every case the debates were tightly interwoven with cyclone Aila. It figured, I argue, as an anchor of globalized discurses; as a window into a dystopian future of climate change. Paradoxically, though, these imagined futures came to be dominated by the imagery of the disasters, silencing what is much more pertinent in the life of the Islanders: normalized changes and slow degradations.

Aila – the most recent cyclone that struck West Bengal – had its landfall in the vicinity of Sāgar during the early phase of my fieldwork, in May 2009. I was surprised by it some 200 km inland from the coast (in Santiniketan, Birbhum) where I had to take care of urgent matters by then. Unleashing its oppressive and humiliating temper, it had already lost much of its fidelity along its way across Bengal – so I was to learn on my way back south to the coast a few days later. Therefore, my elaborations are entirely devoted to the immediate afterlife and not the direct experience of this cyclone on the coast. To my surprise the Colony itself had been only marginally affected by localized standards: a few roofs had suffered, trees had come down and cracks in the outer embankments had given way to the turbulent waters. But the waters had reached only two fields nearby – both deemed already highly salty due to earlier collapses.[167]

[167] The present minor flood meant therefore that the wait for the fields to become sweet again would take at least a year longer; but no fresh destructions.

The economic consequences had, in a word, been extraordinarily mild – particularly when compared with the devastations in nearby Botkhāli or other parts of the Sundarbans (see e.g. Mukhopadhyay 2009b; Sundarbanbasir Sathe 2010; Kartiki 2011). To my utmost surprise, one of my friends greeted me upon my return after the cyclone with a broad smile stating that it hadn't be a problem at all. That – the moment still rings in my head – it had caused no inconveniences at all (*kono asubīdhā haynī*). Many others were to follow suit. The casual and undramatic way the notion *asubīdhā* (inconvenience) was generally used on the island, underlined only the adaptation to and the un-disastrous nature admitted to cyclones. That being said, the cyclone had, of course, been causing a great deal of fear while it was seen raging over the island. But its effect were minimal and it seemed to be part of routine.

However, in quotidian conversations and more concerned debates alike the cyclone clearly left its mark. It might even said that it became something of a discursive watershed. Crucial for this relevance was, as many of my interlocutors insisted, the very fact that it had a name. Before, so I was told, cyclones were just cyclones. Small or big, and distinguished mainly along year or region. Sidr – the cyclone that had devastated parts of Bangladesh in 2007 – was remembered along year and region, as was the 2005 Supercyclone unleashing havoc in Orissa. The 1942 Midnapur Cyclone was, to give a final example, remembered as the Red Flood (*lāl banyā*). That is, the official and timeworn practice to name every cyclone had never before influenced speech patterns in the Colony. Nor had they – with the exception of the Red Flood (*lāl banyā*) –been integrated into localized taxonomies.

In contrast to earlier storms, Aila was widely used as a temporal marker: as an event that had set the island on hold for several days, caused renewed influx of humanitarian assistance it structured time.[168] But it marked also a discursive anchor along which debates on climate change entered the locality. As a named presence that was used to index future changes and, at least, the end of the aforementioned 'disaster gap'. Surely more important than the naming is the *intellectual* climate of the year into which the cyclone burst: the presence of the enigma of climate change in regional media and, to a lesser degree, through the activities of NGOs. Among those few who were familiar with the concept in the way it travels along global spheres, Aila ubiquitously served as a prime example of what the consequences of global warming were.

[168] It was used, to name only few example, as a fix moment in time against which price hikes, the commencement of various works or the flux of the seasons were measured. Illuminating, therefore, the cyclone's quality to structure time; and interweaving it, in the same time, with mundane affairs.

Mirroring the imagery along which climate change is primarily invoked in the media – recurrent storm, floods, droughts – the possible future appeared as one of more and more severe disasters. Particularly telling in this regard was one conversation I had with old Ganesh Māli in December 2009. Talking about the future of the island he claimed assuredly that, indeed, a huge wave would come toward the island; a wave that would rise up several meters and destroy the whole island.[169] It was the time of the Copenhagen summit in 2009, a time when considerable momentum had been building up globally. The IPCC report of 2007 was still fresh, there seemed to be movement in the negotiations, so-called developing nations made their voices heard as hardly before and, of course, Aila had happened only a few months before unsettling much of Bengal. The proceedings before and during the summit were, therefore, regularly featured in local radio broadcast. From these Ganesh Māli claimed, he knew of the wave and the fact that it was due to too much industry in European countries. Because the latter had been heating the world up with their excessive smoke. But, he went on confidently, Manmohan Singh (India's Prime Minister) was on his way to the meeting and he would prevent the wave from forming and, therefore, destroying the island. Even after the summit had ended with only meagre outcomes that frustrated many, he was assured that the Prime minister would handle the issues efficiently.

When I met him during my last spell of research he had fallen very sick and we could not return to this vision. While he was not alone in articulating a future along this line, these ideas had spread. By then, more islanders were speaking of impending waves that would perhaps destroy the island. Not only Sheikh Motalib who had been travelling to New Delhi as a 'Climate Refugee' and who was thus closer aligned with climate change debates (see Chapter 8.5. below), but also several others.

What struck me particularly while thinking through this vision, was not only the reliance on singular disasters, but also the remedy mentioned. Both delegate the events of a dystopian future far beyond the sphere of localized agency; and into the hands of (masculine) saviors guarding the locality by virtue of the powers and care. I will return to this theme when I turn to the most emblematic figure of it, Kapil Muni. Suffice to say for now that the imagination of climate change or global warming through disasters paradoxically overshadows locally precisely those developments for which the global media contemporarily emblematizes Sāgar: *gradually* rising seas. Indeed, oceanographers argue that the sea-facing islands of the Indian Sundarbans will

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[169] Untaped Interview, 7.12.2009

see another 70000 people displaced by 2020 (Hazra 2012, 17). The dystopian moment of the future lay ultimately in another class of events.

8. On Circuits of Displacement and Emplacement

> If place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of *doing* human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities.
>
> Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*

If, as Ricoeur has it, people position their lives and, thereby, themselves in distinct times and spaces, then subjectivities, be they individual or collective, are played out in a complex interplay of temporal allusions and spatial connections across diverse scales. Paradoxically, these self-assurances go largely unnoticed, as they unfold as an undercurrent to the more quotidian struggles and pleasures of everyday life. Only through interruptions or sudden changes – Keith Basso (1996, 4) claims – landscapes lose their quietness, stop being experienced as merely a backdrop to one's actions and may initiate intense spells of remembering and re-orientations. Even while personal attachments or layers of meaning – tying events to things and times – may emerge clearly in such moments, the cultural workings, ontological assumptions and political subjectivities involved in these relations go largely unnoticed. To situate the experience of hazardous environments, I have engaged historical-geomorphological trajectories of the landscape, practical engagements and the tetxture of the disaster already. Building thereupon, in this chapter I will concentrate on localized narratives, on texts and performances to elucidate processes of localization in the active Delta parts. I will critically engage with historical dimensions of migration, emplacement and displacement; and intend, thereby, to contribute to an understanding of how localized places, environmental relations and subjectivities came into being in colonial and postcolonial conditions (see Raffles 1999). What it means, in a word, not only to stay, but to dwell in shrinking landscapes. Throughout these inquiries, I will engage the islands as an afterlife burdening the present of the 'refugees', as a trace lingering on.

My argument is simply that the settlement of the islands was very recent, ever incomplete and that it came to a quick end with the demise of place and displacement. Both moments figure merely, I will argue, as instances in a wider pattern of migration.Bracketed by settlement and forced mobility, this past emerges as a cherished spell of productivity, prosperity and peace. In what follows, I will first of all embed this very moment in the unfolding history on these coasts; and then will focus on the divergence of spatial practices within this moment. Doing so, I hope to show that this moment is embedded in, in what I call, circuits of displacement and

emplacement, as much as being itself characterized by these. That the islands (past, present and future) are seen through pattern of repeated losses. I begin with an ethnographic sketch – with a short narrative and its illumination of wider patterns of past as being bound up in mobilities, losses and fragile riches.

8.1. The Enigma of Departure: On Circuits and Flows

Early one morning, my research assistant and I entered the small house of Debnonā Jānā in the south-western corner of Gaṅgāsāgar Colony. Its position in the first row of houses signalled to villagers its relative antiquity and the fact that its inhabitants came here as so-called refugees from the nearby islet of Lohāchara.

It was the time after harvest and before the bustle of the annual pilgrimage festival. To older men, time was plentily available in this part of the year and so we sat down to venture into the nearer and the more distant past of his, about that lost island and the present. Like I always did it in this phase of my field research and during a formal interview, I began by asking very broadly about the past. Inevitably my interlocutor would start our conversation, by opening up the window into his past through a short sketch of the most important stages. Of the places, where life evolved and the journeys taken. Embarking, thus, on what locally was known as 'life history' (*jiboner itihās*). Debnonā Jānā began thus:

> "Earlier we lived on Lohāchara. Staying on Lohāchara, our Government gave us land here and we settled over. I was born on Lohāchara, my father lived in Haldia. Living over there [in Haldia] he came here [to Lohāchara] into the jungle. Then the jungle was thick, the cutting of estates was going on (*lat kaṭha korto*). Having [secured] his title he came, prepared the land and stayed there. There my birth and all that (*jonmo-tonmo sob*) happened. Then slowly, slowly the land was breaking and when all was gone all the people got up and went away. But we stayed until the very end, thereafter we made our house here [in the colony]."

It may be the case that his way of telling his life history had partly been predetermined by the then widely known fact that I was interested in the past and in the engagement with hazardous environments. Nevertheless, this particular way of remembering and narrating the past invoked and set in motion across a range of further interactions, interviews and even in local publications. I suggest, it entailed a master narrative, in the sense introduced above, through which the past was structured, reshaped and put into a dialectic relation to the present as well as to the envisioned future. The sketch itself mirrors, first of all, the importance of land in these parts of Bengal. As earth to plough, as property to mortgage and most importantly, as a place

to dwell on, land figures very prominently on these shrinking coasts.[170] The search for land, virtually always tied to notions of *loss of land* seems to be the prevailing frame of this story. A second motif is that of movement, instability and intense suffering. Both themes surfaced time and again in the life histories (*jiboner itihas*) I gathered on these shrinking coasts and were related to each other in particular sequences and tropes.

When older residents were narrating their or their fathers' pasts, as Debnonā Jānā did this morning, it became one of movements and relocations. Rarely told in the idiom of adventurous spirit or zest for discovery, these are pasts where poverty, density and disputes had to be escaped. Where relocations became necessary due to vividly remembered social suffering in spaces beyond the deltaic islands. Virtually all pasts remembered started with a moment of displacement. Both, poetic emplotments as well as the practice of emplacement, in other words, take their cue from a moment of loss, an ousting or dispersal. It is in this sense that history on these shores is marked, to turn V.S. Naipaul's evocative phrase on its head, by an enigma of departure (1987). The bulk of narratives illuminating the most distant parts of the islanders' life histories can be differentiated along three tropes. These were, first, the migration due to poverty, density and conflicts rooted therein. Second, the theme of disastrous events in the wake or immediate experience of disastrous events. And, thirdly, settlements due to illegitimate love relations or entering such in the first place. To be sure, the first theme structured by far the most recollections; and I will show that its logic extended into the narrations that follow the theme of disastrous events. The third theme, finally, was alluded so infrequently that it could also figure also as exemption. Yet, it emerged as a distinct theme and highlights distinct conceptions of island society: Popular imageries of equality and lesser rigid norms were related, I contend, to islands' marginal position itself.

Similarly, as will be seen, a shared region of origin and time of departure is emphasized. Virtually all my interlocutors insisted that their journeys and mobilities began with a departure from the near mainland of Midnapur district. Situated right across the Hugli river and sharing substantial environmental characteristics, there hardly can be any doubt that many settlers indeed came from Midnapur. Beyond distinct spaces as 'origins', the temporal patterns are no

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[170] One contextual note and one qualification seem necessary. It has been repeatedly stated that land widely loses its currency as indicator of social mobility, as well as a precondition or means to take part in (new) patterns of consumption. In India as a whole, but also in rural West Bengal. But this hardly reflects the situation on the islands I worked. Here landownership is still regarded as a fundamentally important strategy and is culturally highly valued. The ubiquity and high dependence on circular or temporal labour migrations notwithstanding. The latter migrations emerge therefore as strategies to uphold and not to replace rural lifestyles (see Schendel and Faraizi 1984; Mosse, Gupta, and Shah 2005).

less uniform. The timing of uprootings and regroundings – to borrow a phrase from Sara Ahmed and her colleagues (2003) – related in most cases explicitly to roughly the first half of the 20th century. I suggest that both elements are only partly explained with historical processes – but are related to the micro-politics of the past. Throughout isolated exemptions, the workings of a master narrative have subjected the past to quite uniform, concise structures. This, of course, is related to a sense of belonging: the distinctive imageries of a shared past allows for just that. By the same token, the uniformly unfolding past emerges as a baseline for political claims in the present.

8.1.1. Density, Poverty and Conflicts

The mass poverty engulfing Bengal in the final decades of colonial rule reverberates throughout historiography and popular imagination alike (see e.g. S. Bose 1993; Mann 2002). The pasts remembered among the islanders certainly were no exemption. Allusions to grinding poverty pervaded the narratives – a poverty shaping the everyday in crumbling houses, dense villages and scant fields. As dire conditions from which the islanders escaped, they marked the sphere out of which the island societies had been evolving and became, therefore, the ultimate horizon of remembered history.[171] Beyond these allusions, social memories or other forms of local historiography hardly reach at all.

Particularly prominent here – both, as opening and shorthand – was the idiom of density. Interestingly, this density has extremely rarely been framed as the result of specific structures of land ownership or property relations, as is reported from other parts of rural Bengal where left-wing politics obviously had a greater influence on the perception of the past (Ruud 2003). On the islands, in contrast, it is remembered in a naturalizing manner: it formed the outcomes of an increasing scarcity that was itself seen as rooted in the increasing population. As such it became something of an obvious outcome of normal development and was interwoven at times with Neo-Malthusian overtones. Particularly when density and poverty were remembered as giving rise to social conflicts, to fraud and injustices within closely knit kin groups. In contrast to a full-fledged Neo-Malthusian approach (see Hartmann 2001; Randeria 2006a), however, the increase in population was only rarely understood to be a problem in itself. It had only become

[171] It is important to note that this is the horizon of one trajectory of the past (i.e. migration) coexists with another trajectory rooted in sacral geography.

a problem when meeting with rules of inheritance and, what is more important, the scarcity of land to be newly brought under the plough.

The following excerpt from an interview illustrates this particular phase of the past which might be termed the original displacement, very well. It is taken from an interview with Uttam Pradhan,[172] who has been residing on Ghoṛāmārā throughout my research and with whom I had long conversations while he was settling the sparse inheritance of his recently deceased relatives in the Colony. The excerpt mirrors the aforementioned master narrative in its reproduction of phases and places; and particular in parallel omissions. In the naturalizing allusion to density it stands in for dozens other narrations I heard over the course of my field research.

> Uttam Pradhan: "Listen to how it happened. While we were living over there [in Medinīpur], it became too many people, and there was only one piece of land (*jāygā*). How can the family (*paribār*) exist [under these circumstances]? Then there was this new island, Ghoṛāmārā. In the middle of the river, there a new island rose from the river. On this island lived already many different people from Medinīpur, but only my father did not. And many more came, they took the land and all that (*jāygā-tāygā*), built huts, houses and embankments as here in Gaṅgāsāgar. … At first we built huts and houses and then we brought the children and all that."
>
> Arne Harms: "Did your father come to Ghoṛāmārā or your grandfather?"
>
> U.P.: "My father came [to Ghoṛāmārā]. Father came also here [to the Gaṅgāsāgar Colony], after he had been there and had married, got children and had a family. In this way we live. But now Ghoṛāmārā is in the mouth of erosion and breaks to pieces (*ekhun-to Ghoṛāmārā bhangon-er mukhe, bhenge bhenge yachhe*)."

As indicated in this story, the overwhelming majority remembered mobility as necessary outcome of an enver increasing density and poverty. Land turned out to be too small to accommodate growing families or was entirely absent. Fragmented, lacking and sought for, land emerges as somewhat of a driver in these narratives. The very promise of its availability in the active parts of the delta lured thousands of migrants to settle permanently in these dangerous regions, where they had to endure man-eating tigers, poor drinking water, recurring storms, devastating storm surges and failing embankments. That being said, the short interview excerpt exemplifies another crucial imagery: that of the entrepreneurial man. Not as popular as the trope of density, this imagery nevertheless shaped a still large number of narratives. Outlining his life history in almost the same terms, another resident, Mādhol Giri, emphasized

[172] Interview, 26.10.2009, Gaṅgāsāgar colony

the idea of desperate, yet laborious men making the best out of scarce networks and, as is to be seen, the fact of being deprived by the rules of inheritance. He stated, [173]

> "The place where we lived was small, because our family [in English original] was large. That is why when there was untouched jungle on Lohācharā and people went there to cut a little jungle and settle down. Then my father – his uncle told him what was happening over there, that people were farming over there and that they settled down after claiming land. …. So my father went … and one by one the others followed."

Much like him, most of my informant's fathers or grandfathers had become aware, so it was remembered, of the opportunities nearby, had secured lands for themselves upon which others had followed. What emerges are stories of caring and enterprising man daring the unknown, carving out a niche and eventually witnessing an unknown prosperity. Only later and somewhat hesitantly, Mādhol Giri told me that his father actually was the youngest of four sons. And that he had not been able to claim anything from the scarce plot that was to be shared among the brothers. Many others emphasized similar conditions. Poverty and the marginalization of younger sons through rules of inheritance have to be understood, therefore, as the underside of an enterprising outlook. Several of my interlocutors, as for instance Anil Seth, even remembered their fathers as arriving, settling in, making a space and going on elsewhere to make a space for close relatives, settling them in and returning only then. Certainly not the average past, recollections as this examplify the emphasis on industriousness of their forefathers and, implicitly at least, an imagination of the island as vast, almost endless space ripe with opportunities. Indeed, the latter approach pervaded most recollections: ubiquitous were memories of land taken and extend as soon as it was paid off. Either after loans had been repaid or sharecropping relations changed into proper ownership of the land under cultivation. While these approaches to the past are feeding into the nostalgic times of rural riches to which I will turn soon, they articulate in themselves a past of endlessly available land, of a collective trajectory of rags-to-riches and therefore a past of rather flat hierarchies and permeable social boundaries.

Back on the mainland, the constellation of tiny plots, little opportunities to make ends meet and the subordinated role as younger sons had been translating into quarrel and conflicts. Indeed, the notion of difficulty (*samasyā*) or dearth (*onoton*) were indexing both: poverty and everyday quarrels. However, beyond sparse allusions to conflictive dynamics, most of my informants

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[173] Interview with Madhol Giri, 1.8. 2009, Gaṅgāsāgar colony

remained silent. They demonstrated a reluctance to speak on these issues which was in a stark contrast to the talkativeness when it came to the density itself.

Only rarely have the interrelated dynamics of poverty, scarcity of (good) land and social conflicts been as vividly remembered as in the life history told by Baishatta Jānā. He was not only among the oldest of age within the colony, but also one of the earliest and ritually most active settlers here. In fact, he had established the first temple of the Colony on his private land.[174] But that is not all to it. He also stood out as being the sole legal residents of the Colony whose point of origin had not been Midnapur, but the mainland in the north. One day, he agreed to tell me his life history. He began by saying, "[w]e were living at [the settlement] Number Seven (*sāt nambar*). There and at this time was immense dearth/crisis (*onoton*) in the family. The reason for it was that we were a large family […] there were ten to fifteen members in the family." He went on to recount his fathers trials. Working in the post office, he had used his salary to buy some land. But the land was salty and had not produced any harvest. When his wife had also died, Baishatta Jānā's father sold the land again and went back to Guṅgudāṅgā where he still had the job in the post office. He went on,[175]

> "There (*jayga-te*) he settled down. There were 13 houses belonging to various *jātī*: Aguri, Nāpit, Karan, Māhishya. It was similar to this place: a salty area without any water. One has to fetch water from quite far off. Here my father came to settle. But the land was not ploughed. […] My father thought that we might grow up as good humans if we lived with others in that area. After a while the monsoons arrived. A gang of robbers attacked us. The dacoits left all the thirteen families paupers. And those who owned the oxen [i.e. wealthier peasants], were also caught and one of them was beaten up so brutally that he died. The other one saved his life with great difficulties. After this incident all deserted that place gradually. We, too, went away. […] The thieves were not caught and after that we were in panic. After all, it was a place to dwell in (*thākār jāygā to*). Everyone deserted that area. Where did they go, where did we go? We returned to our birthplace. We returned to our birthplace and my father told them that we need a place for shelter. [….] My father said, 'Give us a shelter here and then we see what lies in our fate'. They gave us a space to stay which was not even enough to build a small hut. [….] We began living there and while staying there my father fell ill. When he fell sick we had a cow which we sold off for his treatment. I had an uncle [father's younger brother], he was a sly uncle (*bodmāis kākā*). He always looked out for opportunities. He said, 'Give me the money and I will do what needs to be done'. He took the money and never gave it back. He also began to occupy our space (*jāygā*). After my father passed away, I had no one because my brother had died short after. And the place belonged to my cheat uncle. What should I do? Where should I go? There was a boatman living our area,

[174] That is, not only one of the ubiquitous household shrines, but a proper house filled with statues of Gaṅgā, Laksmī and Manasā, among others. While he had also contributed to the erection of a public temple a few yards away, he still took personal care of the family's private temple. As he said, once started it is dangerous and even impossible to interrupt the rituals performed at a shrine. – A conception that, as I will show later, does obviously not relate to the shifts of ritual activities, but only to the very termination.

[175] Interview on Baiśatto Jānā, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 8.12.2009. Translated with the help of Sulagna Mukhopadhyay.

> he told me 'Come along'. I was a bit hesitant at the beginning as I had never been outside the house [viz. away from the family]. But who would feed me?"

Thus he went on to stay with the boatman and eventually managed to marry a women from one of the islands in the south, an island he called Charāchar. The ensuing narrations, then, pointed at repeated losses to encroaching waters, and therefore to patterns of displacement that I will return to in the next section. But what is more important for the issues at hand, the intersection of scarcity with conflict and violence are very present here. On two distinct levels. While the violence the dacoits unleash becomes a moment of aggravating poverty, the time with the family is ultimately not better: they live under dismal conditions, his father dies and the young Baishatta is cheated and, finally, has to escape with a stranger.

While there is little reason to doubt the fundamental tropes that shape these snippets, I am not concerned here with the factuality or the historical truth. It seems important, rather, to emphasize the past that emerges through these; and its social life in the present. For one, then, do these narrative strategies entail what I call the original displacement. They form the most distant past remembered along the axis of historical time as opposed to the axis of time related to sacred geography; and they evoke a time of a normalized despair. But through this master narrative the past is more than merely a burden. Weighty as it is, the memories of meagre times emerge as elements in narrative emplotments: they give meaning to the island societies, emphasize (as master narrative) a great deal of shared plights and, thus, a sense of belonging to unfold. Or better perhaps: the root of shared displacement that would recur, as I will show, time and again.

On the other hand emerge these pasts remembered as foils for the diagnosis of the contemporary. As, if I might put it that way, a negative history. Through this past the mainland beyond the islands emerges as a terrain off limit, as a space that can offer little, that hardly opens up survival strategies in a present of shrinkages. The developments of the so-called Green Revolution notwithstanding, the neighbouring mainland remained to be that: a terrain that was too dense to take them in again; an area too hostile to survive.

8.1.2. Social Disasters

Complementing normalized conditions of impoverishment and density, Bengal's coasts have been unsettled by social disasters. Among these, only the Midnapur Cyclone followed by a devastating storm surge and the Great Bengal Famine (1943 onwards) have left their imprint

on localized memory patterns. The have become markers within the flow of time and causally related to population flows. On the following pages I will engage the events as they appear in constructions of past and place.

In localized memory patterns, the famine and flood are interwoven. This is fully explained neither by the fact that both events fall into roughly the same time period nor by causal relations these social disasters were, as historians suggest, *locally* bound up. It points towards the conceptual difficulties and the slippery nature of drawn-out, invisible social disasters as famines. Because of its twin characteristics of monstrousness and invisibility it might have become subsumed, I argue, under the very eventful afterlife of the cyclone and storm surge commonly labelled as Red Flood (*lāl banyā*).

Leaving behind several hundred thousand to several million dead,[176] the Great Bengal Famine was an event of gargantuan proportions. All fell prey in one way or the other to, what Michael Watts aptly called the 'silent violence' of food shortage and soaring prices (1983). Invisible, grotesque, yet maddeningly lethal, the famine looms prominently in debates on the nature of poverty and state relations, and serves also as a crucial fragment for notions of belonging among urban Bengalis and regional leftist politics (see e.g. Sen 1981; Davis 2002). However, among the islanders the Famine rarely figured in past remembered. Indeed, the horrors were overshadowed by the Red Flood and by normalized experiences of poverty and density. Had it been muted or rather receding in favour of other classes of events? Much, I argue, points toward the latter. In any case, the pasts remembered in the Colonies point as outcomes, so to say, toward the difficult field of forgetting. While the worst hit areas perhaps lay – as some studies suggest – in other parts of Bengal, the southern tracts were still severely affected and subject to its deadly dynamics (Greenough 1982). So were the villages on both banks of the Huglī. Here, too, a highly exploitative integration of local markets into global food supply chains dovetailed, among others, with the perversions of a war economy and food hoarding into skyrocketing prices of staple foods resulting, ultimately, in mass starvation. The ubiquity of death and unparalleled suffering flooding the streets, shaped the political texture of the postcolony. Beyond the well-documented domains of urban leftwing politics (see e.g. Chakrabarti 1990; Catanach 1998), the Famine was widely alluded to by social movements across rural Bengal. As for instance, in the Tebhāga Movement that shook the Sundarbans between 1946 and 1950. Across dogmatic rifts, the communists drew heavily on the, by then still recent memories of the

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[176] To be sure, the politics of arriving at this numbers has in itself been a subject of scientific scrutiny (see Alamgir 1980, 84f; Greenough 1982).

Famine's horrors and used them as an anchor for radical politics by emphasizing feudal and imperialist roots of mass starvation (Dhanagare 1976; Chaudhuri 2000, 315 – 317; Bandyopadhyay 2001). Among coastal islanders, however, the Famine began to fade from recollections of the past sometime later; to such an extent that at present it was shrouded in silence.

This awkward silence appears to lend, on one hand, further weight to recent critiques of dominant trends in conceptualizing this famine. In his important and tremendously influential analyses, the economist Amartya Sen had framed famines as a crisis or breakdown of entitlement systems governing access to food. The Great Bengal Famine did actually serve as his primary data set (A. Sen 1981). Without refuting his larger claims, recent studies add environmental extremes affecting particular locations at least to purely economic explanations. Repercussions of shifts in the global war economy were, so it is argued, complemented by failing harvests. Contested, in a word, is the nature of scarcity: Was it an effect of Empire or also an outcome of 'real' scarcity?[177] Several authors emphasize the destruction inflicted by the 1942 cyclone and storm surge on Bengal's southern coasts. Devastating fields, structures and villages (Alamgir 1980, 81 – 84; Goswami 1990, 447; Tauger 2003, 65), it reduced agricultural productivity significantly. Even more so as the large scale cyclonic turbulences interrupted the crucial pollination phase of paddy far beyond the cyclone's landfall – translating into meagre harvests in large parts of southern Bengal (Tauger 2003, 65f).

Yet, the afterlife of the famine in the present illustrates on another level the powerful dynamics of forgetfulness. Hardly ever evoked as temporal marker and receding behind the flood, the famine figures as a negative presence. Not simply the outcome of dysfunctional memory, the silence around the famine is caused by the thinning of one class of events and the subjection of its horrors under the rubric of another event. Drawing on formulations of Assman, the famine had not been transferred from communicative memory into cultural memory proper (J. Assmann and Czaplicka 1995; Welzer 2008).

The life history of Kasem Śikārī is a telling example. This narrative is the outcome of a drawn-out, collective endeavour (see Pandolfo 1997). It took shape not only through repeated conversations with him, but also with his sons and, less importantly, through the interventions of two daughters-in-law. To ensure readability, I paraphrase the life history in broad strokes. Long before Kasem Śikārī was born in 1929 (1336 Bengali Calendar), his paternal grandfather

[177] Surely, within the framework of political ecology, scracity is necessarily to be related back to politics, but along different routes.

had come to Sāgar and settled in, what today is, Mandirtalā. He was servant of a mighty feudal landlord, who owned vast estates on both shores of the Hugli River: in Nandigram and on Sāgar. The duties of Kasem's were manifold and, according to family lore, quite substantial. He joined the landlord on hunting sprees, kept his weapons safe and had to safeguard his lord's revenues. For his services, Kasem's father ultimately earned land. How much land it once had been, remained unclear, but it was enough for the family to prosper. This all changed with the flood of 1942. Interestingly, during our conversations this flood was not labelled with a name or a year, but simply was *the* flood. In this narrative, the powers of the flood unfold less through physical destruction, but rather as re-ordering of property relations in its wake.In other words, the disaster unfolded here along a drawn-out temporality and was far from over when the waters began to recede. Once, while the tape recorder was running, his son added:

> "For 5kg of rice, 10kg rice or one mound he subsequently sold the 20 *bighā* of land to maintain the people (*ināder mānus kareche*). People had nothing to eat then, that was the situation. The suffering of men back then was so intense, that starving they fell on the street and died. Government did not help."[178]

To escape imminent death they saw themselves forced to sell their land in Mandirtalā at exorbitantly low prices (cf. Sainath 1996, 317 – 370). It didn't take long, hence, until the land was sold almost in its entirety and the earnings spent. In any case, poverty and scarcity began creeping in. Their small holding ceased to be enough to nourish the family and density following deadly hunger and distress sales became pressing. This new scarcity, ensuing conflicts within the family and expectations towards Kasem Śikārī's father who was not a first-born son forced him to head elsewhere – and brought him to Lohāchara.

Strikingly, what was remembered as the aftermath of the Flood and only as such, could be taken directly from survivors accounts of the Famine. Acute hunger, distress sales and death on open streets are the characteristic tropes to evoke the Great Bengal Famine in regional and global debates alike. Not only had these events occurred in the time of Famine, but they were actually remembered along the same tropes. Yet, the Famine was not mentioned as such. While it certainly is not my task to judge the sense of past, I suggest that the effects of *both* events

[178] Being common throughout Bengal, the exact value of *bighā* is subject to considerable regional difference. Not only within deltaic Bengal, but even within the Sundarbans the amount of land indexed therewith seems to be inconsistent. Within the Sundarbans of the 24-Parganas, one *bighā* equaled 40 yards square throughout colonial writing (see e.g. Pargiter 1934, 2). As a measurement it enjoys popularity among contemporary islanders and in informal state interactions. Official documents (land titles etc.) however shun this measurement and rely on acres. One *bighā* constitutes roughly one third of an acre.

enfolding the coasts in roughly the same time, have come to be remembered in terms of one event alone.

In a recent debate on social forgetting and its many formations, the psychologists Jefferson Singer and Martin Conway argue for a differentiation between, what they call, *relative accessibility* and a *larger store of available memory* (2008). Following this approach, the fading of the famine in favour of the Red Flood may be understood as a progressive inaccessibility, as an entrenching incapability to relate to these events. When looking at the famine, this progressive inaccessibility is related to, I argue, cognitive and interpretative difficulties of silently engulfing famines – particularly when contrasted with the vigor and unambiguousness of the cyclone. In other words, the famine fell into oblivion along two complementary registers. The mass starvation recedes, on one hand, in favour of the event. The latter overshadows the creeping and abstract dynamics of the former. This aggraveted, on the other hand, by the powers of unleashed natures made visible and tangible in the stormsurge: Its terrifying force became etched deeply into social memories.[179]

In contrast to the fading relevance of the Famine, the flood was vividly remembered in the Colony. The latter is related to what is in most publication named the 1942 Midnapur Cyclone that had its landfall in the immediate environns of Sāgar. In a speech before the Bengal Legislative Council in 1943, the revenue minister illustrated the proportions and damages in the following words:[180]

> "A heavy cyclone from the Bay passed over several districts of Bengal on October 16. It began about 7 or 8 o'clock in the morning and spent itself in the early hours of the next morning. In the afternoon of October 16, there was a high tidal bore forced up by the cyclone from the Bay which broke into the mainland and devastated a considerable area in the southern part of Midnapore and the 24 Parganas districts. The cyclone was accompanied by heavy rain – at certain places it was as heavy as 12" in less than 24 hours. All the rivers in these districts were in heavy flood due to the tidal bore, rain and force of wind. In the worst affected areas there was a heavy loss of human lives – the present estimates being no less than 10,000 persons in the Midnapore district and 1,000 in the 24 Parganas district."

In contrast to this account which emphasizes the destructiveness of the storm, local narrations alluded primarily or entirely to the flood sweeping over the land. What we see here is yet another another working of forgetfulness, another reshaping producing memory, as Augé would have it, in the first place. That is, the receding of the storm itself. For what is remembered as

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[179] I am grateful to Prof. Ute Luig for enriching my argument by emphasizing the powers of unleashed natures and the lasting impact their very violence may have on memories.

[180] File *Cyclone, storm etc. 1956 – 1979*, Marine Department, Marine Archives Kolkata

the flood turned out to be the storm surge unleashed by the devastating Midnapur Cyclone. Indeed, throughout these narrations the tempest may have been mentioned, but never as devastating and drastic as the deluge. While the cyclone was not negated in the way the Famine is, it still had faded and been reworked into memories of, what came to be known, as the Red Flood (*lāl bonyā*). Several interlocutors explained the namegiving color by the fact that the flood occurred in colonial times – and was understood to index the strange skin color of the colonial overlords. By far the most of my interlocutors, however, attributed the name to the strange occurency that the water had turned red to its salinity.

Beyond that, the narrations were structured by what I understand to be a temporary negation of land. Repeatedly I was told that the waters of the Flood had submerged the whole landscape and that survivors could do little more than cling to pieces of wood, to floating roof tops or trunks; that they could do little more than to cling to something and hope to hit solid ground. Instead of damages, localized narrations put the emphasis on bare survival and the complete disappearence of solid land. Buried it was, drowned and unrecognizable. 'What was land once, had become water', remarked Paśupati Giri in one of our conversations.[181] And Anil Seth[182] stated formulaic: "The whole county was covered with waters and people were floating about." Two elements are particularly striking in these statements. That is, one, the powers invested in waters. And, secondly, their echoing of contemporary experiences. Not only was land in the more recent past also experienced as being ultimately and playfully negated by waters in the guise of erosion. But in the narrations, the disaster itself unfolds from mutations of clear boundaries between solid and fluid. I understand these patterns as outcome of particular memory work: Both classes of events are made sense of through each other as the past takes its shape in the light of the present.

To illustrate this claim, I will now turn to one exemplary narration. It is the story old Gaṇeś Māli told me of his grandfather's narrow escape from death and the social transformations rooted in the flood. He said:

> "When the flood came, they did not know what to do and what not to do. In this way, our house was by the side of the river. And there was a tree – how shall I say, it was so thick that it was impossible to cut. Everybody had gone onto the embankment then. The houses were all washed away and they fled on top of that tree. It withstood the deluge. Slowly with the arrival of waves, the houses were breaking away. In this way, they and the children of other houses stayed there until the tree was overflowed.

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[181] Interview, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 26.10.2009

[182] Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 12.12.2009

At first they sat in the top of the houses; but when they had gone on the treetop and the treetops were themselves overflooded, they could not stay on them. Holding onto them, we would have become fish. Then, the trees had gone.

My grandfather (*thākurdā* [father's father]) in this way went with a house [that is, the wooden roof]. Holding onto the roof he floated and floated and upon reaching the ocean (*baṛa samudrā*) he said to God (*iśbar*): I will live no longer. Children, wife – where have they gone? I cannot see my future, take me therefore, God. [….] At this time, one ladder floated along and he grabbed it. […] So be it then, clinging onto it, he floated on. This time, where did he go? To Kachiberia near Diamond Harbour. There he went. After travelling there, again he went with the tide (*bhaṭa*) – he went on in the waters of the flood tide *(joyārer jal*). During ebbtide he did not go, but then came another tide. Now he went from there into the direction of Medinipur and the 24 Parganas and reached Kachiparia near Diamond Harbour. Out there floating he saw a light dimly blinking in the distance. He thought, this must be help or a piece of land and swam into that direction. By then, there was darkness all around and seeing himself in this pitiful state he lamented why he was still alive. Ultimately he reached Haldia, where he hit, at his surprise, ground. He realized that he had been obstructed by a boat or a piece of land and tried to disembark. But a wave swept him 50 feet away and then again another wave. Finally, however, he found himself on a piece of land and was in pain because salt water had entered his eyes and body. He noticed coconut trees and it must have been land here or else there would not have been coconut trees."

With ground beneath his feet, the struggle to survive had not been over yet. Gaṇeś Māli went on to tell how his grandfather had been fighting fatigue, how he had fallen into a pond only to be chased by wild boars and a bull. Finally sleep had overcome him.

"He woke up with sunrise the next morning and was naked. All his clothes had been washed away. His first thought was to get himself covered and as he walked around aimlessly, he came upon an intricately designed box, a very huge box made of good wood. It was so nice, it could have belonged to a Landlords (*jamidār*). As he began examining the box, a man with an axe approached and threatened him. He said, that if he valued his life he should get away from the box. When the man managed to open the box there were only silver coins in it, nothing but silver coins. If today Haldia's people are rich, it is due to the flood. There were dead bodies with ornaments strewn around, unclaimed treasures here and there. All waiting to be picked up. As he continued, he reached an upturned house and a barn. There he heard voices and asked for help. A young girl came out of the house, saw him naked and was very surprised. He asked for a piece of cloth which was given to him and the girl also offered him betel nut to eat. In the meantime, a person who knew my grandfather came and took him with him. He was from the Partho family of Haldia."

The story then ended with recovery over food offered by friends, the return to his in-laws' house in Haldia and the reunion with his surviving three cows. In due course, the difficult reunion with his family were mentioned only in passing.[183]

[183] Interview, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 8.12.2009

Embedded into recollections of one's own life histories or that of close relatives, this particular storyline re-surfaced several times throughout my fieldwork. It did so beyond shared kinship relations and was referring, thus, not to the same person. Periman Bebā, one of my oldest female informants residing in the oldest part of Gaṅgāsāgar Colony, for instance, narrated the plights of her first and long dead husband during the flood along the same narrative structure.[184] He also had been swept to Haldia, found himself naked, asked for clothes in houses of the wealthy and returned somehow to the islet in the southeast.

Structural similarities might be partly explained by the material texture and localized effects of the disaster: i.e. being swept towards the northwest, loneliness in the face of mass death. Others are more better understood as outcome of memory patterns making sense of endured suffering and losses.The nakedness of the male survivor and his begging for new clothes from the rich is, perhaps, the most pertinent example.

Further layers of meaning are folded into the evocative and dramatic imagery of floating bodies. These include an interpretation, indeed an ethical judgement of the economic boom witnessed, in what is now the port city and chemical hub of Haldia.[185] The bustle and growth around the recently installed industrial harbour had for the largest part failed to trickle down into poorer segments of local society. The present was rather marked by a clear cut antagonism between an urbanized, yet environmentally highly polluting port and it's marginalized hinterlands. The contrast to the impoverished islands right across the river, for instance, was repeatedly articulated through a symbolism of light. It surfaces in Ganeś Mali's narration – when his grandfather is attracted to a light that signals a possible escape from the flood – and was pervading everyday statements about the spectacular growth achieved in the port city that was close by, yet seemed worlds apart.[186] The imagery of light is related, furthermore, to ideas of prosperity, modernity and enlightenment that have become decisive for the texture of politics in West Bengal (see e.g. Ruud 2003)

To witness sudden growth and wealth in the postcolony, yet being effectively excluded from it, poses serious conceptual problems to the poor. How can it be that certain segments prosper

[184] Untaped Interview, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 29.11.2009

[185] The growth Haldia had seen in the last few decades is nothing but spectacular. Being conceived as a second location for Kolkata's port (which became increasingly cloaked by sedimentations and whose old structures became too small to handle modern ships), it soon overtook the prestigious port. In addition to its modern capacities that lured modern tankers, particularly the establishment of petrochemical industries made an it important centre on the corporate map of East India.

[186] Echoing the words of Ganeś eerily, the local historian Jaganāth Māitī (Māitī 2008, 14) ends his description of Ghoṛāmārā with the following phrase: "At night, from Ghoṛāmārā the illumination of Haldia's port can to be seen and the beauty of the shadow [reflecting] in the Hugli River is a great delight."

almost overnight, while many others continue to be barred from new and lavishly displayed luxuries? One way to find an answer to this deeply troubling condition lies, as recent studies have shown, in a recourse to magic and witchcraft.[187] This approach offers as much an explanation as it articulates critical perspectives brimming with ethical judgements. Haldia's almost magical rise was made sense of in a similar fashion. Stopping short from supernatural explanations in a narrow sense, the idea of the Red Flood is just one framework to do so. To be sure, the conceptualization of riverine or marine waters is pervaded by transcendental or sacral notions. Surfacing implicitly in the idiom of the water's arbitrary, yet playful powers (see Chapter 9.2.). Many are turned into paupers, indeed, they are literally stripped naked, while others enjoy spectacular riches amassed by the same currents. In its arbitrariness, property relations are framed as being reordered and the tone set for fundamentally different economic trajectories. Through the trope of reordering, destruction and magical development, the flood emerges as a decisive moment within localized history in yet another sense.

However, this narrative is most distinctively structured by the motif of isolation, solitude and bare survival. The pattern culminates, one might say, in the reduction of the narrator or, as is the case here, his ancestor to an object and not subject of mobility. Alone in the waters and, even more desolately, in the waters at night they are remembered as floating about, helplessly drifting into the open sea and perhaps eventually striking land. This particularly horrendous moment is intertextually linked to the figure of, what Hans Blumenberg called (1997), 'shipwreck at sea'.[188] While the former illustrates the disastrousness of the flood, the latter is often enough used to emphasize the normalized dangers and horrors of seafaring. It was evoked, either, to illustrate the very nature of deep sea fishing: surrounded by the vastness of the open sea, rather helpless to its whims and, as many said, dying away from society alone under the sun. Similarly, it was relied on stories of actual shipwreck. Literally every older fishermen had stories to tell of accidents far off the coast. These followed a remarkably uniform pattern: accident, solitude, floating and rescue. Throughout the latter stages, personal interaction with divinities turned out to be central. Either was the appearance of something to hold to and float

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[187] I am referring here to the rich literature on witchcraft and modernity in Africa (see i.e. Geschiere 1997; Geschiere 2011); as well as to studies on magical dimensions of, what has been called, the petro-states in the Gulf and beyond (see i.e. Coronil 1997; Watts 2001). Both literatures demonstrate that spectacular riches and their dislocations witnessed in the postcolonial present are often made sense of through an idiom of occult practices and magic development.

[188] As part of his metaphorology, Blumenberg has dwelled at length on this figure (Blumenberg 1997). He demonstrates that the metaphor necessarily implies a bystander: a person or a group of persons watching from a firm ground ashore (or on another ship). While the narrations engaged with ere do not accommodate bystanders, the audience listening or reading about the treated can be treated as such.

with in itself frames as divine intervention; or it became manifest through the direction one had been floating to and the very muscular powers to hold steadfast for hours and days. Invariably, they remembered themselves or other fishermen floating without a sense of direction. In both cases – the flood or shipwrecked fishermen –, the persons appear as objects and ultimately at the mercy of vast waters. Furthermore, we witness their stories only because they were saved in often enough miraculous encounters.

Now, while the horrendous quality of shipwreck deep at sea is – in its solitude, helplessness and indeed: objectification – beyond doubt, the remembrance of the flood in terms of a shipwreck is very likely in itself an articulation of socially mediated interpretations. It is, in other words, bound up with appropriations of 'nature' and tied to strategies of coping with hazardous environments. A critical triangulation with historical documents is instructive here. For the latter do imply that the storm surge following the Midnapur cyclone was immense and left large tracts of the coast flooded and in debris. But local residents who survived the cyclone and flood in the vicinity of the Lighthouse on Sāgar Island, stated they did so by escaping onto trees. With the surge receding rather quickly, they had been able to leave the trees roughly after 2.5 hours.[189] Within the terminology of meteorology, the flood appears to be as a several meters high storm surge that swept the country. The same residents stated that the behaviour of the water did not resemble a tsunami wave. Rather was it experienced as, so the unnamed officer noted, "[…] a solid bank of water". Both the notion of the storm surge (implying power, peak, receding) and the idiom of the shipwreck seem hence apt to capture the event and its horrors.

To summarize, two interpretations are enfolded into social memories of the flood. For one, it serves in its destructivity as an enforcement or motivation to migrate. In this regard the flood is bound up with other trajectories of the past: the flood appears as intensifying poverty which unfolded along similar dynamics to the normalized conditions on the mainland. In this role, the flood ties the past on both shores of the Hugli together: it brought devastation in Midnapur and on Sāgar; and brackets existing differences. The flood figures, on the other hand, within socially

[189] Upon request by urban authorities the staff from Sagar's Lighthouse had to fill a small questionnaire with local survivors. The questions were aimed at getter a better picture of the disastrous event; and, thus, to produce data on the disturbance that could complement the instruments of modern meteorology. Similar questionnaires were therefore sent out to two other posts of the Port along the lower Hugli. In every location the survivors were asked to state from which direction the wave was rolling in; whether it was a wave or a solid bank of water; and after how many hours they could leave the trees they had climbed to escape the waters. On Sāgar the islanders answered, so the Keeper reported back to the headquarter, that the wave hit the coast as a solid bank of water that had its peak for about an hour and that they could get down from the trees only after 2.5 hours (File *Cyclone, storm etc. 1956 – 1979* Marine Department, Marine Archives Kolkata). – It is worth emphasizing that although these answers help to imagine the magnitude of the event, neither the suffering of the population nor an assistance in rebuilding is ever mentioned.

mediated interpretations of riverine and marine waters. Within these cultural constructions, the imagery of waters as an overtly powerful subject effortlessly turning existing orders upside down sticks out. It emerges as a trope facilitating legibility of contemporary hazards.

8.1.3. Islands of Love

In addition to misery rooted either in slow impoverishment or in disastrous events, a third theme was woven through narratives about migration towards the islands. It relates to the array of possibilities luring into the wilderness. As if to remind us that the transformation of spaces and production of places not only entailed dangers and difficulties, but also a sense of social levelling within and through these perils.

So-called frontier societies have been claimed to be marked by porous structures, dynamic rule bending and social renewal (Turner 1921). Avoiding idealizations, which tend to deny power relations and exclusions of illegitimate Others from an egalitarian idyll (Cronon 1995, 72 – 77), frontier situations and border spaces have been demonstrated to allow at times for reconstitutions of the social (see i.e. Khan 2004; Eaton 1996).

Mirroring these conceptions, the islands of paupers and mere survivors emerged also as islands of love. I adapt the latter phrase – islands of love – from Alpah Shah's telling ethnography of life in and beyond the brick kilns of Eastern India (Shah 2006; Shah 2011). Here she carves out a surprising perspective on these industrial spaces closely associated with enduring forms of bonded labour, harsh exploitations and wasted lives. Without denying terrible conditions, she demonstrates a sense of amorous adventure and of freedom pervading the brick kilns.[190] Shah's work speaks to some of the memories of mobility I encountered on Sāgar: For the possibility to escape from rigid rules governing affinity and sexuality were repeatedly alluded to.

It is interesting to note that whenever mentioned, these motives were attributed to others and not the speaker herself. Once, for instance, during what became a group discussion in the shades of a tea stall, Dilip Jānā claimed that 90 percent of the married couples on Sāgar Island were unsanctioned by their parents. He did so in a tone that was at once bold and joking. Upon finishing the sentence, a grave silence set in. Neither was his claim refuted by others nor did anyone of those being present affirm the statement with reference to their own forefathers. Most

[190] Straddling diverse settings and clearly keeping their respective logic at bay, as is often the case in the worlds of labour migration, the labourers cherished the greater sense of openness, the physical and social distance from narrower norms guiding conduct in their respective villages (see also Strümpell 2006).

likely an overexaggeration, this claim is, therefore, not far from the truth either. In private discussions, however, the theme of escape and illicit love was more freely addressed. Overall only a small number of residents remembered the past of the families as related to flights from strict norms and into freely chosen love relationships. With one marked exception, these narrations were interlaced with the themes introduced so far. For the conditions escaped from were remembered as being marked by density and poverty and the routes of escape mainly established by young men who later took their illicit future spouses with them.

Taking the uncomfortable silence as a point of departure, it seems justified to argue that the density, conflicts and disasters build the master narrative; and that the wish to escape conditions, experienced as constraining, became subsumed under the former patterns of the past. Interestingly, this pattern mirrors the contemporary predicament and resonates with discourses of victimization. In the absence of complementing data sets, I can only do so much as to suggest that love and escape played perhaps a greater role than it appeared on the surface. Two mechanisms seem to silence or, at least, to overshadow these pasts. These are, for one, the ongoing powers exerted by the imagery of licit marriage, of affinity and consanguinity in the present, and the shame associated with illicitness.[191] And, secondly, the workings of more recent pasts on these more distant formations; in a word, the workings of loss.[192] In this way, the figuration of the island of love may serve as a representation and a reminder of further complementing dynamics similarly silenced or forgotten in the present.

But that is not all to it. The figuration allows to be read in another direction as well. That is, as the potential of the frontier society to become a space to forge (and not just undergo) new and surprising relationships. Now while the season of love in Shah's account of present Jharkhand has become the treasure it was as a temporally and spatially clearly limited heterotopia (Foucault 1986), the otherness of the island has, in theory at least, been permanent. The islands were not deemed to be nodes within labor migrations, but the destination of migration and foil of peasant fantasies. They involved spaces to be settled in and emerging societies. Surely, the interactions with the nearby mainland had been manifold and rarely negated; yet most of my interlocutors insisted upon the somewhat more lax regulations regarding social conduct on the new islands. Here, I was repeatedly told, the people were beyond the grasp of their families and

[191] The partial silences enfolding the marriages of girls from Sāgar to the women-starving areas of distant Uttar Pradesh seem to be yet another hint into that direction. I reflected on these distress marriages that straddle the line between convenient solution and human trafficking already in Chapter 6.2.

[192] I am aware, that the latter argument may be easily dismissed as being of a circular kind – yet in drifting through my material I cannot think of a more suitable approach.

villages. That is, they were removed from surveillance and control inflicted by tight kinship networks and, hence, more in charge of their own destiny. Again, these notions were only rarely brought forward with respect to one's own forefathers, but rather as a generalized comment and a remark on the relative levelling in the present.

But as noted already, emphases on love and freedom in the wilderness were, in present recollections of the past, clearly subordinated to master narratives of normalized poverty and the force of social disasters. The arrival of the paupers and their arduous emplacements were similarly remembered along neat sequences and particular trajectories. To these I will turn now. Before doing so I have to engage the very emergence of these spaces as it was thought by islanders; and, thus, to conceptions of local environments.

8.2. Of Horses, Men and Tigers: On the Meaning of Space at the Fringes

> The richest verbal expressions of identity do not necessarily come as individual words, the choice of terms or labels for social categories, but in the more extended use as well, in phrases, sentences, and entire stories.
>
> Ben Orlove, *Lines in the Water*

While the perception of the Sundarbans is dominated by the tiger, localized perceptions of Sāgar island group are centred also on horses. The latter animal seems to be inseparably tied to the emergence of these islands as spaces to identify and as places to dwell in.[193] This, at least, is what those, two powerful narratives entail that emplot the islands in time and space and illuminate, in the same time, environmental relations. To these I will turn now.

The first is, of course, the story about Gaṅgā's descending from heaven. Even while the horse remains passive throughout the events, it clearly remains the element around which the turbulent story unfolds: it is stolen or lost, fiercely searched for and triggers the tensions between the army of sons and the agitated sage.

The second narrative relates to events situated in a much more recent past. In contrast to the former, it articulates not the emergence of the space itself but emphasizes moments of

[193] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty devoted a long chapter to symbolism of the horse in Hindu mythology (O'Flaherty 1982, 149 – 280). Among others she shows that horses are frequently associated with netherworlds and depths in Hindu scriptures.

emplacement. But as the former, it is unfolding around the themes of horse, powerful actor and severe limitations of political powers in these liminal zones.

Organized around a recognizable structure and plot, the second narrative, too, is subjected to varying accentuations, elaborations and omissions. On the following pages I will engage two popular variants of the second narrative. The first one is a shorter and somewhat less bloody version, while the second one offers a greater detail of localized history. I was told both versions to account for Ghoṛāmārā's name. The name – literally 'Dead Horse' (*ghoṛā mārā*) – serves as emblem of the plot. It comes to little surprise that it is widely known on the island, yet hardly elsewhere. In the case of these two versions, the obvious change in focus, as well as inserted or omitted events, do not challenge the encompassing plot nor the horizon of interpretation illuminated therewith.

I start with the shorter version narrated by Niranjan Pradhan.[194] He said,

> "Earlier, all this here used to be only forest (*jaṅgal*). As the settlement started, two English brothers bought the whole island. One day they came over here, to take a look at their possession. They moored their boat at the shore and went on top of their horses onto the island. But the forest (*jaṅgal*) was thick and they could advance only with difficulties. All of a sudden they were attacked by a hungry tiger. One of the horses died immediately, but the two brothers remained unharmed. Nevertheless, they were so frightened that they decided to immediately leave the island and to give it as a gift to the next person they would meet. On returning to their boat they met a landlord (*jamidār*) from Midnapur and gave him, as they had promised, the whole island for free. From this day on the island belonged to this landlord. And that is why the island is known as Ghoṛāmārā."

Along these themes – British actors, wilderness, attack by a tiger, the dead horse, flight and the wish to sever all ties with the island – and in a similarly brief and sketchy version, the story was most often told. To many neither the name of the Sahibs nor the feudal landlord was known. Unequivocally, the island emerges as 'virgin' wilderness where the powers of the British reached their limits in a very real sense; where the British faced a territory they were unfit for; and where shock, awe and retreat determined the future of property relations and much more than capital relations.

These themes structured also more elaborated versions. The version I was told by Anil Seth over a long break during harvest, is a good example. It went as follows,

> "How Ghoṛāmārā got its name – that is a long story. When Ghoṛāmārā got its name, Sāgar Island did not yet exist. Sāgar island was water, only water. Ghoṛāmārā emerged before (*upardhan hayechilo*) – therefore the first and oldest area (*ãcal*) in Sāgar is Ghoṛāmārā. Only later did Sāgar arise (*utphanna hayechilo*). In those days,

[194] Interview, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 7.12.2009

Ghoṛāmārā was for nobody, nobody lived there. Only jungle. Into this jungle one British man (*sahib*) came to take a walk.

Looking here and there he arrived with a boat and roaming on the island he saw the jungle. He lived in a boat on the shore and had seen the entire jungle but he had not settled down. He thought, when the jungle would be cut and some people would be brought and settled here (*kicchu prajā-basati karle*) then people could live here – such a wealthy Sahib he was. Cutting this jungle, then, he let some subjects live here as an experiment (*gabeśona*). He let Adivāsi cut the jungle and told them: this is yours forever, as a reward for your struggle against the dangerous animals this is yours. In this way, the cutting of the whole jungle was going on: he gave money, but not as wages according to the work done, but gave it in this way [i.e. in the form of land].

From there on, settlers came to the land, embankments and all that were built. But since it is an area ruled by the tides (*joyār thānā*) and floods also in the interior parts, everywhere embankment had to be built. In this way, the people undertook his work. He also had an agent (*nāib*) and an office (*kāchārī*) – in this office his agent did all what was necessary to rule (*mantri-hantri*). His Sahib came monthly, every 15 days or fortnightly with money, distributed some and sailed away again. How much money was spent within the time [of his absence], to whom it belongs, to whom it was to give and how much – this he calculated in his absence. After 15 days he came again to give money to those who made it, to learn from papers who he was to give money to and to give it to them. In this way the work began and went on.

In the meantime, the Sahib came together with his younger brother on horses. That is, they took the boat, reached the shore with the boat, entered [the island] by foot and then rode their horses along the entire embankments. On the top of the embankments, they were riding their horses and watched from up there, if the people in the working in the interior did their work properly, if they cut everything, and to speak with the people.

In these times, in the jungle there was a tiger. The tiger approached the younger brother and took him with him. The younger brother. As the younger brother had vanished into the jungle and suffered, the horse was still there. He [the older brother] had went down and watched out and only the horse was there. Where did the brother go? Inspecting the area he only found the dead horse, but not the brother. He realized that he had been taken by the tiger that the tiger had picked him up under a loud roar and had vanished; that his turban and all that lay spread out and blood, a lot of blood from torn wounds had fallen onto the ground. On seeing the blood, the Sir (*sār*) thought to himself: He would not leave from here together with him [the younger brother]. No. And this estate (*lat*) I will not keep. In this state of despair he returned to his house. Back there, he said to himself after having thought about it long, on this night's morning I will give to the land free for 99 years to the first person whose face I shall see. That is, I will give it to him with papers (*tamar-pathay*). When the papers were written, he looked in small shops for boatmen who would transport his freight. In this way, after he made some telephone calls, he returned to his house. He did not enter the jungle again, since the brother had disappeared because of the horse. As he had returned to his house, the neighbouring house was the house of Perimon Mukherjee of Bardhamān[195] who lived also in Bardhamān.

[195] A district north of Calcutta/ Kolkata being the home of many settlers in the Sundarbans.

> At that time, in early morning, he met him carrying a small jug with a narrow neck. As the Sahib got to see him, he gave the papers and the estate to that Perimon for free. That king (*rajā*) let the whole forest in this estate (*lat*) being cut, the whole population and all that (*prajā-trajā*) settle down and all that.
>
> From the horse that was killed and eaten by the tiger, from this the name Ghoṛāmārā originates. Ghoṛāmārā number one. Back then on the estate was no cultivation. To that Perimon Mukherjee he gave the estate for free. Then the settlement and the agriculture (*dhān-tān*) slowly started."

With differing emphases, both stories evolve around a commercial enterprise by British men: legally and symbolically they take possession of the land; measure it and set forth a particular route of 'development'. Large estates, legal possession by absentee landlords, embankments, and various groups of immigrants associated with particular types of work – all are motifs mirroring regional history as it is narrated in archives and history books. Similarly do the Sahibs in both traditions – on paper and in this oral narrative – ultimately fail to *directly* implement their project of development. The reasons or better: the events that led to this conclusion are what strikes me as the most noteworthy in these stories. As they substantiate a localized sense of history infused with questions of power and belonging that converge precisely in localized environmental relations.

Both versions of the oral narrative contrast various categories of persons. These are arranged, first and foremost, along shades of indigenousness. In this regard, the foreign Sahibs are juxtaposed broadly with people from Bengal, or, in the more elaborated, second version, with adivāsi, peasants, boatmen and the rural gentry. On a closer look, the stories also imply a divide between poor migrants and the wealthy. The propinquity between the Sahib and the wealthy Bengali elite is articulated in their physical proximity and, most importantly, in their commissioning of settlement and development. It is interesting to note that both stories invert, in a sense, the imagery of the powerful elite: Here they do not figure as the exploiting and arbitrary rulers of their kingdoms as which they gained notoriety in political agitations and critical thought; but rather as benevolent patrons or kings acting as harbingers of development. They allow people to settle and actually bring money to commission work, rather than extract profits. In a word, through their wealth and as a distant, but well-meaning elite, they indirectly make the land what it is.

The proximity of the wealthy foreigners and wealthy Bengali who receives the estate is, furthermore, not the outcome of the gift, but its condition. In other word, it is not the gift that turns a farmer into a landowner and patron, but the gift fell upon him as member of the landowning class. This is clearly indicated in the narrations and further emphasized in the name

given to the recipient of the land titles: Mukherjee being a common Brahmin name in Bengal and a surname typical for the emerging urban middle class and rural gentry. Beyond a possible historical accuracy, the name implies prototypically the imagery of the absent landlord, as which he actually is alluded to in these and other narrations of past.

On another level, the basic narrative revolves around distinct elements or beings of 'nature': thick, almost impenetrable forest and embankments; a ferocious tigers and the deadly wounded horse. In these contrasting pairs, obviously, wilderness seems to be plotted against a settled landscape: jungle against settlement and, ultimately, nature against culture. Later I will show, that this dichotomy actually resurfaces throughout socially mediated perceptions on these islands, however limited and counterweighted. While the horse may very well qualify as an emblem of the vicissitudes of this very dichotomy, in this as much as in the story of Kapil Muni, the horse points primarily toward politics. Not only mediated by the politics of second nature (see below), but as 'direct' insignia of authority. As a symbol and commodity – both probably related to their facilitation of domination – horses loom large in the imagery of kingship and worldly power. In all narratives discussed in this chapter, horses are tied to political power, signal wealth and underline kingship. The mythical king used the sacrifice of the horse to cement his power or to stabilize his realm with a view on the future of his many sons. Similarly, used the Sahibs their horses either to inspect their possession and the development of its clearing; or simply for a joyride which is a luxury in itself.

In both cases, however, the very kingship or, to put it more cautiously, power is severely limited, if not shattered in the parts. Abducted into these parts, King Sagar's horse endangers in its absence the fulfilment of his vow and is, when found, connected to the unworthy death of the sixty thousand princes. While the horse in the second narrative shatters in its demise and, if you will, futility the powers of the Sahib. Either in its very demise or as a proxy for what happened to the brother, the corpse inflicts horror: forcing the man to flee and to literally throw his estate away.

In both cases, therefore, the very space of these islands emerges as one of grave dangers. As, to be more precise, a liminal space that in itself delimits political power. Kapil's hermitage is, as noted above, situated within the underworld (Bhaṭṭācarya 1976, 15). The virgin island in the second narrative emerges, on the other hand, as an amphibian wilderness beyond the reach of 'civilization'. To be sure, it is neither the muddiness of the cave nor the thick forest itself that threatens the power of mighty Sagar or the two Sahibs, but what dwells within it. Yet, the sage

is identified with the cave as much as the tiger is with the jungle. Therefore it is no exaggeration to understand the space itself as threatening.

In both spaces, the horse falls beyond the grasp of the powerful. It is not outright opposition, but 'merely' a fading influence of those who are sovereigns elsewhere. Vice versa, none of the narrative emplotments frames these spaces as being beyond power. They are neither anarchic, nor subaltern. But rather depicted as being ruled by dangerous or risky beings, that, by extension, have to be worshipped and then may offer protection. Kapil Muni, who is worshipped as god by pilgrims and residents alike most clearly epitomizes this conceptualization.

Indeed, the narratives articulate events that are to be mapped on different trajectories of the past altogether. Both formulate claims on aboriginality of the islands, yet develop on colonial history and mythological prehistory respectively. Seemingly unaffected by each other and running in a sense parallel, they do so without contesting the truth claims of each other.

The third narrative of localized powers and their ability to effectively limit translocal powers appears in another set of stories on tigers[196] wielding great inportance locally. That is, the most famous story of wondrous caveats of the Muslim saint Pīrbābā: his chasing away of the British through his powers over tigers.

Across the river, right on Midnapur's banks of the Huglī, the famous Mosque of Hijlī Śarīf is situated (see Figure 1). As many other places of translocal reverence in South Asian Islam, Hijlī Śarīf too is said to be the tomb of a powerful saint (H. Basu 1995; Werbner and Basu 1998; Mukharji 2010). Being the single most important ritual complex to Muslims from the surrounding coastal tracts, Hijlī looms large also in the daily life in the Colony.

[196] With the forest increasingly pushed back, so it was locally argued, the deities associated with the forest and tigers – Banbībī and Dakṣiṇ Rai – have lost relevance and were actually often stopped being worshipped. Yet several shrines and temples remained in the villages beyond Gaṅgāsāgar.

Figure 12. Bazar Print depicting Hijlī Śarīf

Regardless of their denominations, printed and sometimes framed picture postcards of Hijlī Śarīf adorn most homes in the Colony and on Ghoṛāmārā. While in Hijlī Śarīf various types of pictures are on sale, one particular type was most popular. It shows a hill crowned with the Mosque and tigers relaxing on the meadow around the complex (see Figure 12). Inquiring for the meaning of the tigers, I was told that they signify the extraordinary powers associated with Pīrbābā. He had, so I was assured, control over these dangerous animals and used to scare the British Army from the sacred compound. Beyond the general association of tigers with Muslim practices in the Sundarbans (T. K. Niyogi 1996, 122 – 127; Jalais 2010b, 152 – 163), this might also be understand as control over one danger to stall another. While most of my interlocutors dated these events sometime before Independence and emphasized the control of the Pīr, a small devotional compendium available at Hijlī Śarīf ties these events to the Quit India Movement sending ripples through Midnapur in 1942 (See B. Chakrabarty 1992a; B. Chakrabarty 1992b). In this hagiography (Giri 2007, 27) it reads,

> Among the large group of stories concerning his power, one amazing story prevails. It was an event of the year 1942 of the English calendar. At this time, in Medinipur the Quit India Movement went on. The British government had many white soldiers

> (*goṛa sainya*) stationed throughout the district. In the name of subduing the Movement oppression and looting was wielded on indiscriminate people – houses were burnt, shrines of deities, temple, mosque nothing was spared. At this time, one day the soldiers arrived at this mosque to loot.
>
> As soon as they were to enter the premise of the mosque, the terrifying howls of hundreds of tigers roaring unitedly arose from within the mosque. Utterly terrified the army fled. From then on they stayed in distance to cause no damage, and they kept distance under all circumstances. After the dreadful howling's end nobody ever heard it (again).

Once again, the coastal fringes emerge as beyond the grasp of a distant authority. The overwhelming force of the British army, whose overall dominance of Bengal remained unchallenged, appears in the narrative structure as failing to take full control of these unruly and liminal spaces. Conversely, the area emerges as a territory ruled by other powers. In contrast to the narratives of Kapil Muni or the British Sahibs and the dead horse, this narrative clearly articulates political defiance. The foreign powers do not only emerge as fragile and maladjusted, but as a threat. It could qualify, therefore, as 'counter-memory' proper. As such, one might add, it challenges not only the colonial narrative of dominance, but also thinned-out versions of the resistance. Since here it is not the movement itself defying the government, but a powerful saint. Thus, the third narrative emphasizes once again the powers of transcendental male actors. More than the others, does the social life of this story of Pīrbābā and the roaring tigers emphasize continuities and similarities on both sides of the rivers: hazardous environments, social transformations and fragile navigations. Against this background, I will now turn towards the dimensions most vividly adressed in the story of the dead horse: the toils of transformation, development and emplacement.

8.2.1. Struggles of Emplacement

Two broad pattern through which the jungles were settled and the space transformed into places pervaded these remembered pasts: the cleaning and toiling to transform the landscape itself; and the continuous unfolding of relations and, indeed, of persons through accumulation of lands.

On the islets of Ghoṛāmārā, Lohāchara and Supāribhāṅgā, the land had been distributed, so most of my interlocutors insisted, distributed as jungle. While the swampy 'wasteland' had been cleared and prepared in other villages nearby before migrating farmers arrived, here the arduous task of forest reclamation had been done by the paupers themselves. Thus, the conflation of

particular labor regimes (i.e. forest clearance) with ethnic identities (i.e. Adivāsi) and a sequential ordering of tasks (i.e. first clearance by Adivāsi, then farming by peasant castes) which has proven to be crucial for large parts of the Sundarbans[197] had been bypassed here. Or so it was remembered at present. True, an Adivāsi presence was repeatedly included into recollections – as, for instance, Anil Seth did in his versions of the name-giving incidents. Yet, most insisted that their grandfather or fathers had taken the land by themselves, had transformed it through their labour and had made it what it is in individual struggles.

Listening to contemporary residents, a past of difficult years and existential frictions with the adversities of untamed nature emerges. Decisive for the settlers' transformation of swamps into fertile fields had been labor and time. Labor to detract the landscape from the water; and time to let the saltiness wither as far as possible. The conceptualisation of the forest's colonisation operated, therefore, occasionally in the idiom of cleaning. Thus, the zone had to be cleaned up (*sāf diye*), had to be cleared (*pariṣkār karle*) and so on.

Certainly, storms were listed as difficulties to shape the place, yet, again, not as full-fledged disasters. Likewise, those who remembered their forefathers witnessing the Red Flood on these islands, did not relate it to the transformations of the land. As if the Red Flood was situated on another trajectory of the past altogether. That being said, the environment remained hazardous and deadly.

Tigers and other ferocious animals formed the threats most often woven into narrated pasts. Set against the comparatively large tiger population and the widespread identification of the Sundarbans with these predators, this is little surprising. Much in line with the story of the dead horse, then, tiger were remembered as a constant threat and mute presence within the jungle. Only to be receding and, ultimately, disappearing with the extension of settlements.

Much less present in regional representations were two further main impediments: fevers and the deficient supply with fresh water. While the latter was most often identified as an inherent condition of the salty zones (*nonā jāygā*) before the advent of deep tube wells, the former was often remembered as an outcome of the deprivations suffered during the first years.: It emerged as effect of poverty, malnutrition and toil. Both, widespread sickness and thirst for sweet water, became, hence, somewhat of bitter past against which the ensuing comfort and ease could be measured. And times, they also served to accentuate a sense of pride: for rumours had it that

[197] As noted above, I included several interviews in nearby Dhablāt. Yet the partners were rather randomly chosen, the resulting data is therefore fragmentary. That being said, Adivāsi were alluded to in conversations on the past. But only as clearers of the forest who quickly left after their task had been completed. Conversely, my interlocutors here remembered their forefathers as having taken on the land in an already more or less cultivable state.

precisely because of the abysmal conditions and the hard work, the landlords were recruiting only the strong and fit to join them on the islands. Athough available evidence suggests rather the opposite (i.e. landlords were eager to fill the ranks and not selective), this notion only underlines a particular stance drawing from these memories: in lieu of better term I will calls this an ethos of survivors. For those who remained had survived the odds; more than that, they had eventually prospered.

Across the islands and islets that interest me here, narrations of transformation have resembled each other closely. Indeed, there hardly seems to have been differences in the overall dynamics. While the larger islets Ghoṛāmārā and Lohāchara had irreversibly disjointed from the larger Sāgar, they were included, indeed: dragged into the same trajectory of development. Reminiscencing, my interlocutors never alluded to significant social or cultural differences between these tiny islets. The only difference lay, perhaps, in the emergence of differentiations of settlement structures. While the largest islet, Ghoṛāmārā, was lively remembered as having harboured several villages, Lohāchara figured as so small that there were no discernable villages on the islet. Thus, the island figured for all practical purposes as a village unit. The third islet, Supāribhāṅgā, did not feature grown village structure altogether: the very presence of settlement structures on the island is an ambivalent matter. Official publications frame the islet as unsettled throughout its ephemeral existence. Similarly, several of my interlocutors remembered only seasonal presences there. Indeed, the name of the islet, which is to be translated as 'Broken Supāri' (supāri bhāṅgā), was commonly thought to derive from broken Supāri-palms (*areca catechu*) under which cow shepherds used to rests. Consequentially, the cows and their herders were acknowledged as the sole users of the land.[198] Others, however, sternly emphasized permanent settlement structures on the islet. A few of the Colony's residents took actually refuge on the islet during the drawn-out decades between having become landless islanders and the eventual resettlements. What is worth underlining here is that the islets were since their inception woven together by close relations. These were established by parallel property relations (same landlords, accumulations of land etc.), a common trajectory and by quotidian exchange routes. Networks crisscrossed especially the three smaller islets and were to turn out to be critical in the face of shrinking and, ultimately, submergence.

Tightly related therewith, he second trope shaping the recollections consists of the potentials enfolded in the very threats and limitations. Moving into newly cut land, the settlers were

[198] Since the fruits of Supāri palms, the betel nut, are an essential part of the famous and locally lucrative pān it may be doubted that the cow herders were the only ones using the resources even within the logic of this narrative.

framed as facing the potentiality of not only to make a living, but to carve out a place and to fashion themselves in ways they wanted. To be sure, this perspective was not unanimously shared and perhaps silenced for the sake of notions of histories of displacements and despair, yet it resurfaced repeatedly. It did so, on one hand, through the imagery of anonymity and relations based on (freely-chosen) love or choice (see also Carsten 1995). The trope of potentiality appeared most often as a contrast to density and conflicts in the mainland tracts.
But even those who did not invoke impoverishment, framed the arrival on the islands as one of unfolding possibilities, too. Pasts of active men emerged, who arrived either by themselves or along kinship networks only to become landowning peasants – exemplifying actually the ideal of a rural frontier society.
In all their deprivation and hazards, these early years became synonymous with the continuous accumulation of land, the unfolding of a new vertical relations. In other word, in this period of initial emplacement as islanders, hazards, labour and success had been tightly interwoven.
In retrospective and remembered through the prism of the much more recent emplacement as rehabilitated victims, the emplacement as 'original' islanders followed three phases: translocation, years of toiling and suffering and onset of prosperity. At the beginning of the process had been the *jaṅgal* and at the end, ideally, a homestead (*bhite*) – that is a field (*jami jāygā*), a house (*ghar*), a garden (*bāgān*) and pond (*pūkūr*). With gradual transformations, distinctions between phases were blurred. Perhaps because the reclamations formed a distant memory. But also, I suggest, because the transformations of wilderness into a garden did not entail losses or disasters. It rather involved its opposite: the hardly measurable setting in of gradual comfort (*sukh*, *sbasti*). Following the master narrative at work here, the local poet Bijay Chākrābartī (Chākrābartī 1415, 1) notes,

> "The dense forest is covered with water
>
> The Land is in the middle
>
> […]
>
> People have come and began dwelling
>
> Small huts, cleaned courtyard
>
> A feast for eyes
>
> Makes one feel happy"

The sequence of toil, suffering and prosperity illuminates, localized perceptions of 'nature'. Beyond the dicotomies of wilderness versus homestead or village, these are wet and dry; as well as, most importantly, salty and sweet. As pairs of opposites, they obviously invite structuralist analysis. Yet as polarizations they are traversed by gradual changes and are perhaps better understood through the logic of produced nature and as hybrid entanglements (N. Smith 1984; Castree 2001). The notion of graded or hybrid nature, however, undergirds labour as relation that gives literally birth to the biophysical and points to continuities across the dichotomous divide, to exchanges and to regulations of access. Illustrative is the example of the homestead which is only ephemerally wrested from 'nature', or that of the gradual flux between salty and sweet changing with years and season. The dichotomization can neither be sustained on the material nor on the symbolic level (see also Chapter 9) and it could be used only as a 'blanket label' (Descola 1996, 84) within comparative projects (see i.e. Lévi-Strauss 1976). These dynamics are mirrored in localized conceptions of trees, too.

The relevance of trees involves several layers. On the one hand, however, many residents emphasized the protection of the very settlement through trees. Primarily alluded to protective shields of mangroves, it also implied widely planted, sweet varieties of trees. For these, too, were understood to protect the settlement either in times of storms or surges. They were seen to be means of survival that could be climbed or clung to; or, more actively, as tempering storms and surges through their very presence.

Trees had been cultivated for more immediate reasons, too. Several of my interlocutors explicitly underscored the ecological benefits of trees. Thus, trees were understood to attract rains and to benefit agriculture – which depended as indicated above on abundant rains as sole input of water. A multitude of plants and trees had been planted, of course, for economic benefits.[199] Yet, I am most interested in the third layer: the role of trees for emplacements and cultivation of belonging. For it is not the cutting of all trees that made the landscape beautiful

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[199] Coconut palms, for instance, flourished in areas that still were quite salty and its products were widely used to sustain families or to maintain the dwellings: coconuts were consumed, while leaves and trunks were used to reinforce buildings, tanks or fences. The leaves and trunks of Date palms were similarly used; their fruits however were leased out to small, family-based businesses that collected the sweet resin in the winter months, cooked it into molasses or jaggery and sold both as rural speciality to tourists. (Interestingly, this latter business is the only I encountered that was dominated by local Muslim families: Beyond the obvious relation of Islam and date palms no other reason was mentioned for this development.) Eucalyptus trees, as a third and final example, were slightly more demanding than palms and line what is locally understood as highland: paths and roads. Recently being the focus of aspiring, yet largely defunct Social Forestry projects (cf. U. Banerjee 1990), they were frequently planted on private grounds to generate cash in the not so distant future. When, I was repeatedly told, substantial cash is needed for a dowry or another ritual plus feast, they could readily be sold to the local construction industry. Beyond these economic values, these trees also were tied to aesthetic needs. They made the colony beautiful and signalled – as an aesthetic value – transformations, indeed: the growth of the place.

and the land bountiful – as might be deduced from all the talk of clearences in colonial writing. The contrast of forested and deforested spaces, lumping all trees together as a somewhat unified forest and opposing it to fields, had little significance among the islanders. To be sure, specific varieties and habitats had been unified under the amorphous label of Mangroves – symbolizing, both, the salty past and threatening wilderness (*jaṅgal*). Many other varieties, however, emerge as emblem and evidence of a sweet landscape (*miṣṭi jāygā*). They are evidence of transformations as they would perish in salty conditions; and they are emblem as they are in themselves fruit or producer of fruit and therefore part of a rural abundance.[200]

In contrast to the trees of salty swamps, the trees of the sweet landscape are considered to be very heterogeneous. Beyond economic value, several other varieties were are subject to complex interactions and interpretations. This holds especially true for mango (*mangifera indica*) and bodhi trees (*ficus religiosa*). In contrast to less demanding varieties, bodhi and mango trees do hardly survive in salty ground. Both can therefore be planted only years after a respective area had been reclaimed and embanked. Conversely, both were said to grow slowly and in the more salty areas closer to the tides altogether poorly.

Converging environmental states and times, they are first of all, evidence and symbol of the transformation the landscape has seen. That is, they signal the processual implacement of social groups enabled by the establishment of sweet places that literally *had been* a pushing back of the salty.[201] If mangroves marked one end in a dynamic continuum of possible landscapes and were signifying inhospitable, dangerous and salty spaces, then mango and bodhi trees are at the opposite end. And in some ways not just at, but *the very* opposite end. It articulates, therefore, successful transformations of former swamps into gardens; as well as a long-standing social presence within these now lost gardens. On the salty fringes where today's colonies are located, many of my interlocutors had planted sweet trees from early on. Precisely the absence of blossoms and fruits, as the overall impaired growth was frequently alluded to at present to illustrate the overall poor quality of the soil in the colonies.

Thus, beyond a narrowly defined place-making, trees generally seem to have enabled a somewhat tighter grip on the future, a measure to engage the ephemerality of being on these

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[200] In their study about Western India, Gold and Gujar have demonstrated comparable processes. There the past is considered to be a time of trees and contrasted with an (almost) treeless present. As a narrative of degradation, this very imagery figures, as the writers show, as an instance of cultural critique tying the environment to politics and sacralised order spearheaded by the king (Gold and Gujar 2002; Gold 2001). Throughout the large differences, trees and time are bound up with each other in a moralizing idiom.

[201] I am thankful to Rebecca Hoffman (RCC, Munich) for pointing out that in Oceania trees and their fruits are seen as entailing a continuity with the ancestors and thus a continuity of society enacted through care of the orchards and the act of eating itself.

fringes. They were not just seen to ring in abundance and sweetness, but were themselves a manifestation thereof. To the latter I will turn to now.

8.2.2. Rural Riches

Exact bounds and their timings are somewhat floating and in retrospective impossible to precisely date, but after the arduous drainages and transformations a time of comfort and abundance had set in. Comparatively short and fleeting, this past was remembered in nostalgic tones bordering the fantastic. Imageries of overabundance, the absence of threatening hazards, and peace shaped social memories of these years and decades. Both, exaggerations and patterned forgetfulness, obviously pervading these narratives, are little surprising when held against the engulfing pasts and the uncertain present (see e.g. Malkki 1995). In contrast to other cases, however, the narrations here were not limited to a structural similarity, but merge into a homogenous figure: they virtually condense into *one* version of this period of the past; illuminating, therefore, a particularly powerful master narrative unfolding through a related sets of motifs.

Narrations of lost landscapes were, for one, traversed by imageries of abundance. The landscapes of memory were structured by an everyday that lacked nothing. Speaking of foods, it hardly could have been any better; or, to say the least, the everyday had been a realization of Bengali ideal conceptions (see Greenough 1983). Sumptuous, feast-like meals and an unrivalled fertility had not just been achieved in good years or fertile seasons, but were a sign of normal conditions. In narrations staple foods, as rice, vegetable and cheap fish varieties, receded as being taken for granted, only to give way for the emphasis of precious and contemporarily scarce foods. Precious food served to illuminate these times and their places in a metonymic fashion along four broad themes. To these I will turn now.

The first relates to the (easy) availability of mangoes and their exuberant sweetness. The land had been so fertile, I was repeatedly told, that anything would grow quickly. "When", said Madhol Giri, "a seed slipped out of your hands, there would be a tree, so good was the soil." This imagery was very often applied to or, one could even say, refined with respect to mango trees. Mangoes would explode while still hanging on the tree and new saplings would grow right out of them. To begin with, this motif was, most likely, used as an allegory to index the superb fertility of the soil – so good that the plants showed an exuberant, if not suicidal growth. As a condition, the motif itself draws not only on the mere existence, but also on the thriving

of mango trees. Narrations of overabundant trees and exploding mangoes imply, therefore, advanced transformations of the spaces that encompass temporal depth and spatialized belonging.

The second imagery of abundance points at the easy availability and actual consumption of costly varieties of fish. Cherished, but lesser costly varieties of sweet water fish (i.e. *rui* [*Labeo rohita*], *magur* [*Clarias magur*]), and most prominently the most precious *iliś* (*Tenualosa ilisha*) were explicitly remembered as part of the daily diet. The waters of the river and of smaller channels traversing the island had teemed with *iliś*, so the story goes, and only little effort had been necessary to lay one's hand at them. In utter contrast to the present which was, as noted above, marked by seasonal availability, scarcity and extremely high prices for this particular variety. A fish that is in contemporary Bengal tied to conspicuous consumption and an index of lavishness (Roberts and Sen 1998), emerged as part and parcel of normality.[202]

Beyond the concept of overabundance a further concept is entailed therein – one that seems to be of crucial importance for the nostalgic narrations of this period. That is, the physical distance from and social independence of regional markets. Locating the bodies of fish in one's cooking pot and not regional market hubs, as these memory patterns do, networks are, for the moment, blended over. Ghoṛāmārā or Lohāchara were, of course, well integrated into commercial markets. In other speech situations and administrative accounts, it was clearly stated that catches in those days had been rowed over to the bustling markets of Kakdwip and moved from there towards urban markets. Nevertheless, and this, seems to be worthwhile to emphasize, this integration was negated by these memory patterns. I will return to this in a moment.

Both, the third and fourth theme are connected to each other through the figure of the cow. In contrast to aforementioned themes, these two are on par with, yet dramatize conceptualizations of modest rural prosperity. On one hand, narrations of the past were interwoven with hints at the ready availability of milk. "Everyone had so much milk for breakfast that he could let his hand disappear in it", was one of the phrases that seemed to capture the past particularly well and was, thus, repeatedly conveyed to me. In this and related formulations, a product is taken up that had been omnipresent though the numerous cows omnipresent, but that was at the same time perennially scarce in the Colony. This motif relies on the constant availability of a substance being quintessential for rural well-being.

[202] Even while elements of this imagery border the fantastic (irrelevance of seasons, normalized consumption of an extremely precious commodity) these constructions may hint also at an earlier greater availability and, hence, the rapid shrinking of fish stocks in the last few decades.

Not only as producer of milk, cows are in themselves related to conceptions of rural well-being.[203] The final motif took up on that. Again bordering the fantastical, several women proclaimed that cows venturing into the *jaṅgal* searching for food, would return at night with new-born calves.

Excess, abundance or – to say the least – the absence of want was thought of as a consequence of fertility inherent to the soils of these particular islands, but equally as outcome of the very cultivation of landscapes. Less obvious is a third dimension of past prosperity: i.e. the spatial expanse of the land and the landscape around it. Here, at first, not as distance from the river, but as length and breadth of the owned or cultivated land, and as the sheer limitlessness to gain even more lands.

Lands owned and subsequently lost to the river were frequently remembered as having amounted to 60 *bighā* or more; and only rarely as below 10 *bighā*. These numbers would have turned several of my interlocutors into landlords or, at least, into rich intermediate peasant (*jotedar*), and subjected their landholdings to the West Bengal land ceiling rules at once.[204] These numbers are similarly at odds all we know of the fragmented landholdings shaping the recent history of coastal Bengal. But even while ownership of land and its exact size certainly form one set of historical data being gathered thoroughly and preserved comparatively well, it still is impossible to triangulate these claims. The lands themselves are sunken, documents are either absent or dispersed, and the Ministry of Land and Land Reform which is obliged to keep track, *effectively* holds their documents under lock and key. Against the historical background of the region, the social composition of the settlers and the patterns of subinfeudation which most often prevented accumulation of large holdings by farmers through prohibitive prices, these sizes seem rather unlikely.[205] Against the background of nostalgia and an altogether exceptional episode in otherwise impoverished pasts, these sizes emerge as not surprising at all.

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[203] Although, the materialist argument that famous Indian cow is holy because South Asian were and are depending on her to survive is simplifying, the fascinating debates fanned by this Harris' famous approach have outlined the many roles of cows for rural economies very well (Harris et al. 1966; S. A. Freed et al. 1981).

[204] The abolition of the notorious Zamindari system of landlordism and, thus, the reordering of land ownership, as I will show also in Chapter 8.4., an important means of the postcolonial restructuring of India. In theory, at least. Complementing the empowerment of cultivators, the land reform was incumbent on the fixation of land ceiling – land owned in excess was to be taken over by the state and to redistribute among landless populations. Again, in theory. The exact ceiling was subject to reformulation and protracted contestations for long and this is not the place to engage these in detail. After the 1972 Amendment of West Bengal's 1955 Land Reforms Act, the absolute ceiling (regardless of size of family) was at 22.22 acres of unirrigated land (Lieten 1990, 2265) – that is roughly at the size of 67 *bighā*.

[205] There is no denying the fact that rich peasants (*jotedar*) were influential (S. Bose 2007, 10f). Yet listening to my interlocutors pasts emerged where all other classes or status groups were denied.

To be sure, the vastness of lost lands, indeed their estate-ness, emerged not only as a consequence of entrepreneurial spirit of families or their founding figures, but also as a consequence of an easy availability of land. Here lies one of fundamental contrast to the mainland, or more precise: to the remembered past spatially tied to those areas. While the mainland has been fundamentally marked by population pressure, the deltaic islands were remembered as a vast emptiness. This imagery, of course, resonates well with many other 'settler societies' the world over. But it is particularly striking given the strong hierarchical relations and the feudal character of settlements in these tracts emphasized throughout all available literature (see Chapter 4.4.). Even when settlers were remembered as being dependent on landlords, this hardly ever emerged as a constraint, as a source of contempt or as a site of conflict. Put differently, remembrances of the past negated the constraints of rural land ownership and reframed hierarchical relations to landlords as being of a facilitating character. Related therewith, it is worth emphasizing that two moments seem to be entirely forgotten or silenced which resonate well within archives and became, furthermore, crucial for all mass mobilizations rocking Bengal's countryside in the second half of the 20th century. That is, on one hand, multidimensional dependences on landowners who vested political and ritual authority in themselves.. And, on the other hand, highly exploitative sharecropping relations. Landlords emerge in these narrated pasts as complex, but never volatile actors. Interactions with them were remembered as limited to the extension of cultivation and then the acquisition of further land. It is interesting to note that the practice of sharecropping – which has been at the heart of highly exploitative relations and consequentially at the heart of political contestations in postcolonial Bengal – was remembered simply as a mode of acquisition of land. It emerged as simply an extension of cultivation that led to further savings and then, almost naturally to the purchase of titles to the land under the plow. Lending, political dominance and physical violence disappeared behind this master narrative. As did historically proven subinfeudations that were actually impeding rural well-being as they meant incrementally increasing, skyrocketing rents.

A further, but even less visible dimension of the past remembered, its prosperity and beauty, lies within a generalised social harmony. Emphasizing the nostalgia inherent in these reminiscences, social relations were narrated as of a better quality and fundamental unity. Beyond the vertical, yet smooth relations between settlers and landowners within memoires, no further hierarchies were left room for. This pertains, of course, to peaceful relations between various caste and religious groups dwelling on the islands. Differences had been, so it was

commonly remembered, unmade in a sense of mutual brotherhood (*bhāibhāi*) pervading everyday relations and respect for ritual activities alike. These narratives resonate well with most of the writing on coastal Bengal (Nicholas 1962; S. C. Sarkar 2010), but the emphasis on the irrelevance of caste as a factor shaping politics in contemporary West Bengal has been repeatedly questioned (Marvin Davis 1983; Chandra and Nielsen 2012). It is not difficult to curb the narrations for, at least, hints of a past more enmeshed in social distinctions. There is, for one, the already noted, conspicious absence of Adivāsi. As hard-working, 'naturally adapted' and effective clearer of the jungle they were woven into narratives of colonisations of the forests; but their presence had been erased from later periods. Another hint are erstwhile caste-specific neighbourhoods on Ghoṛāmārā: albeit literally reworked by coastal erosions, they attest to a more segregated past in precisely the times of what is framed as the greatest amity.
Beyond the application to social stratification, the emphasis on greater harmony was also widely used to underline the benefits of being remote; of being detached from the market of politics. It is used to invoke a rural cosmos – I am exaggerating here to make the point clear – a cosmos whose internal homogenization was yet unaffected by the strife of party politics and, equally important, the detrimental forces of market economy.
While communalist conflicts arguably played only a minor role in postcolonial West Bengal after the extremely bloody years around Independence, the dynamics of revolutionary struggles and party politics are all the more violent. The latter were powerfully shaping political present of the island along many guises – i.e. in quests for jobs, resettlement, provisions or emergency relief. Precisely the absence of the strife and bloodshed (hiṃśa) party politics entail, emerged as the final nostalgically remembered quality of the bygone golden pasts. And invoke a life on Ghoṛāmārā, Lohāchara and Supāribhāṅgā that was precisely in its remoteness untainted by the incursions of party affiliation, the power of ration cards and the dependence on big men of party politics.

8.3. Remembering Loss

Warmth entered the narratives when the metaphorical tides eventually turned: when the wilderness (*jaṅgal*) had been pushed back, when the salty swamps had turned into sweet and arable land, when families had been forged. Dearth, fever and tigers were receding and the picture of a rural Eden emerged. Large estate-like plots and the overall fertility of the soil secured exuberant harvests and let the poor migrants enjoy chronic overabundance. Yet, these

very rustic riches were short-lived. Mostly within the same generation the wealth had evaporated again: Coastal erosions set in and made the lives miserable again. The encroaching river broke, took and literally chewed up their land. While human life hardly was in danger, the intense coastal erosions turned peasants again into paupers and emerged, therefore, as true disaster. The river had to be fled, houses to be moved and, finally, islets to be left for good. Within one or, at most, two generations, the families of virtually all my interlocutors had completed a threefold journey: From the mainland to Ghoṛāmārā, Lohāchara or Supāribhāṅgā respectively; as freshly landless islanders onto embankments; and, much later, on to one of the dense resettlement colonies on nearby Sāgar island. In the same time, the trajectory was always also told along that other line: from abject poverty to transient wealth to a slightly less harsh poverty.

While the results of these changes were comparable, indeed almost familiar, the incidents and drawn-out processes through which the latter unfolded were of another kind. In its uneventfulness and dispersed character these were, obviously, difficult to address. And it might be so that the insistence on a discourse of victimization as well as, perhaps, the puzzlement of most observers had done its part to reach this state. Be that as it may, the narrations of losses were structured by three different tropes. That is, their encroaching nature; particular times of intensified erosions; and, finally, a widely told storyline unfolding around one particular tree and drowning children. Articulating a widely shared sense of helplessness, these tropes were, on the other hand, interspersed with particular silences and gaps. I will enter the discussion of these tropes and framings through that one fragment of pasts frequently omitted.

8.3.1. Vanishing Shores: Silencing the Prehistory

Between the hyperbole and talkativeness through which the pasts of arrival on the islands and, then again, the ambivalent re-rooting in Colonies were remembered, silences lurked. The modes of detailed narrations of particular phases, almost in slow motion, and, then again, a skipping of other phases alternated with each other. Omissions such as these are intimately related to the bumps and loopholes of social time. As produced outcomes, they similarly point to cultural politics (Trouillot 1995).[206] Concerning the past of the islanders, this applies, first of all, to the

[206] Silence, blanks and gaps have also often shown to be tied to the workings of trauma. Taken together with overwhelming flashbacks they mark, as a diverse scholarship has shown, the texture of memory out of bounds: the

onset of erosions. And here – to be more precise – to the *overall* onset of the hazard and from there on and in all conversations, the onset of threats to *particular* homesteads.

Earlier, in chapter 7, I had reflected on the awkward temporality of coastal erosions, on its drawn-out character that is experienced nevertheless through a series of deflecting small events. This complexity is added another layer through, what might be termed as, its prehistory: the time before and the time of its onset.

Many residents understood, as I will show in greater detail in the next chapter, erosions as intrinsic to rivers, as part of river's activity, related to her innermost being and, thus, her grace. Consequentially, among them the erosions were seen as having had no beginning in history in a modern sense. Having never affected Sāgar or the smaller neighbouring islets, at one point in time, however, they had begun to kake themselves felt locally. Many others, however, insisted that the erosions started only quite recently, that they have become a feature of the river hitherto free from it. In both figurations, the hazards of the more distant past were rather framed along the standard narrative of the Sundarbans – tiger, wilderness, cyclones, disease – to which erosions were added only to replace the former subsequently.

Regardless if the voraciousness of the river was understood to be an ontological trait or a later developed characteristic, the pasts of rural riches were, as I have noted above, one of stable outer limits of the island. And it is precisely this stability or fixedness that was lost and turned on its head. The moment of reversal, of a sustained hazard is, according to speaker and situation, dated somewhere in the second half the 20th century. Devnonā Jānā – one of my oldest interlocutors – dated[207] the turning point and, thus, the onset of shrinkages in the year 1942 (beng. 1349/50) and issued therewith the most remote date I encountered during my fieldwork. Although he did not draw a relation of any kind with the immense cyclone that occurred in the same year, an association seems highly likely. For the cyclone figures, as shown above, as the single most important marker of remembered history in these parts.

During most conversations, however, the onset of the erosions was not remembered as being coincident with other dramatic events. Most speakers dated the onset roughly in the 1960ies and 1970ies. From these decades onward, land-loss had become viral and displacements an integral part of normal routine on these islands.

individual or social inability to reframe sudden and dramatic experiences into proper memories (see Caruth 1991; Caruth 1995).

[207] Interview, 21.11. 2009, Gaṅgāsāgar colony

Only when set against the background of localized environmental knowledge and geographical research – coinciding both in the notion of ultimately endemic presence of erosions – the powers of forgetting or silence for these dates becomes evident. For here the erosions were remembered as having set in or, to say the least, as having turned dramatic in roughly the time period when today's residents of the Colony saw their whole or remaining lands vanishing into murky waters. The nothing but fundamental instability, fluidity and vulnerability of the islands is, hence, silenced in collective identities.
The silence enveloping erosion's prehistory allows for the articulation of clear temporal phases and distinctions. It allows to distinguish, I suggest, between a time before and a turbulent time after the onset. In doing so, it sets the ground for a retrospective appropriation of encroaching processes as disastrous events – a perception that is contingent upon discernable intervals and periods. Silences on preceding fluidities and shrinkages of the local shores ars most likely related also to questions of legitimization and political negotiations. In the allusion to distinct starting points, it will have helped to render environmental suffering visible and to justify claims toward state actors. What is more: most likely arbitrarily fixed dates were taken up by media representations and to be cemented, as I will show later, with the arrival of public memory.
The silence encountered so far is mirrored in that on the slow nearing of the river, on the years when the distance between shore and homestead ahd been slowly reducing. It is mirrored, in other words, in the negation of the emergence and aggravation of threat itself. For as much as the erosions were thought as having no effects on the island before a distinct turning point, they enter recollections of the past *exclusively* with their onset on erstwhile plots. That is, erosions began to have made inroads only when the destructive waters had literally arrived at one's door. In glossing over inherent instabilities and earlier occurrences of embankment collapses, floods and shrinkages, the *focus* of memory becomes clear. It is obviously much less framed by larger groups (cf. H. Basu 2004), but is limited to the smallest social units: families and, perhaps, immediate neighbours. Neither the village, nor the neighbourhood emerges as the socio-spatial frame of memory, but the homestead. The dialectics of remembered wealth and silenced hazards is mirrored, thus, primarily in narratives of losses affecting society almost individualised. Particularly with respect to one's own land, the past was characterised by a nothing but abrupt inversion of abundance and stability. Listening to islanders, it seemed as if the erosions started over night, as if the river entered the fields surprisingly, out of the blue.
Yet through repeated questions and reconstructions I could establish that the largest number of fields and homes were (remembered) as once having been distant from the river. Presently

skipped in recollections of the past was, hence, this gradual reduction of distance, this shrinking of something like a buffer zone and rise of an ever increasing threat. This does not mean, however, that the plight of groups and persons affected earlier was negated. Nor were the recollections meant, I suggest, to articulate a sense of original suffering – for the surprising onset might be read to suggest that the narrators were the first victims. Neither was the case, as all my interlocutors freely admitted that there were many before them who had seen their land submerging. Nevertheless, as a narrative structure and mode of remembering, I argue, surprise and promptness situated the erosions within the temporality of the classic disaster. They became comparable to and made meaningful through the figure of an instant event, a punctual destruction. Suddenly the river had circled in, as it were, and had begun to break (*bheṅglo*) and feed on (*khālo*) on the plot or the house. This at least is what standardised narrations suggest: they freeze the gradual, most likely ubiquitous and temporally dispersed transformations; crystallizing the erosions as events. Against the immense difficulties to address the slow violence of drawn-out, barely visible shrinkages, this silencing appears to be a culturally-mediated strategy. One that condenses processes into shorter time frames; and subsumes environmental suffering into tight narrative plots. It helps, therefore, to confront suffering by making it intelligible in the first place. Bordering, thus, the rhetoric of disasters and refugee experiences. While nobody told her story along the lines of instantaneous displacements or a homelessness-over-night, through these temporal dimensions and their silences, the calamity was remembered as unexpected, unforeseeable and a shock. Mirroring many other voices, the short summary Sheikh Motalib[208] gave one day illuminates this particular approach on the past very well. He said, "[…] everybody had land and the people cultivated their lands and therefore they had a very good life. But suddenly the land began to disappear in the waters."

The theoretically possible, albeit absurd assumption that the islanders would not have cared about distance to the river is countered by the tight surveillance of the river that I noted in preceding chapters. And here especially in one of the main tropes giving solace to residents in the present: the idea that it cannot and will not happen again because the Colony and the houses within it are far from the river. A sentiment condensed beautifully in the agitated claim, voiced by one of the squatters on the edge of the Colony, Sheikh Junus. Nothing will happen to us, he boldly remarked, as "[t]he river is in the distance!"

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[208] Interview, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 30.7.2009

8.3.2. Particular nights

During most conversations, the slowly encroaching nature of erosions was quickly emphasized; and continued to frame many memories throughout. If anything, the phrase '*par par'* (gradually or step by step) seemed to structure recollections. Slowly the land had been lost and during many conversations that seemed to be all to it.

Paradoxically, the slow and steady character of erosions has – on a closer look – been tied to particular events. Drawn out chronic crises, the normality of hazards were complemented by and even read through the imagery of eventful deflections. Following localized conceptions, it is useful to differentiate two different classes of deflecting events constituting or amplifying erosions. The first would be that of storms. The second class, however, is that of precisely foretold spring tides (*bharā kaṭāl*) haunting the residents on the island's edges. Both classes of events are intersections of meteorological and astrological processes with social vulnerabilities culminating in an intensified attack of the sea on the coast – to rely on Schmitt's militaristic prose for once (1954).

Both are times of roaring waters, actualized dangers, of intensified erosions and their hightened visibility. Nevertheless, storms and spring tides differ considerably. Although severe storms certaily were 'frequent life experiences' (Bankoff 2003) on these coasts, they ultimately remained to be non-routine events. Too long were the intervals and too vague the predictability. While the dreaded spring tides, on the other hand, were bound up with nothing but routine patterns, yet were experienced in the worst case as truly disastrous events. However, the distinction between these two classes of events that I want to stress here, relates not to their respective destructive effects, but to their relevance as 'time of hazards'. During my fieldwork, seasonal spring tides emerged as moments through which dramatic pasts were forcefully inserted back into the present. Similarly, their presence became a non-material, sensual marker of memory shaping past and present: as an actualization rooted in collapsed temporal registers. I have noted already that storms were of limited relevance for the islanders. Although acknowledged as motors of coastal erosions, storms hardly figured as tropes to remember the shrinking of the landscape or the loss of homesteads. The latter was almost entirely narrated through the interrelated tropes of encroaching waters, on the one hand, and the stark visibility of their destructiveness in particular nights. Both – the encroachment and the nights – combined into something of an event. What is at work here, are, I contend, patterns of perceptions allowing to condense drawn-out processes and to frame them along culturally mediated

interpretations. These are only underlined, or so it seems, by the sensual qualities of the fullmoon spring tide tide involving roaring tidal waters, extreme hights of the waters swashing over embankments and the splencour of the full moon.

To sidestep silence on shrinkages, or better: the difficulties in addressing them, and to inquire further into these sketchy memories of the really disastrous, the nights, that is the time of the hazards themselves served as an entry point. As moments when the past was present; and as a moment through which this particular facet of the past was narrated. The clear temporal limits (within the year, within the transformations of the moon) and the collective affectedness were enriched by a set of sensual qualities. Three elements can be distinguished here. First, the clearly visible heightening of the water; second, an increase in noise, the roaring of the river or the sea; and, third, the time of the full moon itself. Of these three main qualities I will engage here only with the moonlit night, which I understand as a sensual index of a narrow time frame. I do so not to privilege particular formations or contents of remembering, but to emphasize that the figuration of the 'eventful night' structured narrations of losses. The other qualities emerged more as contextual triggers of memories in the present, as moments in amphibian landscapes of memory and not as a trope when sat down to talk 'history'.

In the often slippery oscillation between process and event, between encroaching and punctual collapse, the brightly light nights of the full moon, thus, held a special position. The highest waters and the worst spring tides (*kaṭāl*, *bhaṛā kaṭāl*) were remembered as having occurred with the full moon during and immediately after the rains. Against the background of oceanography I want to critically reflect on this prioritization. For standard textbooks of physical oceanography frame spring tides as a roughly fortnightly phenomenon: with the new and the full moon the tides reach their highest level. The relation of the full moon spring tide and the new moon spring tide is, furthermore, varying according to the precise location and the time of the year (Garrison 2011, 232 – 234). Decisive for the maximum height of the tides seems to be the season of the year, as in particular places the spring tides during full moon and new moon may virtually reach the same height.[209]

What can be deduced from these elaborations on moon phases and tides is, among others, that new moon spring tides can be times of dramatic water levels and intensified threats to the

[209] The tidal charts measured by the Tide Keeper at Sāgar's Lighthouse, which were mentioned already, substantiate a limited applicability of these scientific theories and underline, partly at least, the predominance of the full moon in local memories. In a sample I took rather randomly from spring tides during the last rainy seasons, the differences in water level are only marginally between new moon and full moon phases. In other months, however, they are quite marked.

embankments, too. And, therefore, times of embankment collapse and loss. Several of interlocutors clearly remembered so. Yet, by far the most memories pointed at the time of particular full moons. To be sure, small differences in water levels, even if they are as marginal as a few centimetres can turn decisive for the collapse of embankments and hence the trajectories of floods. This has been proven throughout history. However, the pervasiveness of full moon and moon-light nights in most narratives seems to me to be not only rooted in these ecological figurations. Besides the sensual power of the moonlight night, the heavy emphasis on full moon spring tides needs to be situated within the context of the ritual importance of the full moon throughout Bengal – and marks, I argue, at the same time a critical commentary thereon.

In Bengal, as in many other South Asian societies, full moons structure to the year. Particularly, the sequence and precise dating of most of ritual activities and festivities are directly linked to the moon (Michaels 2006, 337). Annual festivals for particular deities are related to a particular full moon; life cycle rituals are related to them; and the almanac proscribes or advises against particular activities according to the relation of a day to the full moon. Full moon and, to a somewhat lesser degree, new moon phases are times of intensified ritual activities (R. S. Freed and Freed 1964; Babb 1975, 125 – 127).[210] They are understood to be auspicious moments and as allowing for an enhanced access to the sacral entities. The latter conception in particular allows for a certain parallelism with Hindu notions of space: As much as specific places – the *tīrtha* – are treated as overlaps or entanglements of different worlds or orders and hence allow for an increase in the 'fruits of worship' (Nicholas 2003), do these orders come closer at specific times.

This approach pervades the life in the colony, for instance, in spring and before the rains, where the full moon nights are climaxes of festivals for the most important goddesses, Manasā and Śītalā (see Chapter 9.2.2.). During and after the rains the festivity, however, is turned on its head. Then the focus of its residents is directed toward the embankments, the hazards at sea and, of course, past sufferings. This double role of auspicious moment and intensive threat emerges also clearly on the full moon marking the end of the monsoon: the *Kojāgari* or *Sharad Pūrṇimā*. For the latter is at once the day of the *Lakṣmī Pūjā* and of one of the spring tides. Nightly vigil to honour the goddess and to attend the embankments coincide in these nights

[210] The Indologist Axel Michaels reminds us that it is not the untamed growth of time ('Wildwuchs von Zeit') that calls for rituals, but its interruptions and transitions (Michaels 2006, 336; see also Münster 2005, 112f). One of these transitions are, of course, the full moon phases themselves.

tensely: it was as much a time of ritual promises, of auspiciousness, love or intimacy with deities (Nicholas 2003, 18), as it was a moment of danger and loss.

A telling different example is the incident of ultimate land loss as it was remembered by my friend Noa. Although he, as most others, subscribed to the notion of gradual shrinkages, indeed, emphasized the slow and perpetual workings of the waters, he still remembered the moment when his family lost very much in, what appears to be, an incident. And one that was neither marked by storm nor by other calamities. The decisive moment here was, once again, the time of a full moon and the spring tide unleashing its force by then. Sitting in his house on the Colony's embankment he narrated,[211]

> "It did not need even 15 minutes. Eighteen *bighā* were lost at once. That means, after it all belonged to the river, the embankment had been broken as was the house and land (*jāygā*). […] It was not during a storm, it was during the spring tide during the full moon of the month of *bhādra* [that is, in August-September]. Then we had this hut (*kaṭ*), we stacked rice and other things on its roof. In the daytime, a little water flooded, so I knew that at night it would be all sinking in water. […] But it was different: it came very quick. The embankment broke and salty water entered all around. The house was breaking and the things we had on its roof were lost. We lost voting cards and foods. Later I recovered the rice, but it was too salty to eat. […] But listen nobody could know how quick it was about to happen. I had taken a good look at the embankment and seen that it was good. I had seen that something would be going [i.e. eroding] at night, that was the situation. But then it came so quick!"

Among others, this narration clearly highlights a sense of surprise and, perhaps also, an instance where localized environmental knowledge failed. As everybody felt, so it is inclined, safe and was expecting nightly floods but was overwhelmed by massive incursions of salty water in broad daylight. Precisely therein the story illuminates the trope of nightly floods: it is only underscored in the ultimately misleading prognoses and, even more, in the floods that appear as a deviance.

8.3.3. Silence (II): Pasts as Squatters

What these recollections omit is no less interesting: the particularly difficult years after the land was lost in its totality recede into the background. While the horrors of erosions and the loss of dwelled-in, supposedly durable places were volubly elaborated upon, the drawn-out years afterwards were again covered with an eerie silence. Here a kind of forgetfulness on patterns of migrations unfolded which were even more localized in scale and frequently repeated; an

[211] Interview with Nur 'Noa' Mohammed, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 16.07.2009

oblivion of movements within the immediate surroundings leading those who had lost their place to dwell onto an embankment or a heightened street nearby. Folded into the overall theme of repeated losses and forced movements from island to island is, thus, the pattern of movements *on* these very coasts. These omissions, nevertheless, should not be taken to indicate an irrelevance of more localized migrations or that they were taken for granted, but rather to the degree of powerlessness and shame associated with these. While those migrations leading from the mainland to the island and eventually to another island can be framed as stories of survival or persistence, the smaller ones are events, I argue, depriving the narrators of agency and frame them as 'drifting grains of sand' (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2007) in a threatening way.

Conditioned by the epistemic structure, according to which the ground beneath ones feet simply is there and the disaster an event – however stretched out, but still an event – it took me quite some time to tackle these silences and omissions. Indeed, to realize them in the first place. It os one thing to realize that erosions meant a literal shrinking of landscapes. But it is another to realize that it affected the overwhelming majority of the household repeatedly; that it was lived through over and over again: houses had to be moved and rebuilt only to be endangered again, upon which the squatters saw themselves forced to move once more as much as to witness yet another place of refuge being washed away. The chronicity of the hazards is, thus, mirrored by the chronicity of retreat, intensifying threats and displacements.

However, the silence was unevenly distributed, so to speak. While rehabilitated residents in the Colony were most reluctant and their recollections very monotonous, those who were at present squatters engaged these experiences with more talkativeness. Of course, these differences are to a considerable extent to be explained with the actuality of these experiences in the squatters' present. Indeed, theirs was a present still and indefinitely marked by successive, relentless events feeding into each other and tightly interwoven in retrospective.

Beyond that, these differences illuminate poetics of remembering. For the silence I am concerned with here is not be equated with forgetfulness. It is, therefore, not alone testimony to the dynamics of memory. Silence here is less the result of language broken apart (see Das 2006), but rather an outcome of creative engagements with the past – of the poetics of narrations and identity. Put differently, in fading over the pasts as squatters, the capabilities to colonize wilderness, to transform swamps and the fruits thereof were emphasized. Reworking the already noted, revealing phrase by Lambek and Antze (1996, xxii), one could note: When silence is not in question neither is identity.

In due course of long discussions and repeated interviews, a somewhat clearer picture appeared. But the recollections of these times still remained sketchy, vague, almost lifeless. Monotonous were the enumerations of how many plots lost; of how often the river reached again for what used to be beyond its reach; and on which nearby embankment they had moved. More than silence, but still: rarely was more unveiled than basic frameworks and enumerations of displacements and houses moved. Allusions to the actual embankment collapses, other hazards or the everyday in these unstable places receded into the background. Ultimately a chain of events emerged: narrated in a steady manner and, whenever we happened to talk on the river's edge, supported by gestures into the amorphous, sluggish waters. Interrupted, though, by occasional disruptions of anger levelled against a dysfunctional state and the overall dirtiness of party politics. Yet even during these emotional outbreaks, those times and their places remained of a distanced, dreamlike quality. Vague they were; reduced to circumstance and the fight for survival. Almost unreal, especially when set against the rich, even ornate remembrances of the 'original' lost plots or of the first years here in the 'refugee' Colony.

When all land had been lost, so the islanders remembered, they had to recur on relations to kin dwelling in the interior and tried to move onto their plots. With the availability of kin and kin-owned plots in the interior being one obstacle, the stress put on these relations by demanding a place, obviously, became another. Under deteriorating conditions, the accommodation of relatives became a double constraint: household economies lost an overall diversity and arable land had to be turned into dwelling grounds, temporarily at least. In those instances where landless groups could make their demands be met, this followed mainly along the claims of older brothers on younger brothers and husbands on in-law-families. As these arrangements were understood to be humiliating for the in-moving parties and feeding into conflicts, they were avoided whenever possible. Thus, they had actualized conflict-lines which were vividly remembered as structuring the past on the mainland.

But when the conflicts became too pressing or when the relatives' lands were gone, most had to swell the ranks of the squatters on embankments and streets. The focus on strategies of economic survival and the quest for political assistance were the sole windows into these difficult years. Allowing thus, in retrospective narrations with the odd anthropologist, to step beyond the mere quantification of displacements. On that morning when we sat down with Debnonā Jānā, the short-distance flights from an encroaching river and their relevance for the present, were among my core interests. So after having spoken at length about the emplacement here and on Lohāchara, I returned to these somewhat hesitantly remembered episodes. They

retreated from the river, he told me. As everyone else, so also did they have several plots of land and with the river encroaching they moved to the plots closest to the island's centre and farthest to the shore. And even after that was gone they stayed on.

> "I stayed on. […] We all came together and stayed together. We had brought the animals, built an embankment and all that and did some farming. In this way it went on. We made nets for the *Ilish*-fish and stayed for another ten to fifteen years. […] Thirty-five persons [that is, families] were there. But one after the other left. And when we were [only] ten persons [that is, families] and five left – how could the [remaining] five stay? By that time we could only catch fish and could not farm. […] Not in a meeting, but speaking to each other we decided that we could not stay on. And we left to different places."

Relocating for at least five times, they found themselves in an ever faster turning circuit of displacement and emplacement. A circuit that finally brought them to the very heart of the then tiny islet – crowded as it was by then with a cluster of families, desperately staying on. By that time, the government had finally ceased to pay for the yearly routine of embankment rebuilding, had – so it is unanimously remembered – given up on Lohāchara. Too costly were the reparations, too bleak the prospects. But Debnonā Jānā had stayed on. Where, after all, should they go?

True, there were lands nearby. Standing on the outer embankments the lights of the nearby harbour of Haldia were to be seen. The very place his father had escaped from to start anew and to enjoy an ultimately fleeting moment of wealth. The blinking lights signalled a place close enough to easily reach with a boat, but in the same moment distant, even hostile. Geographically speaking safe, these were, in a nutshell, socially inhospitable regions. Regions that were so densely populated and poor that my oldest interview-partners or their fathers were forced to leave not too long ago. Further beyond lurked only Calcutta and its vast hinterland: regions that were imagined as spaces of further marginalization and poverty.

8.3.4. Climaxes and Incidents: The Story of the Children and the Tree

One of the conceptual difficulties of living through these shrinkages is their drawn-out and slippery character, the rare possibility to tie existential threat to events, climaxes and collective experiences. Yet, the identification of the threat, its susceptibility and indeed: its legibility depends on such moments. They are quintessential to communicate the slow violence and to live with it. In addition to the abstract and often implicit allusions to ambivalent deities,

ecological explanations and imageries of protection, which I will engage in the next part of this thesis, climactic events allow, I argue, to narrate the existential threat itself.

The sinking of Lohāchara is one of these rare climactic moments. To be sure, the sinking of a whole island and, therefore, a totality of sorts holds particular powers. First and foremost among the islanders themselves: It was experienced as a definitive end of a world once known. Added to this was the multifarious dependence of cultivators on the land. A relation that seems to be different on nearby Supāribhāṅgā. For its settlement was, as noted above, always ephemeral in itself. Lohāchara's demise, then, allows to be read as an event and as a climax. The excerpts from conversations included already do substantiate that. Furthermore does it allow for the horrors to be communicated across various discursive spheres, right into globalised circuits of debates on Climate Change. The evacuation of an island, the loss of terrestrial life's most basic precondition it is in itself a powerful imagery. I will return to the politics of images and, what I call, the return of public memory later in this thesis. To approach the erosions from the climax overshadows, then, the individualised flights and the rather arbitrary moment when the island was left to be consumed by waves and currents and hence it drawn-out nature of the loss.

But while the sinking of Lohāchara emerged as a climactic condensation, another narrative seems to have become more popular in capturing the shrinkages as event of tragic proportions. It is, what I call, the story of the children and the tree. In fact, this story was one of the moments through which the dispersed localities engaged with in this thesis have been woven together. Often repeated and alluded to, the story cast a spell on me – as narration and as the narrated past event.

As symbols and figures of thought, trees and children differ profoundly. Trees appear as awe-inspiring and immobile, while children on the other hand appear as fragile, mobile and indeterminate. However, both connect the past to the future and were widely understood to be figures of continuity. At the same time, both emerge as highly vulnerable to the slow violence of erosions. These complexities may account partly for the prominence of trees and children in social memories of past erosions. In several occasions the erosions were narrated along the destruction and loss of trees and the endangerment of children. Both motifs, however, have been tied together intimately and emblematically in the narrative plot of the story I want to discuss here. Toward the end of my last spell of research I, finally, had the chance to talk to one of the stories protagonists: Sheikh Mamtāj who now dwelled in Baṅkimnāgar Colony.

The story, unmistakably, commences with the old Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) on Lohāchara. Not one, but *that* very one tree. As a landmark the tree surfaced in many reminiscences. It did

so, when remembered pasts were mapped by means of conversation. It helped, figuratively speaking, to find back onto the island that was no more, to hold fast to it and to develop a sense of orientation. It was of vital importance to develop maps of sunken places in casual remarks, elaborate narratives or staged reconstructions (see Chapter 8.5.).

The tree must have been a very impressive specimen and one of very few Bodhi trees on the young island. It seems very likely, however, that the tree gained much of its popularity, it landmark-ness not only through its physical appearance or social relevance (see below), but through the story itself. The eroding river had, so the story goes, closed in on the tree and the trunk now arrived, in a sense, on the water's edge. The waves of the shallow waters had been gnawing on the tree and he began to sink. Close by, a large group of people had gathered watching what was going to happen. Although this was never explicitly mentioned, islanders had obviously been aware that tree was in immediate danger. The people had known, in other words, that this day was particularly dangerous. In more abstract terms, this day had been as close to a disastrous event as it could get.

Still small boys back then, Sheikh Mumtāj and his brother had asked themselves, so he recollected as we met,[212] what would happen and what the gathered people were about to do. Out of curiosity, they disobeyed their mother, who had explicitly forbidden to go there, and approached the tree. Suddenly, however, the tree couldn't withstand the waters any longer and plunged into the currents amidst great noises. While everybody else had been watching in safe distance, the falling tree had taken the two boys with it. Sucked into a vortex, they were struggling to stay afloat – but only Sheik Mumtāj had managed to escape the whirls and currents. His brother was lost: disappearing into the deep waters (*gobhīr jole*), he was never found again. Being a loss to his family, his death came as a shock to the villagers and emerged as the sole loss of human life due to erosions remembered by the islanders.

Living on Sāgar, I encountered this story countless times. In its simplicity and drama, the basic structure of the narrative, remained the same in all the different narrations. Details, however, changed. Some – Sheikh Mumtaj for instance – were able to accurately date the incident. He said: "That Bodhi tree fell into the river, into the waters of the *aṣṭami* [*aṣṭamir jale*], then the river is very deep." Collapse, death and narrow escape were thus precisely pinned on one of the peaking days of the Durga Pūjā (*aṣṭami*; sanskrit *āṣṭāmī*).[213] In this way, then, the dramatic and

[212] Interview, 29.1.2011, Baṅkimnāgar colony

[213] Technically, the term *aṣṭami* could be translated as the eighth day in every fortnight of the Hindu lunisolar calendar. According to the latter every lunar months is divided into two halves beginning with the New Moon and the Full Moon respectively. Not only the fortnightly intervals, but also every day within the fortnight of a certain

emblematic event is tied to an extremely significant and ritually auspicious day of, at least, the urban Bengali middle class (Rodrigues 2003, 71 – 247). Similar to the *lāl banyā*, the death of the boy is remembered as embedded into the temporal structure of this overly important Hindu festival. In both cases, the festival denotes, first of all, high water levels and dangerous river. Auspicious times emerge once again as dreadful; as markers of hazardous pasts and presents. In the story of the falling tree and its continuing relevance on the coasts, localized perspectives on dominant Hindu images, times and practices are thus brought forward. The time of festivity emerges as one of risk and despair.

Beyond localized difference, the explicit dating of the event allows for a narrative coherence and a dramatic condensation of unbounded processes. Here, I argue, lies another reason why the story became so famous and so widely alluded to. Regardless of being related to the annual festival or the fortnightly spring tides, the event-as-narrative is in itself a spatio-temporal condensation of unbounded processes. That day, this tree and these children are bound up in a climactic moment that entails losses and illuminates the profound yet hardly visible changes of the land. While highlighting encroaching destructions, the story implicitly illuminates social inabilities or, at least, an indifference of the state to suspend the erosions. Let me, to make this clear, turn to the involved actors: the tree, the kids and the bystanders.

Across South, Asia Bodhi trees have been depicted as focus points or arenas of diverse ritual activities. Articulated through localized figurations, these activities involve, to varying degrees, diverse religious groups. Neither entirely congruent with nor causally rooted in this ritual dimension, Bodhi trees are highly relevant for emplaced identities. They are, in other words, intimately related to the actual unfolding and quotidian experience of locality and a sense of belonging.[214] Included into temple compounds or separate from such, large specimens of Bodhi trees have been noted within many nuclear villages or neighbourhoods. Indeed, the grotesque nature India had in the eyes of colonial writers, seemed to be condensed in these very amalgams of society and tree (Rycroft 2006). From another angle this may rather be understood to hint at the fact that the continuity of emplaced ritual activities and identities rests precisely in the continuity of some of its trees.

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month is assigned with particular meanings, rules and regulations (see for more details R. S. Freed and Freed 1964; Wadley 1983). That being said, in colloquial conversations in Bengal the notion *aṣṭamī* is used to index one of the peak days of the Durga Pūjā which falls on the *aṣṭamī* of the solilunar month of *aśbin* (September/ October) and is among devotees often also called *Mahāṣṭamī*.

[214] Several authors have emphasized the positive role of fig trees and especially the Bodhi tree for biodiversity: Offering food and shelter for a wide array of animals they are seen as maintaining diversity on the landscape level (Colding and Folke 2001, 590; Gadgil 1987).

It is interesting to note that neither in this story, nor in other narrations shrinkage, the loss of temples was ever prominently mentioned. Against the background of rural Bengal's emphasis on fleeting idols and structures (see Chapter 5.2.), this may hardly surprise. The loss of the tree, however, emerges as the sole instance where a heavily localized, literally rooted thing of ritual relevance had been lost: a thing that could not be moved, substituted or easily replaced as, for instance, the ubiquitous house shrines.

Against this background, the predictable but unstoppable demise of a Bodhi tree captures the very undermining of collective identity and its implicit promise of persistence. The threat to the community and, ultimately, its reshaping is dramatically condensed, I suggest, in the imagery of the falling giant.

Another dimension of the tree's prominence in the story rests in its very materiality. Never directly alluded to, it nevertheless underlies as a theme. In at least two ways: as thing of an extraordinary stability; and as a place of refuge or rescue. With lasting materials being rare in the alluvial waterscape, wood marks one if not the most robust and reliable material available. Localized architectural practices are a testimony to this. In a fluid and unfixed waterscape, where rivers continuously change their coast, where the ground to walk on may eventually dissolve and stones are extremely rarely to be found, wood encapsulates, therefore, all that the waterscape is not: fixity and rootedness.

Not only by virtue of their durability, trees emerge within localized environmental relations prominently as refuge. When in 1942 the cyclone survivors had been questioned, as mentioned above, this function of trees was unspeakably clear (see Chapter 8.1.2.). For they had not been asked *if*, but only how long they had had stayed on the trees to be not washed away by the storm surge. Beyond Gaṅgāsāgar, where numerous pilgrim shelters take in all who need shelter when a storm is approaching, trees remain on these islands and in a very practical sense refuges. Concrete houses still were rarely affordable in these parts and public storm shelters or flood rescue platforms very few, distant and, as now in Botkhāli, themselves dissolving due to erosions. Under these circumstances, trees were readily available and comparatively safe places. While falling trees are among the most lethal effects of storms in Bengal, I hardly encountered allusions to the danger of trees, but very often to their safety. Onto them the residents of Gaṅgāsāgar used to flee before they came here; in narrations of inverted landscapes driftwood emerges as that what enables survival; and in dramatic storms, I was told, one could only tie oneself to a tree to survive (see also A. Ghosh 2004). This very notion resonates also in a locally quite popular allegory. According to this, trees are safe havens where man and snake

equally seek shelter and do so without harming each other. Surely, the allegory hints at the heterotopian moment of harmony characterizing the immediate experience of many environmental disasters: Frightened by the powers unleashed all around, adverseries may seem meaningless and deadly enemies interact peacefully. For this moment and under these circumstances. Yet the allegory takes up on the imagery of trees as places of survival, as materialities underscoring continuity.

Returning to the narrative structure then, the imagery of trees as embodiment and guarantor of stability runs through all the versions – indeed, it is the backbone of the narrative. The human actors within the story, however, were differently accentuated. The versions I encountered could in this regard be divided into one stream embracing an assembly of quiet and passive onlookers; and another limiting the plot's actors to only tree and children.

In Sheikh Mumtāj's version, paraphrased above, the brothers had become attracted to the undermined and weakened tree only through the bystanders. They had ignored their mother's orders, had come close to the tree and, thus, into danger. On two levels, therefore, the tragedy is an event foretold. Obviously, the people from the neighbourhood were very much in the picture and form nothing less than an audience to the dramatic fall.

According to many other versions of the narrative structure, however, the events unfolded in an even more accidental fashion and without foreboding. Often I was told that the two children simply had been playing close to water's edge under a Bodhi tree when the ground began to break in rapidly. So violently and so quick that both the tree and the children had been sucked into the gurgling waters. It is interesting to note that versions fashioned along this plotline emerged very often in the early phases of my fieldwork. This was the time when I tried to understand the patterns of erosions and map them: Low land dissolving with collapsing dams and receding coastlines. High land being slowly undermined and subsequently crashing into the waters: sometimes, as it were, in large chunks and amidst loud noises. To illustrate the second mechanism, the story of the tree and the children was repeatedly alluded to. Again, I am not interested in extrapolating a coherent or 'true' version of the story, but rather to critically examine within and through which idioms certain events are remembered and which (political) positions are articulated thereby. While the structure of the whole narrative condenses drawn-out processes into an event, the second version emphasizes victimization and eventfulness even more. That what never seems possible is achieved through this narrative: Erosions become known along punctual, violent and frightening effects. In a word, as a disaster in the classical

sense. They come to be pictorialzed as taking precious life and undermining the very fabric of emplaced society for which the Bodhi tree stands metonymically.

This brings me full circle to the children. Obviously, the death gives the event tragic depth. It is tempting to identify the islander's society with the children and portray them as innocent, fragile and bearing loss, as Sheikh Mumtāj did. At the same time, it certainly allows to effectively formulate moralizing claims tied to the trope of powerlessness and victimization. The fact that they were often, yet not always remembered as being brothers, would lend further credit to this conclusion.

Nevertheless, I think the first version captures the sense of most narrators even better. Precisely because it complements the scene with an audience. The threefold constellation of tree, children and onlookers is emblematic, so it seems, for the way localized society posits itself in relation to the slow violence of coastal erosions: as silent onlookers who know what befalls them and, paradoxically, also know not; who see *what* is about to happen and *when* it will come, yet cannot protect what is precious to them; who are victims yet due to their knowledge and foreboding effectively out of harm's way. When it comes to mere survival, that is. It is relation to the implied audience that the story of the tree and children unfolds further powers: For it is one of the very moments when a collective experience of sorts comes into being.[215] This implies not only the helpless onlookers witnessing the event itself, but involves the narrators and their audiences as well. In trading the story as much as in listening to it, we might assume, a shared experience occurs: one that is centred on victimization through a dramatic condensation of shrinkage.

8.3.5. On Communities and Collectivities

The broad spectrum of reactions to and interpretations of the shrinkages is tied to its temporality. It unfolds, I suggest, in the absence of a clear, identifiable moment of *the* disaster; and therefore in the absence of a clear, identifiable moment of victimization shared among witnesses. Individualized, small-scale experiences condense into collective experiences only over years and decades. Or were, as shown in the preceding chapter, created through particular narratives condensing slow ruinations and producing witness to something that ultimately escapes the eye. The imagination of a collective relates, put the other way round, to places and

[215] I am thankful to Prof. Ute Luig for bringing this to my notice.

incidents dispersed widely across time and space. Highly illuminating elsewhere, the terminology of 'the brotherhood of pain' (Oliver-Smith 1999) is only of limited analytic value here. Due to the processual character of the shrinkages and distinct modes of collectivity flow rarely from an event lived through by society. Fraternity or the levelling of difference did not emerge as a phase amidst or shortly after a disastrous event – simply because there was no such 'event'. Similarly, were neither the nights of collapsing embankments nor the long days that followed remembered in nostalgic tones or utopian terms. The temporal structure of the disaster itself foreclosed these. In narrations and practices, patterns of mutual support and social levelling were nevertheless evident. These were rooted only rarely from a mutual appreciation that the community had not perished nor simply from a sense of obligation. Rather do they rest, I argue, in the imagination of a past, present or future of impoverishment and displacement. Shared experiences and collectivities had been generated from and through the very loss. For the moment and the powers of loss allowed, I argue, for a legibility of and communication about that what has befallen the islanders. If anything the master narrative I engage throughout this chapter underlined recurrent losses and particular collectivities growing therefrom (see also Harms 2012). Implied in repeated experiences of loss; as much as in broader patterns of marginalization, the societies on the island's edges could be understood as a 'community of suffering'. Brought forward by Pnina Werbner, the latter notion implies "[…] vital sedimented memory of common suffering and resistance" (1997, 238). Reflecting on transnational migrations and xenophobic Othering – as exemplified by British Pakistanis –, she emphasizes socialities permeated by affective warmth, solidarities and productive encounters with the past (Werbner 1980; Werbner 1996). These dynamics apply also to the afterlife of coastal erosions. The notion helps, therefore, to grasp the reworking of identities while navigating the onslaught by the sea and the miserable pasts elsewhere. Yet, I suggest, Judith Butler's elaborations on the afterlife of loss are a welcome addendum to grasp what is at stake here. Drawing on one of her pertinent formulations, I understand this mode and its repercussions as a 'community of loss'. Butler (2003, 468 original emphasis) notes,

> "Loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community *cannot* overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community."

In this chapter I want to highlight the complex ways in which the populations dispersed along the embankments and gathered in scattered colonies may be understood as such a 'community of loss'. I have shown already that recent losses are to be accomodated within a broader

historical trajectory my interlocutors embedded themselves in. If anything, the present on these islands was burdened by a past of losses and forced mobilities. In the interior – that is, among those who were still far enough from the shores – these displacements were rooted only in social developments. Yet most of my interlocutors looked back on pasts of several interlinked displacements. In their distinct modes and temporalities these were, as I have tried to show, closely related to each other.

To speak of a community of loss captures not only the totality of devastation, but first and foremost this shared sense of bereavement. While inviting, at the same time, to attend to the presenced state of absent materialities and the conflation of diverse temporal modes through the spectre of loss. Building on these fragments of a poetics of loss, I will now turn to the practicalities of survival after erosions. For these have to be understood against the background of the 'community of loss'.

One crucial element was neighbourly help. Although this may sound trivial, it actually is not. Especially not against the background of anthropological discourses on India and their influential emphases of narrow structures, dividing lines and, much too often also, apathy (on the predicament see Burghart 1990; V. Das 1994; T. Beck 1994b). It rested, I argue, in shared histories of loss, transcending the environmental hazard and it awkward temporality.

The demand for neighbourly help is obvious: When the river had been approaching and the land beginning to disappear, poverty intensified among those who found themselves now at the outer fringes of the island. Staple foods as rice, vegetable or fish (cultivated in sweet water ponds) had ceased to be available via subsistence farming. Especially when households had not been enjoying remittances sent or brought by migrant workers, social networks had to be activated to keep the household running. These networks gained further currency as the out-leasing of land, which figured prominently among the strategies to counter cash shortage in times of distress, became ultimately impossible[216] and the moneylenders were sought to held at bay as long as possible. Common among the poor all over the world to sustain and to survive, social networks have proven to be particularly important in the wake of disasters.

Kinship networks figured, of course, prominently here. Quotidian assistances as the lending of staple foods or labour – when, for instance, on short notices houses had to be evacuated –had been organized in this manner. Among present squatters as much as in the squatters' pasts of presently resettled islanders. Some of the more consequential forms of immediate help had been

[216] Eroding lands were too endangered to be accepted as lease.

unfolding along kinship networks, too. I am referring to immediate and long-term intake of landless kin. Both were, of course, often related to conflicts over scarce resources or entitlement and duty. In times of immediate dearth, differing households were integrated into kitchen-units. That is, the cooking for various, kin-related households was organized on and around one stove. Here, once again, the present experiences of squatters mirrored the narratives of resettled Colony dwellers. Far more serious has been the permanent or, at least, long-term intake of landless kin. Set against the land scarcity of the last few decades, the fraught nature of these shifts is evident. Not only have the buildings reduced the size of gardens and fields, but the claims were in themselves understood to be humiliating in the context of a 'settler society'. However, responsibility, emotional bonds and social pressure had translated often enough into the sharing of marginal plots with kin. Not only narrations, but also the crowdedness and untypical compactness of villages on Ghoṛāmārā attested to this. Several of today's residents of the Colony had recently to take in relatives from the sinking islands adding, thus, to the bureaucratically administered density. It is noteworthy that this intake which served in itself as a regrouping of larger compounded kin groups, was in the same time fragmented again: in-moving relatives had built up their own house and were cooking on their own oven. Particularly humiliating and silenced at first was, furthermore, the move by a married couple onto the plot of his in-laws. Not uncommon as a strategy to manage distress in Bengal, it figured nevertheless only quite infrequently on these islands.

Both figurations illuminate, among others, the ambivalent nature extended families were locally attributed with. The logic of obligations was obviously relied upon and enforced through, among others, ritual practices. Nevertheless, spatial arrangements rooted therein – i.e. collective cooking, living together – were at present considered as conflict-ridden and tended to be broken up into smaller units again whenever possible. None of my interlocutors remembered these practices to having lasted longer than absolutely necessary; neither in today's Colonies nor among its squatters were these practiced. While this brings up the question once again where exactly extended families end and, consequentially, where nuclear families begin, it also emphasizes the limitations of kinship as resource to navigate environmental hazards.

Others emphasized the distresses of living through the aftermath of losses beyond the kinship obligations; and therefore as illegal squatters in the vicinity. Narrations here centred on the everyday difficulties of being housed on streets. Sheikh Sarajul, for instance, recollected,[217]

[217] Interview, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 21.07.2009

> “After we had bought and prepared the land and made a house, this flood happened. Everything broke and at once the land and all that (*jami-tami*) went into Gaṅgā (*gaṅgā nadi*). There is this brick road in Mansābājār to stay away from the river’s edge we made our house on top of that brick road. The government gave us some rice. For the girls, boys, and the daughter-in-law staying there on the road was very difficult. To use a toilet, to retreat and to wash was very difficult.”

Throughout these difficulties and humiliations, a sense of shared predicament was remembered as permeating everyday life on and off the embankments. Experienced by many throughout my fieldwork and remembered by many more, the shared horizon translated into one of compassion and love (*bhālobāsā*). It comes to little surprise that this sense of mutuality and love is tied to the islands, indeed was seen as one of the mechanisms that emerged in their very hazardousness and made survival possible at all. In innumerable conversations, the islands were equally marked as dangerous zones (*banyā elākā*, lit. flood area) and places entwined with equality and love (*bhālobāsā*). Already through these twin characteristics, the island were set apart from the physically more stable, but socially tumultuous mainland. In the past, the present and the future. This is not meant to uncritically reproduce the past as a utopian world of fraternity, of idyllic solidarity or romantic scenes of subaltern harmony. But more to acknowledge the construction of the past and present through this imagery; an imagery, I add, that is far from generally valid. The assumptions and reminiscences along the lines of compassion were often enough circumscribed and discarded. The master narrative of love and mutual help was, in more abstract terms, negated by marginalized remembrances articulated in either irreverent voices of others or in ultimately negating undertones. This involved, for instance, that the dependence on assistance was frequently framed as begging (*bhikṣā*); and that assistance was remembered by some as insufficient or non-existent. Group discussions or conversations growing into such were repeatedly interspersed with insertions emphasizing such tensions. A short cut from a conversation in the hut of infirm Sheikh Āftāuddin will illustrate this. Sitting with him in his illegal hut on the embankment, the conversation had meandered to the last years as landless squatters on the streets of Botkhali. Reminiscencing these quite recent experiences, he said,

> Sheikh Āftāuddin: It was not good. For the food to be plenty, how much you have to arduously earn [by labour]. My first-born son died afterwards, the wife died, one daughter, the middle died, brothers died ….
>
> Sheikh Āftāuddin’s Daughter: One son had to earn the food … No, how much money do you get living on the street?
>
> S.A.: When the life became particularly difficult, then we also had to beg. … We did that, baba, a few times we did that, what to do?
>
> Arne Harms: Where did you do that?

S.A.: There, within the vicinity [also: within our land (*deś-e bhitore*)].

Daughter: You will be begging within the vicinity, where else will it work?

S.A.: Everybody was together, we knew each other, there was love. But how much will man (*mānuṣ*) give? When in my family is dearth, will you give me 500 of your 500 Rupees? You would not, you would give 100.

Daughter: This will be enough for few things to buy. But all the people whose dwellings (*bāstu*) were gone with the embankment collapse, who is there for them? Who gives them? Who will make a call again? Again and again, four, five times, six, seven, eight times men (*mānuṣ*) lose their dwellings.

While many narrations insisted on a prevailing spirit of mutuality and generosity, the conversation in Āftāuddin's house pointed to humiliations associated with the acceptance and search for material support among neighbours. Help to shift houses may be one thing, but the dependence on others to make ends meet amounted to begging. As a practice of last resort it, nevertheless, implies localized networks and a sense of shared belonging. To a particular place, its social relations, and, what I understand as, an extended moment of despair. Since only here, within the close perimeter of *deś*, the search for assistance would work. Nowhere else would it bear fruits as Sheikh Āftāuddin's daughter stated mirroring various other voices. I will have to dwell on this figuration for a moment.

To be sure, *deś* marks one of the more complicated, and a deeply ambiguous notion in spoken Bengali. Lexical meanings include state, country, place of origin and village (cf. Sāhitya Sāmsād Dictionary 2008). Anthropologists working on rural Bengal, however, oscillate in their translations between neighbourhood, village, region or place of origin (Marvin Davis 1983, 20 – 40; Gardner 1993, 5 – 8). On Sāgar, too, the notions indexed village, island or region – changing with broader context and speech situation.[218]

Throughout all these ambiguities of the notion, two dynamics remained intact: the mode of exclusion; and values attached to the included. Regardless of its spatial limitation, regardless where the border is drawn, *deś* necessarily implies a sense of belonging. Be it as place of origin, as a site which shaped personhood and character (Lambert 2000) or as the spatial counterpart of shared historical trajectories. The notion of *deś* substantiates, therefore, the way social identities are locally played out along spatial categories (of village or island). During the conversation in Sheikh Āftāuddin's house, *deś* implied more or less directly all these dimensions. It denoted spatial confines within which help is guaranteed. More than 'mere'

[218] The reversal holds also true: the notion of *bideś* can cover anything between foreign country, neighbouring island and that what is beyond the limits of one's village. In these ambiguities it falls together with the more prominent figure of *bhāire* – i.e. outside work (*bhāirer kāj*), outsiders (*bhāirer lok*) and so on.

social capital, it was seen to entail affective dimensions and a sense of belonging. Obviously the latter dimensions were assessed as a resource to survive among those who stayed back in the hazardous environments. Quotidian patterns of mutual help or allusions to a mutuality within and through the degradations drew, in other words, on a sense of intimacy and solidarity transgressing the routes and confines of kinship. Living throughout shrinkages and in their aftermath, the community of loss overlaps, fuses and, indeed, become bound up with the intimacy of what is today often framed as place-based identities.

Equally interesting is what is implicit in this excerpt; and here especially in the words of Āftāuddin's daughter. Intercepting she makes clear that the mutual help and the sharing of resources were ultimately insufficient – and will remain to be so. Moving on along circuits of displacement and emplacement as the coastline had been receding, adequate measures of help were absent. To address the root cause of the problem, the islanders have been seeing themselves as incapable of and as left alone. Movingly addressed in this conversation, this theme permeates this entire thesis. For the moment I want to emphasize the unification of those who suffer these conditions, by Āftāuddin's daughter and in many other narrations. Stripped of their immovable possessions, in her account destitution and want is taken for granted. And, thus, the portrayal as helpless victims – a portrayal that denies, I suggest, localized agency of the islanders even while they engender it to a certain degree.

That being said, the extent to which memories of quotidian assistance were accurate or retrospectively reframed in a more compassionate tone needs to be addressed. On one hand, it can ultimately not be tackled through the methodology of this study. Yet the ubiquity of these narrations and the absence of critical voices lend a fair deal of authenticity to the narrations. On the other hand, its accuracy is perhaps not that important. For the idea of mutual help pervaded reconstructed pasts and burdens the present, thus, with a legacy of solidarity. If anything, these memories substantiate and deepen perspectives subsumed here as 'community of loss'.

Neither the idiom of caste and religion nor of class and party established a common ground; but rather the imageries of hazards suffered, of pasts shared. It resembled thus what sociologist Kai Erikson (1995, 190) wrote of the survivors of devastating floods in poor mid-western USA: "[…] the shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a source of kinship." And also in parts of the Bengal delta where erosions are not necessarily spelling disaster, the

experience of submerging lands is reported to serve as an entitlement to settle anywhere in the vicinity (e.g. Schmuck-Widmann 2000, 85).[219]

Complementing shared experiences and a sympathy of the suffering of others, the actual demographic shifts in the ruined villages and, thus, a growing sense of unavoidability to share the displacees' plight in future have to be taken into account. For the ranks of the landless were swelling with every rainy season (and continue to do so) – turning the landowning groups increasingly into a minority within respective villages and on the islands. Everyday encounters and the public within the villages itself will have become, I suggest, increasingly dominated by losses: by their past, present and future. While the interactions in the sunken villages are approachable only through the medium of narratives, the present as it unfolds in most threatened villages today only underlines the remembered pasts. The texture of the public became, in a word, obviously dominated by the looming threats: discussions, engagements with external visitors and political dynamics all were structured by the pasts suffered and the futures feared. In very much these terms they shaped the public in present Botkhāli. At least implicitly, these commonalities reach into the future: Against the background of forecast losses and gradual closing in by the shore, the difference between landowners and the newly landless was not absolute, but in itself ephemeral.

Comparable to other modes of collectivity related in environmental disasters, the groups burdened by these pasts were far from being pervaded by a generalized sense of fraternity. This is most obvious,when it comes to exclusions practiced by the survivors. As much as the community, to paraphrase Butler, cannot overcome the loss without losing itself as a group, the distinctions to other impoverished groups are guarded. The trajectories of loss served – on a rather abstract level – as a moment of distinction. Both, the nostalgic recollections of golden pasts and the dramatic losses emerge as moments of inclusion to a community and, arguably, to an entitlement to some kind of rehabilitation. In the emphasis on pains sustained from devastation and an assumed innocence of local populations (see Chapter 9), these pasts emerge as highly specific. And as denied to other landless groups. Through the claim to certain pasts and a particular community, mergers with vertical collectivities – of 'refugee', in a broad sense, or of class – were thwarted. This was illustrated on the conceptual level by the powerful distinction between newly landless islanders and the 'ordinary' roadside squatters: literally, the

[219] Although it might be questioned if this entitlement goes unchallenged in practice. I assume that it will it rather be tied to pre-existing networks and thus to a shared past or to localized bargains. Either way a generalised entitlement seems to be unlikely.

‘people of the street’ (*rāstā lok*). While the former have been included in the community, the latter were not. As a label *rāstā lok* was applied exclusively to various landless groups populating the edges of the concrete road and around the pilgrimage centre. As I have noted already, the persons and groups subsumed as *rāstā lok* had mainly moved here also from the nearby mainland in search for a slightly better life, too. Except for the experience of erosions, of course, the pasts suffered by the victimized islanders and the impoverished more recent immigrants, were certainly comparable. Yet these possible parallels were widely unmade precisely in a denial of shared history. Having not colonized the shrinking islands and, what is more important, having not lived through erosions their pasts and their suffering were effectively treated as of a somewhat other order. The derogatory terms along which the roadside squatters were talked about were rooted also, I suggest, in this very unmaking of mutualities and the exclusiveness of the community. For the *rāstā lok* were widely portrayed as morally inferior. As thieves or illegitimate couples, many saw them as responsible for their marginalized lifeworlds and morally not entitled to resettlements. The distinction from what I call ‘ordinary’ roadside squatters therefore relates to a social demarcation grounded and enacted in “[…] narratives of the past, by which they may alternately question, support, and undermine the claims of others while projecting their own” (Gottschalk 2001, 71).

The denial along historical trajectories was, furthermore, added the particulars of strictly localized experiences, relations and identities. The village and partly also the island served, therefore, as frame for localized tolerations and solidarities. Be it, as shown, through practical help or an unconditional non-ousting of newly landless squatters. To be sure, against a background of scarce material and political resources the exclusion of other impoverished groups is hardly surprising.

By way of negative extension, the exclusions of other poor on the islands shaped the imagination of places beyond the close-knit community. According to a widely shared sentiment, the exclusion from entitlements and solidarities is precisely what awaits the displaced islanders elsewhere. Moving away from the islands and onto the perhaps less environmentally vulnerable mainland, they would have to survive as strangers. Most likely, they would ultimately be turned themselves into ‘ordinary’ roadside squatters in foreign areas.[220] They would have to pay for rent and so on, could not rely on help and would have to

[220] In spite of that, a fascinating body of literature has shed light on the footpath as site of marginalization of and empowerment by the poor in contemporary West Bengal (see e.g. A. Roy 2004; R. Bandyopadhyay 2011; Crichlow 2011).

sustain injustice as strangers in a foreign country (*bideś*). Peopling the pavements and being pushed around in this hostile environment, so I was repeatedly told, their scarce money would have evaporated quicker than they could earn. Contemplating on her past and the reason why she stayed back on the island even throughout the most difficult years, old Binodini Das articulated this sentiment in clear words. Sitting in front of her squalid hut right on Ghoṛāmārā's embankment, she exclaimed,[221]

> "The place where our house was is rotting in the middle of the Gaṅgā. When it was gone we moved onto this embankment again. … My in-law's house (*sosul bāṛi*) was here and for how long they have lived here I do not know. By God, my in-laws had land, trees and all that (*jamin-damin-gāchh*). All was eaten by the river … This river here, I mean, after the river's water had come close by eroding it ate the house. When the house was completely lost, we came onto this embankment. We installed a tarpaulin and stayed on. In a boat, such a small boat (*dinghi*) we stayed. When the water had dried, we settled on the embankment (*bās kare*), beneath the tarpaulin we built our house. … Here we stayed on the embankment and then we made our house right next to the embankment. We didn't need to buy the plot (*jāygā*) – by the side of the embankment close to the river we simply made our house. Nobody said anything against it. … But this is not possible in Kolkata or in other places. Kolkata is a place – there our children will starve. From various distant places people come to beg for rice and you will get nothing. […] We village people, knowing poverty we are such people – well, when the children in this or that house starve and the people com begging they will receive! But in Kolkata you will not get anything."

Living right on the outer embankment, the processes and events of erosions were rather distant, yet marked her everyday, too. Both, her present and future were full of uncertainties as the river has been gnawing on the embankment and, therefore, the very fundament of her house. Against this background, her past was narrated as one of losses; and the actors reduced to persons navigating losses and having to dwell in their presence. However, the flight from extremely vulnerable conditions was refuted by her as by many others on the grounds of volatile social conditions expected where one knew nobody. As the flipside of localized identities and a sense of belonging, its very negation seemed, I contend, to spell threats. Through imageries of social hazards of the elsewhere and the affirmative or political inclusion into the community of loss, to stay back became an option. Indeed, it emerged as a strategy to navigate hazardous environments.[222] Partly the outcome of, what has been addressed as the poor's inability to move and to flee (L. M. Hunter 2005, 285f; Lübken 2012, 9), it also articulated localized taxonomies of environmental and social hazards. While the environmental hazards could to a degree be

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[221] Interview, Ghoṛāmārā, 19.11.2009

[222] Taking Sunando Bandyopadhyay's work into account, it seems safe to assume that the dynamics outlined here are widespread on Sāgar. Drawing on demographical data he shows that since several decades precisely in those areas and villages population density skyrocketed where the strongest erosions occurred (1997, 27f).

imagined to be successfully navigated along the vector and routes of localized communities, the space of the elsewhere emerged as grounds too hostile to be an option.[223]

However, the past and present on these fringes is neither suffering alone nor limited to losses. And the modes of collectivity outlined here unfold also as, in the words of Amita Baviskar (2008, 12), "[…] communities [that] create legitimate identities in order to claim resources." Reworked by waters as much as ephemeral homesteads, the localities remained sites of the 'community of loss' – and as such sites of distinct political articulations. As a particular mode of collectivity, the 'community of loss' claims a future; and underlines once again the relevance of the past for the future as engaged with and flowing from a particular, accumulated present. To the latter dynamics I want to turn now.

8.4. Remembering Resettlement

Following the scarce evidence, sometime after the 1930ies the islets of Ghoṛāmārā, Lohāchara and Supāribhāṅgā began to shrink. As did, of course, Sāgar (see Chapter 3, Figure 3). From this, only very roughly dateable tipping-point onwards the accretions ceased to outweigh or balance erosions and the islands moved from a state of perpetual transformation towards one of dramatic reductions. Most of my interlocutors entered a new phase of patterned mobility – moving onto, as I have shown already, vulnerable embankments and streets and diversified their economic activities to survive within the changing social and material environment. Parallel to these developments, informal networks unfolded around spokesmen that engaged the actors of the localized state pressing towards not only measures to safeguard the island, but increasingly also to obtain rehabilitations of landless islanders. Treading the pathways of localized party politics they secured small-scale resettlement. Ultimately obtaining legal titles in nearby colonies, they arrived at an erstwhile solution that, if not unique, is remarkable against the backdrop of the politics of rehabilitation in West Bengal and India (see Danda 2007, 56). These rehabilitations marked the very rare coincidence of vote bank politics, shared histories (across these islands) and the availability of small stretches of mangroves on Sāgar. In this chapter I will engage the history of these practice and shed light, thereby, on the continuing significance of land as political resource on these hazardousness coasts. Lost to the waves or distributed in swamps, land remained in either case a crucial moment of interactions with the state.

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[223] Needless to say, those who managed outmigration successfully would most likely have another view on the matters at hand.

8.4.1. Land and the Perils of Rehabilitation: Politics, Poetics

Writing on the margins of postcolonial states, Partha Chatterjee recently criticized (once again) the currency of the concept of 'civil society' to understand the political present. In the postcolony, he writes, the discursive space between state and subjects is infused with dynamics and infrapolitics[224] that transgress the neat and normative model of a civil society fashioned along austere ideals of Western democracy (Chatterjee 2006; Chatterjee 2008; Chatterjee 2011). While civil society does play an important role for at least certain segments of society, others clearly fall beyond its reaches. According to Chatterjee this, of course, is not rooted in ignorance, but rather in the difficult terrains illegitmacy and illegality at the margins. To highlight these messy dynamics, he turns to squatters and refugees – both an important 'ingredient' of the political ferment in postcolonial India.

For the present purpose two complementary moments of these messy dynamics are particularly important. That is, on one hand, the fraught political negotiations and localized bargains for power which give rise to 'political society' (Chatterjee 2006). And, on the other hand, the very fragility of citizenship. Particularly on the margins of the state, various researchers note, the legitimacy of individuals as citizens *of* the state and hence their claims *onto* the state are far from certain (see e.g. Randeria 2003b; Baviskar 2004; Rao 2010). Several authors emphasize the difficulties of the state to know or to read its territory (see also Scott 1998; Chattaraj 2010). While others insist on the structural violence inherent in mechanisms of bureaucratic rule and, therefore, the perpetuation of exclusion from constitutional rights and entitlements (Akhil Gupta 2012). Residence in administrative units or, in the case of illegal arrangements, entities within spatially demarcated boundaries emerge in either argumentation as crucial (Chatterjee 2011, 14 – 16). Along the grid of these very units, populations are labelled and included into development measures – mediated both by the powers of local politicians and the bureaucratic procedures of the state.[225] In other words, it is not so much a granted right of citizenship that

[224] In departure from James Scott's usage of the notion 'infrapolitics' I am not so much concerned here with hidden forms of resistance he theorized (Scott 1990, 19), but rather with the way these politics oscillate between legal and illegal spheres (see also Blom Hansen and Verkaaik 2009).

[225] In theory, of course, all subjects are entitled to certain social measures regardless of their location. The famous, often hailed and well documented flagship measure against rural poverty, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act translated into the above mentioned Hundred-Days-Work, for instance, has been shown not only to fall short of its promises, but to deliver its services along localized practices of power. The right of any person to approach any office of the rural government regardless anywhere in the country and to be offered

matters, but the administrative unit along which development measures may or may not be secured.

Now with the erosion of shores, villages and homesteads, administrative units literally disappear. Beyond the loss of economic resources, the workings of erosions further infringe on the very base of citizenship. Since the very territorial arrangements that in themselves allow for a legibility by the state as much as the access to benefits are literally dissolving. These awkward dynamics complement the community of loss and amount to yet another layer of suffering. On the fringes, these were not imagined as being countered by access to resources or by rights steeped in equal citizenship. This is implicitly related to fears of being reduced to faceless paupers on the mainland: particularly for the poorest they were beyond the grid of political relations and moving there meant to terminate an already volatile access to the state. Bengal's environmentally safer regions emerged, thus, again as hostile. In addition to what I have characterised as the warmth of localized identities, people stuck to 'their' shrinking landscapes for these reasons. Hoping and working with what resources, social capital and infrapolitical means they had.

Very much in the same way as pressure was levelled today, the islanders had made their claims on the state several decades ago. That is, along angry rhetoric and everyday pressure on local functionaries; along tempered petitions sent to higher offices; and informal arrangements guaranteeing loyalty and mutual benefits in case of successful routings of funds (Chatterjee 2008). But contrary to what is argued today, it was more than the mere availability of land on the island that made their claims heard and, thereby, legitimate. If it would be so simple, the vast emptiness of Nayāchara or the smaller, yet still significant island of Jambudvīp to the southeast of Sāgar could be distributed and settled which was out of question entirely for political reasons. Rather was it, I argue, the coincidence of still available jungles with 'land distribution' as technology of rule in communist Bengal. The latter figuration hints, therefore, at the cultural politics of land in leftist West Bengal.[226] Land figured – to cut a fascinating, well

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work (and if not the wage without work), has been reported to be widely non-existent. To become beneficiary of work and wage, in most cases, political relations that are place-based in character have to pre-exist.

[226] Being firmly rooted in the Bengali intelligentsia throughout most of the 20th century, from quite early on the Indian communists embraced democracy and the path of elections towards revolutions (Franda 1971; Kohli 1998). Needless to say, this was and continues to be a highly controversial development that sparked reformulations, splits and radicalizations. Yet after several decades of campaigning and popular mobilisations, the CPI(M) took office in West Bengal's state government in March 1967 for the first time. While this coalition broke apart in November of the same year, the CPI(M) ruled in later coalitions and, finally, managed to win elections in June 1977. From then on the party spearheaded a left-wing coalition, the Left Front, for more than three decades until they were ousted in May 2011 by Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC).

researched development short – crucially in the rise of leftist politics in 20th century Bengal (see e.g. Ruud 1994; Lieten 1996; A. Guha 2007). Allied with other demands (as rights to forest, water, to justice etc.) it overshadowed the latter particularly in the early phase of leftist mobilizations. Under the banner of comprehensive land reforms, leftist movements took rural areas by storm. Here land served as an idiom to root socialist, communist and Maoist ideas in the villages; to route localized struggles; in a word: to carve out rural revolutions (see e.g. Duyker 1987; Ruud 1994; D. Bandyopadhyay 2001).

With the electoral victories of the CPI(M) and concomitantly their realpolitik, the relevance of land and land struggles changed (Mallick 1993, 29 – 50). Before the advent of neoliberal approaches, just redistributions of land figured prominently in campaigns throughout. Likewise, it must be added that the record of implementation of land reforms of West Bengal is, in an All-India comparison, among the better (Lieten 1990; Lieten 1996). With the onset of liberalization in India, the *practice* of distribution, however, changed remarkably. Remaining an idiom of mobilization and legitimation of left-wing parties, it became more and more a resource in localized dynamics to control voters and to ensure the following of distinct groups. Albeit more and more along the logic of bestowing gifts rather than as following from an obligation to perform justice (Cf. Chatterji 2001).

While much of the discussions centred on the redistribution[227] of 'feudal' lands, these dynamics equally involved lands hitherto unsettled and part of what could be called the Commons. Absorbed as state property though the Permanent Settlement (Ranajit Guha 1982; Chatterjee 1984) and framed as wastelands where they had not been put so use hence, they built a large reservoir of land to be distributed. Both the enclosure and the distribution along political trajectories were not limited to leftist politics and became a matter of intense contestation in various parts of India. In her lucid ethnography of rural Punjab, Rita Brara outlined similar processes that amounted to the bypassing of (customary) rights of residence and localized power structures in an idiom that drew on the postcolonial inheritance of absolute control only to harness it to a regional political project. She notes (Brara 2006, 244):

> "The classification of revenue-free 'wasteland', that was conceived in the colonial era as land to be developed to bring in more revenue for the state, was now envisaged as land over which the state could extend its authority in a new idiom [that is, beyond

[227] These included, as historical and political studies have shown, the identification of lands owned by single individuals above a legal limit (the ceiling); the acquisition by the government and therefore the production of lands vested in the governments (vested lands); and, finally, the distribution thereof to poor segments of society(see e.g. B. Sarkar 1989; Mallick 1993).

rights by residence or localized power structures], through its allocation for private use or by introducing environmental or fodder-providing schemes, for instance."

Hitherto regulated along more or less localized logics, the so-called wastelands became a crucial means in the dynamic of regional and localized party politics.[228] In the Sundarbans – characterized, as it were, by predominantly small landholdings – Land Reform operations became largely synonymous with the distribution of so-called 'wastelands'. The tracts set aside for distribution became hotly contested. Shaping the political present of earlier decades in rural Bengal, these complex dynamics framed the micropolitics of resettlements after erosions on Sāgar, too. Discourses on the state's responsibilities served as the horizon against which the resettlements have become possible.

Engaging the state on the slippery and volatile ground that is the terrain of political society – unable to make claims as the affluent middle class does and thus only through arrangements that are context-specific and arrived at in direct negotiations – the islanders heavily relied heavily upon key figures. As elsewhere among marginalized population in rural (Ruud 2003) and urban Bengal (Chatterjee 2006), local school teachers were instrumental in the process. Patterns of social capital, aligned in many cases with a reformist or, to say the least, humanitarian zeal seem to predetermine for these roles. Formalized education certainly emerged as key: valorized among rural population and invested with specific layers of authority, it enabled also a better access to representatives of the localized state, perhaps even a shared language with higher echelons.

For the rehabilitations of landless islanders from Ghoṛāmārā, Lohāchara and Supāribhāṅgā, the now retired school secretary Niranjan Pramanik proved to be instrumental. Teaching in Lohāchara's primary school, he was one of the very few to be in an officially sanctioned relation with the state. In both directions. This double-role proved all the more important as it was related to a space that was equally sanctioned with governmental authority and served as a prism of state-people relations on the remote island: the school building itself. While it may be too strong a formulation to frame the school as entanglement of different worlds, different orders certainly overlapped and the brick-built room became therefore a node of interaction between state and populace.

[228] Thus, it is an important insight to be gained from studies by Brara and others that the Commons were already regulated along political dynamics (see e.g. Bhattacharyya 1990; Gururani 2000). Through the intervention of the state only a further dimension was added to the picture – one that unfolded in tension with pre-existing power relations and was bound up, hence, in highly contested, localized outcomes. While local elites may have been sidestepped in some cases, they were reformulated in others and managed to uphold they control through connection to the new idiom in yet other contexts (Agrawal 2005).

The school building had become relevant for political negotiations already within this frame in times when Lohāchara's submergence was not imminent. Yet, primary school had already been destroyed and could therefore, as is common throughout rural Bengal, not be used as a voting booth. Once again, neither the erosions' dislocations among the rural populace nor the more specific threat to primary education made the officials respond, but they became active , so it was widely remembered, to guarantee voting and, thus, the legitimization of the political apparatus. To allow for smooth and ordered elections on the far-flung island, the government swung into action. During a rare visit to Lohāchara, the Block Development Officer (BDO) himself[229] had offered a comfortable solution: with 1000 Rupees given by the government, the secretary would arrange for a room to be built that could serve as a voting booth and would otherwise be used for schooling. At least for couple of years. The receipt of this transaction serves as one of the very few documents in the hands of the population proving the existence of Lohāchara. Likewise had this arrangement heralded in, so Niranjan Pramanik argued, good relations with the BDO that were in themselves significant for the later establishment of Colonies. What is more: the booth-cum-school emerged as a looking-glass of the state into localized environments and as a figurations through which the state was seen. And actually seen at work.

At least certain officials knew by then, so much the story of the school implies, from the difficulties that the islanders on Lohāchara were facing. It seems fair to suggest, that they must have gained a sense not just of the threat to governmental 'outposts', but to the everyday life and the overall existence of the island as well. Nevertheless, nothing happened.

It took several years of petitioning undertaken in a distinctive political environment that brought about a change. Elaborate petitions had been sent to the BDO Sāgar's seat of administration, in central Rudrānāgar by the school secretary and many others. Delegations had been visiting offices between Rudrānāgar, Kakdwip and Alipore in Kolkata to emphasize the plight of the islanders and to speed up processing, indeed to ensure that the petitions were noticed at all. At the same time, the pressure had been enhanced from below through the routes of localized party politics. Even though the Pañcāyat had by than been not as well-developed and well-endorsed

[229] Installed into office by the state government the Block Development Officer (BDO) routes and oversees local development measures on the Block level. That is, on a sub-district level, the BDO governs state measures for a number of Pañcāyats integrated into a Block. Together with Ghoṛāmārā (and earlier Lohāchara and Supāribhāṅgā), Sāgar Island forms one Block that is divided by 9 Pañcāyat. Seen by rural populations, the BDO is the lowest officer of the state bureaucracy being in friction with the subjected, yet separately elected Pañcāyat.

as it was at present, it arose as an important means and arena of rural politics after 1978 – that is, shortly before the resettlements of Sāgar began.[230]

Finally, the state showed interest and sent officers. Sitting in his house, Niranjan Pramanik[231] remembered the day in the following terms:

> "I was alone, it was in the afternoon and everybody was gone. Back then there were only a few people and it was in the afternoon: the people rested after lunch or followed their own business. My brother told me, he had seen a boat [*launch*]. Wading through knee-deep mud we approached the boat – it had halted exactly at the spot where my house had stood before it had broken [through erosions]. I told them: 'All that is mentioned in my petition and for that I have asked you, is directly in front of your eyes." The officers said they would take a look at the conditions and then return back to Calcutta. After they had inspected [*inspekt karā*] the place, they returned to the office of the BDO. They came as a group of five. On the next day I went to the office and they told us, we should go and take a look at this place – Baṅkimnāgar here and Jibantala."

Together with the school, this incident cemented his ascendance to a village leader. Entertaining good relations and writing petitions, he now also became the successful negotiator between state and islanders. Intentionally or not, through the disastrous transformations of the landscape and their culmination into political contests for land, he ultimately managed to fashion himself as a local politician. This role, I have to add, translated not only into political functions awarded to him, but also into localized reputation and material prosperity. Surely, rumours emphasizing the darker sides of politics – corruption and misuse – were not far. To mention only one repeatedly voiced strand – rumor, he was accused of trying to declare a plot reserved for a school as his own property – without success. Regardless of these feats, he certainly had managed to establish a status of a rural *bhadralok*: He is the sole rehabilitated person I met on Sāgar Island who lives in a multi-storeyed, brick-built house beyond the confines of a Colony. Both, shape and locality are relevant. While the structure itself embodies locally wealth or, at least, an escape from poverty, the position signalled social distance from refugee-hood and established his the family in the older, more solid and higher-ranking inner parts of the island (see Chapter 5).

Yet, the resettlements did not only foster the powers of certain person as they facilitated governmental arrangements between the islands, but they also saw the emergence of new

[230] Soon after their electoral victories, the leftist government reinstated Pañcāyat elections in 1978. Thus, communist West Bengal took up a leading position in, as Corbridge and his colleagues note (Corbridge et al. 2002, 194), "[…] a national trend towards the decentralisation of development initiatives." In other words, the local government of the Pañcāyat proved to be crucial for local politics in rural Bengal already by the 1980ies and much earlier than in many other parts of India (cf. Mallick 1993, 124 – 170).

[231] Interview, Chemāguri, 20.11.2009

leaders through the very establishment of colonies. In other words, also islanders from in-taking Sāgar managed to use this moment and its possibilities to ascend in local circuits of power. Kājol Māitī, who became decisive for land distribution in Gaṅgāsāgar Colony, being one among them. I will return to him soon.

8.4.2. Which State: Between Parti and Central Government

After the initial moments of possibility, the resettlement operations in the swamps continued to be closely related to local politics.[232] Two patterns of reasoning about the ultimate causation of the rehabilitations may be discerned: one emphasizing the role of regional politics; while the other credits the central government. The way in which the resettlements were subjected to interpretations, mirrors political dynamics of West Bengal's 'present history' (Chatterjee 1997b). The two routes of political contextualisation that I will introduce now, are ultimately rooted in perspectives on the regional state and the position of the residents within political networks spanning the islands. Taken together with the 'community of loss' and the imaginations of the elsewhere, these networks form part of the horizon for staying on.

Many voiced the opinion that the resettlements had been made possible and facilitated by the *parti* or the *bāmfrānt*. While the former is a common moniker for the CPI(M), *bāmfrānt* (literally 'Left Front') designates the CPI(M)-led left wing coalition that ruled West Bengal for the last three decades. At the bottom line, these speech pattern illuminate that the CPI(M) had managed to uphold its image as the party of the poor and – more relevant to the issues at hand – as powerful actor of land distribution in particular localities. It had been doing so beyond the ruptures in realpolitik. Here the cadres effectively managed to foster its stance as a party of the poor taking care of duties through the means of its control over 'state land'.

Seen from another perspective, this motif underlines the legitimacy of the resettlements insofar as that the decisions to do so were framed as bypassing localized circuits of power. While the notion of *parti* or *bāmfrānt* indexed at times the workings of local leaders (*netā*) and party workers most often they implied the sphere of politics above and beyond local offices. It indexed, in other words, an overly powerful party completely with its Leninist overtones. Even while the CPI(M) derived a large part of its powers from its very rootedness in conflicts, it did

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[232] And they continue to be so in fraught debates on future resettlement in the remaining or in the newly planted mangrove patches. For, if the latter should ever develop into land through localized accretion they will be, as I was told in the offices of the Gaṅgāsāgar Pañcāyat (27.1.2011), scheduled for settlement sooner or later.

so always in continuous feedback with a translocal, indeed universal movement[233] and detached powers of urban functionaries and offices. Precisely on these not only distant, but abstract and somewhat transcendental structures, the notion of the *parti* hinted at. Underlining, thus, the legitimacy of the resettlement by relating it to a distant command structure.

Many other of the residents, however, located the decision to resettle and the particularities of making spaces available, in the spheres of the Indian central government. In this vain, many narrations were interlaced with allusions to signatures given by the India's then Prime Minister and inspections done by ministers or high-ranking officers circling over the islands in their helicopters and returning back to Delhi. Obviously, these imageries similarly aimed at underlining a legitimization by giving political weight to the scheme – yet did so through the mode of spectacle. Against the background of party politics in West Bengal, the involvement of the central government and the localization of decisions in Delhi was in itself a political statement of sorts. When looking at West Bengal's recent political history, the tensions between New Delhi and Kolkata can to a considerable extent be translated into tensions between the Congress party and the CPI(M). In crediting Delhi, the *parti* is sidestepped as an actor taking care of the poor. However, the latter implications were not always played at and often bound up in ambivalences. This became clear when, for instance, particular residents who positioned themselves clearly as supporters and even office holders of the CPI(M), were crediting the central government with the establishment of the colonies, too. This was the case with Sheikh Motalib, for instance, who left no doubt at his membership within and continuing support of the Left Font during the political uncertainties of my field research. Once member of Ghoṛāmārā's Pañcāyat, he continued to strive on his good connections, but had, as so many others, not renounced the CPI(M) for the TMC.[234] I will return to the special position of Sheikh Motalib and his relations to Delhi below. Suffice to say for now that as a stout follower of the Left Front, he was among those who vehemently argued that the rehabilitation were made possible by officers of the central government. To be sure, this amounted to a little flattering comment on the agency of regional politicians; yet, implicitly, it awarded the shrinking landscapes and its populating societies an elevated position.

Aligned to this imagery and crosscutting the dynamics of party politics, the resettlements were seen by most of my informants as being rooted in the state's responsibility to take care of its

[233] Although Indian communists embarked quite early on a distinctly South Asian path towards revolution, their project was still seen as embedded in a universal, teleological development (see also Fengjun 1988).

[234] The shift to the TMC was a move common in those days among officeholders on all levels of West Bengal's government.

subjects. And then through a fusion of the language of citizenship with that of moral obligations of quasi-monarchic rulers. The latter, of course, points to the complex ideas of what has been theorized as the moral economies of peasant societies (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976) and here, to narrow it down, to the logic of *rājā* and *prājā*. In a nutshell, this logic implies a moral obligation of the king (*rājā*) to take care of its subject (*prājā*) in times of dearth.[235] Legitimizing rule and offering an idiom to demand care, this logic is often negated in practice; and might be better understood as "[…] outgrowth of class struggles over subsistence minimum and surplus appropriation […]" (Watts 1983, 109).

That being said, the resettlements were narrated by many in the Colony as being rooted in the compassion of the government. During one taped conversation Madhol Giri, for instance, said "[t]his place has been completely finished off by the river. Seeing our plight the government gave us therefore this place here."[236] Similarly, many others made clear that it had been the duty of the state to give land to them – precisely as they were the state's *prājā*. Upon asking whom this would relate to in a un-monarchic, democratic present, I was reassured that the state was the *rājā*. Simply because there was no other authority they have been the *prājā* to. What might seem to be naïveté, I argue, is an efficient political strategy as much as it is a claim on legitimacy for one's resettlement.

Seen from the embankment, then, the state appeared as a somewhat paradox entity. It had, for one, to be negotiated in ways that spanned the local and the translocal. Or to be more precise: the negotiations were remembered as moving back and forth between local offices and distant corridors of power, indeed: airborne encounters. At the same time, however, the resettlements were enmeshed in localized contestations for power.

8.4.3. Facilitations of Resettlement

After permission by rather distant state actors had been granted or, as some insist, the resettlement directly ordered, migrations across the river could begin once again. After 1980 and in continuous waves, several thousand residents of Ghoṛāmārā, Lohāchara and

[235] In his classic study, James C. Scott identifies the norm of reciprocity and right to subsistence as fundamental principle of political relations in Southeast Asia. He notes (Scott 1976, 182 original emphasis): "The recurrent economic problem of peasant life is the ecological precariousness of the food supply; therefore, those who control the scarce resources of society are responsible for the basic material requirements of their subordinates. *Here the norm of reciprocity and the right to subsistence are firmly joined. It is the right to subsistence that defines the key reciprocal duty of elites, the minimal obligation that they owe to those from whom they claim labor and grain.*"

[236] Interview, 1.8.09, Gaṅgāsāgar colony

Supāribhāṅgā moved to the salty 'wastelands' on Sāgar. They were allotted land in one of the five colonies established: in Hariṇbāṛi, Baṅkimnāgar, Gaṅgāsāgar, Jibantalā and Beguākhālī. The details, logistics and the actual proceeding of the distribution were, from now on, a matter of the localized state alone. It had been invested firmly in the hands of local Pañcāyat officers. It was their duty to identify suitable spaces, to demarcate them and to issue legal titles. The actual procedure and routes of distribution empowered, therefore, these institutions and their actors. Crucial were the twin moments of list and party (*parti*). As fetishes or, to say the least, figurations infused with excess value and enchanting powers, these two moments mediated the politics of rehabilitation.

Lists lead a complex and, one might even say, illustrious life in the postcolony. Being, of course, a basic tenet of bureaucracy and governance, they have been heavily relied upon to engender a rudimentary legibility of territory.[237] Beyond that, they have demonstrated to be a decisive moment in the 'anti-politics machine' of development and the structural violence of governance structures (Akhil Gupta 2012). They lead – in a word – a life of their own; turn situated knowledge and often enough, a willingly manipulated, knowledge into 'fact'. On paper and forwarded into offices lists become invested with an aura of factuality – whose mistakenness is often well-known. More than that, oscillating between localities and mediating between regimes they shape political interventions and help to rework the present they supposedly represent in a way entrenching power relations (Appadurai 1993; Sivaramakrishnan 1999, 249 – 258).

Insofar as the inclusion into lists was the necessary precondition to be eventually resettled, these clearly became a tool for power relations. For it was much less the very displaced-ness or the legal titles (*pāṭṭā*) of lost land that served as entitlement in practice, but the appearance on a list to be sanctioned by political authorities. In two ways: whether one was to be integrated at all and the priority status given to one's resettlement. Over the decades, the Ghoṛāmārā Pañcāyat had compiled several lists of newly landless islanders. These then had to be issued to the BDO only to be forwarded to an array of offices in, what locally appeared as, the hazy bureaucracy of Calcutta. And only after the lists had been cleared along this way, the nominated persons could actually receive titles and lands. Needless to say, the process took time and the outcome was uncertain. An early inclusion into the lists was promising. In retrospective even more so,

[237] In his highly original ethnography of everyday state governance of India's poor, Akhil Gupta proposes a "[…] perspective that sees the state as constituted through writing." And goes on to cite one of his bureaucrat-informants saying "'If it is not in the file, it does not exist.'" (Akhil Gupta 2012, 143, 146)

because the plots distributed had became, smaller and smaller over the years. While the residents of today's Colonies unanimously claimed that everyone who had lost all land to the river eventually received lands in one Colony or the other, several squatters on Ghoṛāmārā's embankment defy this notion. Surely, most lost their lands after the overall stop of distributions; but others had been dwelling here for decades simply because they had not managed to get on the list early enough. One such victim of the vicissitudes of infrapolitics was Dilip Jānā. During my fieldwork he dwelled on a comparatively secure part of the island's outer embankment and had transformed his abode into a neat garden. In contrast to these achievements, he exploded regularly in laments on the futility of his efforts to secure what so many had received: a plot in one of the Colonies. He had tried it all, he repeatedly told me, had established good relations with the politicians, became a member of the CPI(M) and shifted later, with political changes foreboding, to the TMC. But to no avail. First his name had not been included and when it was, the list got not cleared.[238] Then distributions had paused and it seemed to be too late. Now he was stuck, he said, on the embankment.

Little surprising against the background of volatile politics in contemporary India these past experiences were mirrored by many others lined along the island's embankment. These perspectives underline, similarly, the claim to a localized identity based in a sense of shared past. For with the lands sinking and the administrative units literally evaporating, claims for a resettlement as much as anything else could be sustained only through the mutual familiarity between officials and individuals. It depended, therefore, on a shared background as neighbours or fellow villagers – only this made their claims legible. But I have to be cautious here: in theory claims were sustained by particular papers (land titles, voting cards etc.), but in *practice* these could be translated into entitlement only along the bureaucratic channels that rested on relations, a shared past and, often enough, a residence in the vicinity. When, therefore, the news of possible resettlements and the creation of lists broke, some of those who had managed to leave the island along personal networks had actually returned to claim their share. That is, they returned to populate embankments or dwellings of kin to tap into the resettlements. Many others with less well established connections, however, had stayed back hoping to make it into one or another rehabilitations scheme.

[238] One of the officers of the Pañcāyat (Interview with Subrata Dās, Ghoṛāmārā, 26.11.2009) told me that even in the years when the distributions were still going on, several lists were not cleared by the state government and had to be sent in anew. The reasons for this were, so he exclaimed, unknown to him.

Complementing or, one might say, rationalizing the dynamics of belonging and infrapolitics formal criteria were applied. During an interview, for example, the former MLA of Sāgar Block, Pramanjan Maṇḍal of the CPI(M), clearly referred to a 'Colonization Scheme' through which the rehabilitation and resettlement had been organized.[239] He subsumed the 'Colonization Scheme' under a famous, centralized and long-standing programme to provide shelter to the poor – the *Indirā Āvās Yojanā* (IAY).[240] However, most other politicians whom I spoke with, subsumed the resettlement under the distribution of lands and saw it as being complemented in some cases with the provisions under the IAY.[241]

The available empirical base suggests that the resettlements had been subject only to vague rules and regulations within which the Pañcāyat distributed according to political inclinations and the actual availability of land. Debates on absolute or relative rehabilitations – as for instance through the famous standard acres guiding early resettlement of Partition refugees[242] . were conspicuously absent. In contrast, all were to receive what was issued as standard-sized plot in the given year and the given Colony.

Throughout all the significant shifts in the practice of distribution, one of the few constant approaches was the prioritization and, indeed, the construction of nuclear families as the subjects of distribution. This meant, so I was told over and over again, that only one member of a family which had lost its land completely, had been entitled to land. Clearly, persons who were landless by other means had no entitlement whatsoever – and figured, consequentially, little in narratives and practical approaches. To little surprise, in most of the cases the oldest sons had been chosen as those in whose names land titles were to be issued. The titles served, therefore, as akin to inheritance proper. Both, regulations and practices, then emphasized individualized ownership of land and cemented gendered hierarchies. Similarly, have the webs of wider family relations been reshaped through these practice. Surely, the politics of land

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[239] Interview, Rudrānāgar, 26.1.2011

[240] Functioning unabated, the IAY aims at alleviating poverty through the funding of housing for poor – in both, rural and urban India.

[241] Actually, only a small fraction of the residents of the colony managed to receive funds to build the standardized houses the IAY is locally known for.

[242] Early refugees of the Partition in the West – that is the Partition dividing the Punjab – were given lands as rehabilitation whose size was related to the amount once owned on the other side of the new border. Either the size of the land allotted was put into relation to the older or, what came to be more common, old and new lands were related along the category of yields possible on the land. As guiding principle for the latter procedure, Tarlok Singh of the Indian Administration invented the category of the 'standard acre'. Regardless of the size of the land, one standard acre indexed, as Ramachandra Guha (2007, 87) notes, the land "[…] which could yield ten to eleven *maunds* of rice." That is, roughly between 400 to 440 kg of rice. Through this procedure, the differences in climate and irrigational facilities, among others, could be accommodated (Ramachandra Guha 2007, 86 – 88). Needless to say, this approach rarely informed the later rehabilitation of the less visible and drawn-out displacements in India's eastern border.

distribution did not severe wider webs of extended kinship. But they clearly prioritized one form of ownership over others and in many cases called for intense conflicts about kin responsibilities. The prioritization of nuclear families was mirrored in the approaches of the IAY once again who paid for several small houses in every colony. Over time, the emphasis on nuclear families proved untenable. The distribution of land had therefore been negotiated along kin obligations. Thus more people had to be accommodated and more houses to be built on tiny resettlement plots. What is more important: with the next generations growing up, the issues of fragmentation of plots, of transformations of scarce agricultural lands into the grounds for further houses has been rising again. Turning in several cases into dire conflicts.

While according to regulations every family was entitled to have one of its members resettled, a few managed to work around these constraints. Unsurprisingly, these were well-connected persons with active links to *parti* and Pañcāyat. One of my informants, Juddhistir Jānā, dryly remarked, if you were in the *parti* and you had ten sons you would get ten plots of land. While the comment is clearly an over-exaggeration, it still underlined politics of favour and the production of loyalty through distributions. These corruptions of official approaches translated in local tensions, but were on the long run unspectacular. Remembered more than two decades later, these corruptions were treated as the workings of the local state. These dealings with the powers of the office were, in other words, narrated as yet another instance of dirty politics and the unconcealed strategic nature of distributions that were and still are quintessential for the politics in West Bengal. Seen in this light, they appeared as part of a very normalized abuse and never figured as scandal.

In the first years, the resettlements had been rather generous and allowed for a great deal of choice by the resettled groups. Over the years, the actual practice narrowed further and further down. Both, in respect to size and individual choices. Most of the narratives told by early settlers, entailed episodes of inspections of the available land and rarely also new rounds of departure when individuals remade their choices and shifted to other colonies altogether. In both cases, the salty character and the hazardousness of the area had been measured against the size of the plots, general income possibilities and the presence of kin in respective colonies. However, over the course of decades-long clearing of lists and issuing of titles, the size of the plots became homogenized and continuously reduced.

I will illustrate these dynamics by briefly turning to Baṅkimnāgar Colony, the second oldest colony on Sāgar. This colony emerged as node within social relations and flows of stories and became, thus, an important site of my fieldwork. Those who settled here received a staggering

4.5 *bighā* of land. That is, almost double of what the settlers in Gaṅgāsāgar Colony received and exactly three times of what the last resettlement in Jibantalā amounted to (1.5 *bighā*). The size differences are only partially explained with the increasing scarcity in land. The socio-ecological figuration of the respected colonies obviously was also relevant. Baṅkimnāgar and Gaṅgāsāgar being a case in point: roughly settled in the same period the differences were from the beginning substantial. Situated right at the island's western banks (see figure 2) and interwoven with an erstwhile mighty channel (*khāl*), Baṅkimnāgar emerged as a much more hazardous area: the drainage has proven to be more difficult than in other swamps, the land still inferior and embankment collapses more frequent. These difficulties had been compensated for, so it was argued locally, with larger plots.

Those early settlers, who had a choice, made it clear that their selection rested only partially in the environmental condition, but to a large extent in the social environs and the benefits of economic opportunities. I will engage these two conditions throughout the remains of this chapter. For the moment it is suffice to say that Gaṅgāsāgar has been enjoying a far superior position in the flows of labour and capital which clearly balanced the smaller plots. Several of my interlocutors perceived of the composition of the Gaṅgāsāgar Colony as much more appealing: kin, erstwhile neighbours and, therefore, the continuation of a sense of place throughout the very dis-placement emerged as important categories. As well as, finally, the integration of the colony into the wider social landscape.

Even within the same colony the size of the plots could vary over time. In Gaṅgāsāgar Colony, which is the only one for which I have comprehensive data, the first settlers received the above mentioned 2.5 *bighā*, while later settlers received only 1.5 *bighā* or less. Parallel to the reduction in size also personal choices became increasingly irrelevant. With the coastal erosions accelerating and available swamps shrinking, it became paramount to lay hands on a title at all. Most importantly, the conditions of who was legible to receive a plot changed. While at the beginning only victims of coastal erosions from the neighbouring islets of Ghoṛāmārā, Lohāchara and Supāribhāṅgā had received land, this strict condition has ceased to exist in practice. In Gaṅgāsāgar Colony, land had increasingly and then exclusively been distributed to person with other backgrounds throughout the 1990ies. This, I must add, does not rest in the fact that all in in need from the neighbouring islets had been resettled, but is rather a break with their prioritization. It is related, I suggest, to shifts in political interests. Increasingly local politicians from Gaṅgāsāgar itself used their influences to settle landless families from southern Sāgar as well as many of those who had to shift to make room for the development of the

pilgrimage site. Key figures emerged, who used the politically legitimate frame of land distributions to further their own interests and extend their influence. Of crucial importance for this shift and thus the social composition of Gaṅgāsāgar Colony has been Kajol Māitī. Hailing from southern Sāgar, he first had embarked on a brief career as actor in a local, travelling theatre troupe (*jātrā*) only to contend by the early 1980ies for the CPI(M) in Pañcāyat elections. Thus he looked back on a prehistory in show business he shared with several other local functionaries in coastal West Bengal. Without being victim of erosions himself and through his political position, he had managed to receive a plot even when the distribution was still strictly limited to victims of erosions. From there on he had fashioned himself as the architect of the Colony. Avoiding all modesty, he freely declared to be himself the person who literally had made the whole Colony. In fact, he had been in charge of the allotment of plots to resettled islanders for several crucial years. Besides that he had operated as a contractor for public work measures in the transformed swamps. In the latter function he profited, therefore, from public expenditures on the construction of houses, roads and embankments in the new Colony. Similarly, he had furthered his influences along these route. Eventually, he had managed to greatly advance his influence by distributing land to landless persons sharing his geographical and historical background: persons who had eked out a living in southern Sāgar and who attributed their landlessness to general poverty and fragmentation. Here the transformation of swamps, the production of specific population and a political career dovetailed.

8.4.4. On the Cultivation of Belonging: Emplacements

The establishment of colonies resembled closely the processual ‘reclamation’ of land on Ghoṛāmārā, Lohāchara and Supāribhāṅgā. In arduous encounters and over the course of several years, patches had once again to be transformed; land again to be made. For the actual progress of transformation as well as the emplacement itself, environmental conditions, the workings of the state and the relations with neighbouring settlements were crucial. Because the swamps they began to occupy had been used by others hitherto, the take-over by colonists was always also a matter of tensions. However, these had not necessarily developed into disputes and conflicts. Two broad patterns emerged. The arrival and ensuing emplacements in, for instance, Gaṅgāsāgar Colony were comparable peaceful. Yet not always so. The past of Baṅkimnāgar Colony, on the other hand, has been marked by everyday hostilities and intense contestations during the early years of settlement. On the following pages I will outline these two trajectories.

This will allow to reflect on the conditions helping to make rehabilitations somewhat less fraught, on the contingencies of emplacement. I begin with the more conflictive past of Baṅkimnāgar Colony.

8.4.4.1. A Death Foretold

Situated at Sāgar's eastern shores, Baṅkimnāgar Colony was actually sandwiched between the Muṛīgaṅgā River and Baṅkimnāgar proper – a village of considerable age by local standards.[243] As noted, the plots distributed here were have been larger than in most other Colonies. This difference was thought to account for the adversities of draining the immediate shore, of transforming the protective belt of mangroves bordering the wide estuary.[244] Plots had been expected to remain much more salty than those in other colonies and embankments to break more often. Yet, the difficulties of emplacing oneself in the *social* environment were, so I was told, less clear in the beginning. To engage these troublesome beginnings will help to illustrate the entanglement of social and material environment through which the locality emerged.

Overshadowing the otherwise ubiquitous imagery of the tiger-infested jungle, in Baṅkimnāgar Colony the past was remembered mainly along quotidian struggles. Again, less through the trope of lean years and long gaps that had to be survived before the first harvest was ripe, but through specific social conflicts. Tensions with the neighbouring villages arose, to name the single most significant trope, along need for drinking water. Upon arrival in the *jangal*, neither tube wells nor ponds had been in place. Until all this had been installed, the new settlers depended on fresh water sources of the neighboring villages. But they were, so it was remembered, denied to use it: To drink from one of the village's ponds or to to bath in it had generally been off-limit. The access to the few tube wells had been contested from the very beginning, too. While the new settlers had eventually managed to secure sufficient waters – through long walks, quotidian struggles and eventually their own arrangements – these hostilities were to shape the relations with neighbouring villagers. And they culminated, in a sense, in a demise in their midst. Or, put more cautiously, in the story of a death foretold.

Comparable to the story of the tree and children, this story condenses longer struggles into a particular incident. It makes deprivation and bitter struggles almost tangible. Here, too, a particular moment is emphasized and effectively subjected to interpretations. Actually, the colony as a space came to be structured along the story's incidents, the former known through

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[243] In fact, Baṅkimnāgar figures among the oldest settlements on Sagar (Māitī 2008, 49f).

[244] Interview with Subrata Dās, Ghoṛamārā Pañcāyat Office, 26.11.2009

maps relating to the latter. It figures therefore as a moment of emplacement: It illuminates how place and belonging are, as Raffles notes (1999, 329), "[…] anchored in narration, and specifically in narratives of 'nature'."

The narrative relates back to the first years of hardship, to the very struggles to colonize the terrain. To those months and years when the drainage of the swamps and, hence, the expulsion of the tides had been the most pressing concern at hand. The latter proved to be particularly tricky here: Not only was the patch of *jangal* situated at the very edge of the island, it also was woven through by a channel (*khāl*) entering directly into the vast Muṛīgaṅgā River. Since the *khāl* had been, so it is remembered, of considerable depth and breadth, villagers from the adjoining tracts had been using it as direct and convenient access to the open waters. Fish workers used it to enter the open waters, travelers used it as a shortcut on their way to other islands. Yet, to facilitate settlement and an ensuing transformation into agricultural lands, the disruption of the *khāl* had been planned by the distributing governmental institutions. During conversations it was repeatedly stressed that the *khāl* had to be drained altogether to prevent an otherwise regular flooding of the entire Colony. But I do not want to indulge in the intricacies of hydro-politics here. I will rather focus on conflicts – or better: their afterlife in social memories. The narrative unfolded along two distinct patterns. Taking cue from the drainage of the *khāl*, the two plotlines differ in who is doomed and the meaning attributed to the calamity. I will begin with the more prominent version.

To disrupt and drain the *khāl* at its mouth, to simply fill it up with mud was not enough. The engineers opted for a construction made of long wooden poles to be anchored in the bed of the channel and only subsequently covered with mud. After these measures had been consented upon by the BDO and the necessary materials arranged for, the anchoring operations were to start. Immediately before the onset of the works, a local leader (*morol*) told the public of gruesome nightmares that plagued him. He was responsible for the supply and storage of the planks and summoned in his dreams by ghosts to prevent the construction of the enforced embankment. For, so he was told, the *khāl* was vital for local traffic and could therefore not be closed. In his dreams, so it was widely remembered, he had tried to persuade his otherworldly interlocutors. "'He said, we will live in this place. How can we live here, when we do not embank the area?'" Upon thus he was answered, "'No, whomever piles up the mud [into an embankment] will die!'"[245] On the following days the dream had been intensely discussed. It

[245] Interview with Ganesh Māli, Baṅkimnāgar colony, 23.11.2009

came to be seen as a warning and very real threat. Yet the *khāl* had to be closed for the settlement to be possible at all; there was no doubt on that.

The assemblage and anchoring of the wooden construction had been supervised by a man named Śoro. He had been the *head mistrī*, that is, he was overseeing the operations and supervising both the (semi)skilled construction workers (*mistrī*) and the unskilled workers. Now, as soon as the first plank had been anchored to the ground, so it was remembered, he received news from his house that his son had died from drowning in the pond. The works had to be interrupted and were taken up again only after a religious ritual, a *pūjā*, had been carried out. Performed by Kartik Misra, one of the extremely few resettled Brahmins, it had prevented, so it was believed among my interlocutors, further deaths by pacifying the responsible transcendental actors.

Sadly, both the foreman and the priest were long dead and the conversation with their present kin did not add much to the basic narrative structure. With the latter being told in a rather uniform fashion, several layers of meaning have neverheless been at play here.

The decisive moment for and within the story certainly are hostilities encountered by the newly-arrived refugees. In the figure of threatening ghosts, hostilities by diverse sets of actors (perhaps, to speak with Latour, actants) mingle in ambivalent ways. Analytically, then, two dimensions have to be distinguished: the hostilities of neighboring villagers; and those of localized ghosts. Along these separate dimensions, the difficult question of legitimacy came to be negotiated. Furthermore, they contain implicit interpretations of marginal environments.

The resistance of hostile neighbors was, beyond doubt, the most often alluded explanation of the death. Old Ganesh Māli boldly claimed,[246] "[h]e was ordered to not build the embankment, since this was the route to enter and leave." Established villagers were not willing to see this route of everyday mobilities drained. The conflicts around the small channel became, therefore, not only a condensation of everyday tensions, but also a moment through which the legitimacy of the Colony could be reflected upon. Indeed, this very legitimacy has been be secured through the narrative itself.

While the contestation of the colonists' claims had beed clearly attributed to the villagers, the decisive event grew from the transcendental agency of ghosts (*bhūt*). As the events unfold, ghosts emerged as the uncanny allies of the villagers – and not simply the executors of the threat. For they had been, it was widely believed, those who drowned the *head mistrī's* child.

[246] Interview with Ganesh Māli, Baṅkimnāgar colony, 23.11.2009

Notions of magical practices, personified powers of destiny or dubious tantriks commanding ghosts (Urban 2003), were hardly alluded to. On the contrary, most narrations implied an agency of the ghosts – killing, as it were, for their own sake and not as emissaries of the villagers. Communicating through dreams, threatening and killing their actions seemed at once tied to the complaints of the villagers and pointing beyond them. Precisely this ambiguity and vagueness accounts, I argue, for much of the story's powers.

But let me return to the ghosts again. In Bengal, ghosts are widely thought as being beings of the winds and marginal zones. Certainly liminal and dangerous, they are not necessarily restless beings. Resembling humans, ghosts are widely understood to be rooted to particular place for longer time periods – themselves emplaced, as it were, and shaping the texture of certain places. Their favourite abodes are spaces at or beyond the limits of settled area, beyond 'culture'. Burning grounds at the fringes of 'civilization', wilderness far beyond human presences or, to return to the islands, forested tracts and particular trees in jungles. In her ethnography of rural Bangladesh, the French anthropologist Thérèse Blanchet (1984, 54) notes:

> „*Bhut* used to be masters of the land, before, when there was no civilization. But then came the 'great religions'. … Civilized ways did not penetrate everywhere however and *bhut*, even after the advent of the 'great religions' still played tricks on men, but even more on women. *Bhut* are believed to be numerous in the jungle or where habitations are sparse (on the *chor*). They are few in towns."

The habit of ghosts to reside in particular places, to become emplaced and to literally fuse with material figurations into ghostly hybrids, reappears as a trope also in Hindu epics and literary works (Bradley-Birt 1920, 174 – 181; Haberman 2013, 106 – 113). Unsurprisingly, the threat to or devastation of these lived-in spaces is reason enough – so it is locally understood – for ghosts to become angry and unleash their fury. Resurfacing in ambiguous ways in local interpretations of environmental changes, this conception frames also the interpretation of the death in the story of the foretold calamity. Here it had been directly human-induced transformation of marginal jungle itself. In producing space for society, these other entities were to be displaced. That is why, I was told in a few informal conversations, the *head mistri* had received orders in his dreams; and that is why the child had to die.

The ambiguities of this explanation were complicated by ongoing contestations of the very nature of the event. Not so much in an effort to frame ghosts and related affairs as 'women business' – common in other parts of Bengal (Blanchet 1984, 54; Wilce 1998, 126) – but rather to perform a scientific attitude, ghostly actions were at times vehemently denied. Especially

with the tape recorder rolling. But even as a negated presence the ghosts perform an important work for the texture of Baṅkimnāgar's past.

Among the very few contemporary studies of the social presence of ghosts, Laura Bears work on the Anglo-Indian community of Bengal has to be considered here (Bear 2007a). She shows that the figure of ghosts is intimately tied to self-assertions and a sense of continuity and identity among marginalized Anglo-Indian in present-day West Bengal. Tracing their appearance throughout autobiographical narrations and as tangible presences experienced in modernist ruins, Bear demonstrates that ghosts are neither burden nor a threat. Rather do they emerge as anchors within hybrid histories. Ghostly presences infuse the present with past; they embody roots and duration to a hybrid community largely denied the history. [247] Thus, they allow for sense of belonging for the haunted ones.

In their exotic ways, these findings speak to the past and present on Sāgar. Here, too, entailed the socially mediated presence of ghosts collective identities and belonging among socially heterogeneous actors. In this regard it is secondary to what degree the agency of the villagers was involved, whether the ghosts were deemed responsible and that they seem to have vanished into thin air after the narrated calamity – since despite of that the collective is constituted and, in a sense, re-rooted. The decisive moment here is the opposition to hostile forces and that a future is literally wrought from them. The latter became particularly clear in the concluding events remembered by everyone I spoke to: the Pūjā held afterwards. After the death had been announced, the works stopped immediately and taken on anew only a few days later after the ritual held in the house of the Brahmin. Nobody doubted that the ritual was necessary to prevent further calamities. Even though nobody I spoke to could relate what kind of a Pūjā (to whom, when exactly, which procedures) it actually had been, as a concluding moment it played a crucial role for this past. It simply became the Pūjā held after the death. Thus is became a particularly important moment for the emerging place and 'its' population. Through the calamity the Colony established itself as a social unit, as a meaningful entity. Conversely, at present a sense of belonging was replenished through it. This is why, I suggest, the story mattered.

[247] As descendants of more or less illicit, yet never unproblematic relations between British and Indian individuals, the Anglo-Indians have always had a difficult standing in South Asia. Crisscrossing almost every social category structuring the past and present of India – that is, 'race', caste, class, religion – they have become outcasts of sorts. The claim to a past has therefore, as Bear shows in her anthropological and other writing (Bear 2007b; Roychowdhury 2000), a particular urgency.

Involving a sudden death, too, the second narrative unfolds along a slightly different plot. According to this narrative structure, it had been the Brahmin Kārtik Misra who had nightly premonitions during the draining of the *khāl*. Not being directly threatened, he vividly dreamed of collapsing embankments and of the imminent death of those who would build the embankment. Yet against these gloomy futures, the Brahmin, so it was remembered, had steadfastly built his house behind the embankment and been closely involved in the construction of the embankments' foundations. But, true to the premonitions, six months after the embankment had been erected, both, the Brahmin and the *head mistrī* died.

In comparison to the first storyline, timing and actual incidents leading to the death were, only vaguely and indirectly related to the dreams. Yet nobody who told the story along these lines, doubted the connections.[248] On the contrary, they were seen as nothing less than a personal sacrifice for the sake of the community. The death was made sense of along a pattern tying human sacrifice and the greater good together – a pattern that resurfaces in postcolonial encounters with displacement (Routledge 2003) as much as with 'normalised' progress (see i.e. J. P. Parry 2008). In line with the latter conceptions, the death of the Brahmin – and never, I have to add, the death of the worker – came to be seen as an example of commitment to the welfare (*maṅgal*) of the people and their unity (*ektā*). It turned into a moment where a community had been forged, a sense of solidarity unfolded as much as an instance of criticism of the present state. That is, the decline of willingness to make sacrifices for the community in the present Colony.

8.4.4.2. Sharing the New

By contrast, the emplacement in Gaṅgāsāgar Colony followed much more peaceful trajectories. Beyond the patterns of land distribution itself, the formation of and the settlement within Gaṅgāsāgar Colony was remembered in way that mirrors the settlement on Ghoṛāmārā and Lohāchara respectively. Once again, the recollections were structured by plights, want and hazardousness.

As noted at the onset of this thesis, large swaths of the Island's extreme south were until quite recently forested and as such identified as haunts of wild animals. The early days of the Colony were remembered in precisely these terms. Several residents pointed at a presence of alligators

[248] The narrations of this version happened all during informal conversations with the tape recorder turned off. Therefore I have to paraphrase entirely what I was told during my stay in November 2009.

(*kurmi*) and deer (*hariṇ*) greeting them, as it were. Many more, however, spoke of the beginnings with the ubiquitous invocation of tigers. 'It was a jungle full of tigers,' was as a phrase woven through countless conversations, relating back to the imagery of an 'infested wilderness'. This identification is mirrored, furthermore, in the name used for the forested tract before it was rechristened simply as Colony. Earlier these swamps had been known as Beokhāli or Begokhāli – corruptions of Bāghkhāli, the Channel of Tigers.

The crucial element for the emergence of Gaṅgāsāgar Colony was the fact that the whole area was, as my interlocutors put it, new (*notun*). It was in the process of being literally carved out of the swamps through government interventions. Thus, a sense of locality and interconnectedness developed through these very interventions embedding the resettlements in an embracing trajectory and an emerging new society. Put simply, the arriving resettled groups had comparatively little tension with surrounding groups because most of it was in the process of becoming and populated by similarly arriving groups. In the face of the interventions, the tensions with the much older village nearby, Dhablāt, as well as with the very few persons who lived here already turned out to be rather insignificant.

When contrasted with each other, there emerges an obvious tension between the two pasts. How can it be that relations in one case were marked from such a deep hostility, while the other appears to have been tough, yet characterized by amity? This is not the place to answer these questions definitively, for I could not extend my fieldwork to surrounding villages in any comprehensive manner. That being said, a few remarks are in order. If only to underline that I understand the differences between the past of Baṅkimnāgar and Gaṅgāsāgar as a telling contrast and not the corrective of the respective other.

Let me approach the problem of the past through the problem of silence. Given the obvious fact that both jungles had indeed been used in one way or the other before the advent of the colonists, it seems utterly unlikely that there were no or only ephemeral tensions when Gaṅgāsāgar Colony was established. From all what we know of the explosiveness of resource conflicts, the claims of the new settlers had certainly not gone unchallenged. Out of the various usage practices, Mangrove swamps have been subjected to, only the practice of inland fishery left traces. Several of my interlocutors assured me, that today's Colony had been leased out by governmental agencies to neighboring villagers who had marketed the fish from water bodies dotting the swamp. Their leases had been been cancelled and usage regime terminated by the local government willing to permanently distribute the plots. Probing into these prehistories beyond the limits of Gaṅgāsāgar, I learned from some frustrations and lost fishing grounds. Yet,

these allusions were always covered in a hesitancy: a silencing of conflictive moments through residents in the first case; and, perhaps, a caution by the neighbouring villagers rooted, as it were, in my obvious affiliation with the Colony.

The difference between the two trajectories – harmony versus conflict – lies therefore not in the frustrated claims by predecessors themselves. For in both cases there were claims frustrated, usage patterns eliminated and resources diminished. But rather do the differences rest in the political and material conditions to enforce the claims or, even better, to translate them into conflicts. The colonists in Baṅkimnāgar, on the one hand, entered a route well known from studies on forced migration: settled in marginalized fringes they were drawn into bitter contestations about essential resources with neighbouring groups rooting their claims in longer presences. While the conflicts eventually weakened, they shaped the still tense relations with the neighbouring villagers. In Gaṅgāsāgar, on the other hand, the arriving colonists entered an overarching trajectory of development. And it seems entirely possible that the resettled colonists quickly arrived at positions of inverted power relations. Being involved in the development of the sacral centre and obviously in a well-connected manner – otherwise they would not have secured resettlement in the first place – they may have become powerful precisely through access to the benefits of state investments on these shores. If, however, exclusions of neighbouring villagers from access to jobs and development measures were the case, they were downplayed locally. What emerged were allusions and enactments of an overarching trajectory of development that encompassed the area and meant significant growth in a region otherwise lacking incentives of economic growth. Income opportunities intensified, infrastructures have been laid and networks into far corners of India established through the sharp increase in pilgrimage traffic in the course of the last thirty years. While examples of these development measures are woven throughout this thesis, one of the most important and institutionalised instance was the massive distribution of jobs related to the pilgrimage festival. Introducing work relations and the prominent role the *melā* plays within economic strategies I had pointed at the role of trade unions. Being bound up with party politics, they were also, I noted in passing, important instances within the politics and poetics of localized identities. I want to take up this point here as the trajectory of development shared between the settlements around the sacral centre is rooted in the institutionalised workings of the trade unions. Insofar are the trade unions instances, I argue, of an on-going emplacement.

The production and inscription of localized identities has been tightly interlinked with constructions of entitlement to workloads – and, conversely, with exclusions from these.

Regardless of work type, of party loyalties or administrative rank, everybody insisted on the strictly limited nature of entitlements to shifts and wages. Only islanders from the immediate vicinity (*deśer lok*) were seen to be entitled to receive workloads from trade unions. Persons from outside, however, not.[249]

In the notion of *deśer lok*, the people (*lok*) become the genitive attribute of *deś* and, thus, imbued in constructions of spatialized belonging (see Chapter 8.3.5.). Against the background of the hybrid rootings and multiple pasts of the Colony's residents, the notion of *deś* is further complicated along temporal categories. It can equally imply the colony as place, the estate-like villages of Ghoṛāmārā or the origin of one's ancestors in nearby Medinipur. These spatial and temporal ambiguities were flattened out and reworked – partly and contingently – in various venues. The work at the *melā*, the partaking in the opportunities that evolve from here and the unfolding of development certainly are important ones. To be sure, the fuzziness of *deś* is not reversed in the notion of *deśer lok*, yet in constructions of entitlement it is has been further narrowed to people only from the immediate environs. That is, it indexed only persons living close by: those from the southern parts of the island. The residents of distant colonies (as e.g. Baṅkimnāgar Colony), of Ghoṛāmārā or Medinipur were strictly excluded.

Through these patterns of entitlement, I argue, localized identities were underlined and enforced that transgress the notions of displaced person, colony or village. In the shared entitlement to the works and fruits of development, the differences between resettled person and the islanders from nearby villages have been thinned out and mutually enfolded into a broader trajectory.

While these have been merely fragments in complex patterns of belonging, in the shadow of the sacral centre they were not negligible. The *melā* work emerges, in other words, as a venue where the past of 'refugee-hood' was partly unmade.

Similarly, the notion of emplacement implies contingencies producing yet another type of exclusions. To be involved in a trajectory of development, had become limited also along the temporal vector. With the growth of the festival, rumours of opportunities had lured, as I have noted already, several small kinship groups from Medinipur to the *melā* ground. Being allowed to live here in ramshackle huts throughout the year, they were effectively excluded from claims on resettlement along historical and moralizing attributions. Yet they were also denied work or the establishment of small business opportunities during the *melā*. Countered by inofficial and

[249] To be sure there were exemptions to this rule, for the networks of kin and political loyalties had to be accommodated. But it governed, as far as I can see, by far the largest part of jobs distribution; and remained a powerful imagery even when it did not.

illicit arrangements, this exclusion points to the temporal dimensions of emplacement and integration into localized trajectories. Having arrived late and along slightly different routes, they remained excepted from belonging to the place.

8.4.5. Neither Deep nor Shallow

With few exceptions all residents in the older part of the Gaṅgāsāgar Colony and the other Colonies included in my fieldwork, remembered their life histories along the terms and tropes outlined so far: The past seemed to be bound up in circuits of displacement and emplacement; as one of patterned mobilities that were hardly freely chosen; and of scarcity and losses lined-up in rather neat trajectories. I have outlined these patterns of social memories not only to engage the workings of loss and the poetical uses of the past within the present. But also to question and critically rework the notion of the refugee. For one could ask now: Where is the refugee? Which moment spelled calamity? Is there one or are there many? If so, which would be truly distinctive? In one way the question could be answered by underscoring the moment when erstwhile owner became landless (once again). Indeed, this moment and its horrors loomed particularly large in remembered pasts. Yet it was counterweighted by the role land plays generally, by the character of the relations towards this muddy, yet sustaining material basis of life.

Steeped in migratory histories and enforced mobilities, land here is encountered in ways that differ greatly from the relations with land as they are invoked by subjects of forced migrations or in works reflecting on their plight. Neither would it be apt to frame the relations with land we see at work here along the lines of spatial articulations of ethnic conflict or the rhetoric of indigenousness. Moving on through various types of relations with various plots, my interlocutors differed clearly from the proverbial 'sons of the soil' or from those who saw their *ancestral* land swallowed by, say, another megadam (cf. Weiner 1978; Baviskar 2004). This, however, does not mean that they do not have relations or that these can be captured comprehensively through notions of movement, hybridity and dance (cf. Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013). The relations were deep and true to the notions of emplacement or dwelling, yet shallow in time. The engagements straddle, therefore, the line between the categories of space and place; between the pure spatial form, the not-yet related to and the culturally made meaningful place. Dwelled in and lived through, the places made on Ghoṛāmārā retained, I suggest, a sense of being a container, a plot, a horizon, a base – in short, space. The Bengal

noun used most often when we were talking about land here and there was *jāygā* – and it entails, I argue, precisely these ambivalences. It does not index the sticky materiality of soil or earth (*jami*, *māṭi*), nor the locality known through biographical events or prolonged dwelling (*sthān*) and surely also not the abode (*bhumī*) of forefathers or deities. To be sure, the latter notions were dotting conversations and then to mark out a distinct relation with one place or the other established through birth, life-cycle rituals or, occasionally, death of a family member. Yet the islands and their particularities were mainly known as spaces, as plots, as *jāygā*. The equally important notion of *bhiṭe*, often translated as homestead, only underlines these ambivalences. As a homestead it involved the conundrum of heightened ground to build a house upon, the house itself and, possibly, a pond and surrounding fields or gardens. I have to stress that a *bhiṭe* was and was not tied to a particular space. As much as the *bhiṭe* emerged as a site of dwelling – of mutuality of space and self, of transformation and affective dimensions – homesteads could travel, too. To be sure, the possibility of a homestead's destruction served as an essential and intimate threat,[250] yet the very homestead was seen as nested into space and thus to be moved along. The tensions between space and place, between deep and shallow roots were thus reappearing here: As construct the *bhiṭe* facilitated a sense of continuity across rather mobile trajectories; yet it entailed deeper relations that rooted the homestead in place.

Three dynamics will very likely have contributed to these relations. One, of course, are the rather short time interval spent on the islets and their very disappearance. A second possible dynamic relates to the accumulation of death and ancestors in a particular space and, hence, the embodied knowledge of the space as one's own village: As a place pervaded with the presence of relatives and, through them, a meaningful past.

Historians have demonstrated (D. Chakrabarty 1996; Raychaudhury 2004) that this relation to particular sites, to particular villages and places within them, prevailed among refugees from East Bengal and their sense of loss. Among them villages seem to be remembered as sites where ancestors had died and been worshipped. Precisely for these reasons, these places had an intimate bearing on questions of selfhood and continuity. Although the literature on Bengal is scarce in this regard, I defy the generalizing notions that the poor cannot afford to suffer a sense of loss and simply move on (cf. Köstlin 2010, 7f); that the place-based longing as exemplified among middle-class *bāṅgāl* refugees would be a distinguished sentiment. Rather does it need time-worn relations and the accumulations of deaths in certain spaces to turn them into places

[250] Annu Jalais (2010b, 58) rightly observed that the imagery of a razed homestead is in spoken Bengali partly synonymous with the destruction of a person.

in the deepest sense of the word. Yet, these developments could hardly unfold in the comparatively short time spent on the islands. Particularly the relations toward the 'original' place of origin, that is the villages across the Huglī, could be understood to be remembered in such a way. Yet these were, so it seems, overshadowed by the tropes of density, strife and disasters.

These differences are, furthermore, refined through the very character of land procurement in the first place. For they implied fundamentally different relations with the land. To be sure, the land taken as squatters has never become related to in the way owned fields were. This ephemeral relation may count for some of the silences outlined above, too. Yet while localities are more of a nodal character than homelands in the sense of sedimented histories or present forefathers, they still harbour affective dimensions. Places emerge as a counterpoint to marginalizations and injustices sustained elsewhere: set against the more distant pasts of density, poverty and conflicts as much as set against the more recent experiences as labour migrants. Against the pasts outlined in this chapter, the elsewhere (*bideś*, *bhāire*) emerges as space of disempowerment and infused with hostilities. Complementary, this stance lends emotional depth to the container-like space horboring the islanders for the time being.

The emplacement in colonies was, finally, bound up in oscillations between a sense of permanence and trustful emplacement on one side and a deep uncertainty of the persistence of land on the other. To these I want to add another layer of the land's very fragility: i.e. the dimension of politics. To many of my interlocutors the distributions of land remained somewhat suspect. Being facilitated by state officials who were known to be unpredictable and, what is more, being arranged by members of the 'high state' – that is, by politicians associtaed with distant centres of power – the very proprietorship remained vague. Many of those who owned legal titles (*pāṭṭā*) and lived on the land for years still voiced anxieties that the land could be taken from them anytime. The elusive powers of the state apparatus that had set them into landownership could, so it was feared, been set into motion once again to oust them. Widely televised, rampant forced acquisitions of fertile land by the state elsewhere in Bengal only fuelled these anxieties as did the ever uncertain horizon of loyalty expected for benefits. Not bought, but bestowed, the land remained in localized perspective tied to the favours of the state; consequentially, to many it never really was one's own. To elucidate some consequences I have to anticipate the next chapter and point at parallels between localized conceptions of state and divinity, and of state and 'nature'. In this perspective, then, the powers of the secular state bordered the powers of divinities: similar to the latter the state followed its own rules and was

seen to hold absolute, arbitrary powers over individuals and society. Likewise, the state's powers appeared as akin to the powers of material environments. For, as much as the state was the only entity who was invested with powers to stop the shrinkages, the state itself was feared as an agent of devastations and losses. Directly or indirectly. On the conceptual level it is justifiable, therefore, to speak of a continuum of shared characteristics between state, divinity and nature.

Against this background I will now turn toward a fourth crude category of agents – i.e. visitors related to global audiences. Surely, these were utterly irrelevant for questions of ownership or submergence of the land. Yet they proved to be important for the ways the lost lands and submerged islets continued to be relevant in daily life. In their very absence, as sign and lost home they became sites of exchange and spectacle through which certain pasts were nourished at the cost of others. To this staging of certain pasts complemented by an, at least implicit, manufacturing of silence I will turn to now.

8.5. Media and the Arrival of Public Memory

> Ghoramara is not just any island. It is symbolic of a problem that transcends local, regional and national boundaries. It is the actual face of global warming and climate change, the biggest problems facing the earth today,
>
> Sunita Narain*, cited in Times of India*

Their contours are set against the vast expanses of a washed-out sky and sullen waters. Accompanied by gurgling sounds and a rattling engine, the boat floats along Ghoṛāmārā with the two men gesturing into the distance and recounting what once was and has long gone into the river: Houses, fields, pathways and roads stretching, so they say, far into the distance. Seated in the bow of a local *trawler*, the men seem at times to be lost in reminiscences. Yet, they are not alone: The watchful eye of a film camera registers every of the their movements and mournful words from the rear. An empty space of rough, bleached planks spreads between men and camera, between filmed ones and filming crew separating one group from the other (see figure 13). In a sense, they are still are alone and engulfed by amorphous waters. They are themselves moved into, if not confined within a distance. As if, one might say, placed on a stage, dramaturgically arranged and asked to narrate their losses. For the camera, the team and

Figure 13. Still from Mean Sea Level *(dir. Saha 2009)*

global audiences. These are the opening scenes of a recent documentary on Ghoṛāmārā evocatively titled 'Mean Sea Level' (Saha 2009). Commissioned by the influential Indian environmental organization *Centre for Science and Environment* (CSE) based in New Delhi, the film seeks to illuminate the threats Sea Level Rise has in stock for Indian coasts. Several of the uncertainties about the past and future of erosions examined throughout this thesis are woven into the film. Nevertheless, they have been merely subsumed under the overarching theme of Climate Change.[251] While this seems to invite yet another comment on the epistemological and ethical difficulties in every attempt to represent Climate Change, in this chapter I will follow another approach. That is, I will turn the question on its head and reflect on the prominent role of the Sāgar island group within these debates and interrogate the ways in which this relative fame influences perceptions of the past and the environment on the islands themselves. How, in other words, the globalized attention acts back onto the fragile coasts and performes a particular form of memory work.

[251] The DVD's blurb makes this unmistakably clear. It reads: "7,500 km from the climate secretariat in Bonn, islands at the southern tip of the Indo-Gangetic Delta are their own testimony to climate change. 'Mean Sea Level' is the story of those who live here, on edge. … For these people, climate change is real. Rising sea level, 2mm a year, is a deadly insecurity. The experience of this new breed of climate refugees defies simplistic explanation: sea level rise is not water flowing upon a landmass, causing it to submerge and so disappear. Sheikh Lalmohan lost his home in island Lohachara 18 years ago, and lives in a refugee camp. … All this, while we debated climate change."

The prominence – to which the film owes its existence and which it feeds into – is, of course, only partially explained by the devastations of recent environmental hazards or exceptionally bleak prospects. Large tracts of India's coasts are extremely vulnerable to inundations or cyclonic activity and almost the whole Sundarbans will suffer immensely with the intensifying consequences of anthropogenic Climate Change. Then why looms Sāgar so large?

Beyond the longstanding perception of Sāgar through the prism 'natural disaster', the island form of the landmass seems in itself to play an important role here, too. For it appears as a valid metaphor for the world at risk. But this applies to other islands troughout Asia, the Pacific and the Americas, too. Conversely, it is unclear where exactly we might find the truly first victims of Climate Change – proclaimed simultaneously in far-flung places across the globe (see i.e. Mortreux and Barnett 2009; Farbotko and Lazrus 2012) – and if this label is justified in the first place. Decisive for the fame are, I suggest, other dynamics. The quite long-standing presence and not only the expected future of displacements by encroaching waters are certainly important in this regard. But they do not suffice as explanation. To this, I argue, the relative ease of communications have to be added. Here the relatively reliable ferry, metalled road and the availability of cars, in a word: the infrastructural developments due to pilgrim traffic come into play again. If the timings of the tides are taken into account, the threatened coasts can be reached by private car only within a few hours from Kolkata and accommodation is easily arranged in the pilgrim shelters of Gaṅgāsāgar. These conditions contrast with much more arduous journeys into the central part of the Sundarbans and facilitate the kind of drop-in visits chosen by most interested visitors. Take, for instance, the two French TV-journalists I briefly met one late summer evening. They had been travelling Africa and Asia to shoot a feature on Climate Change and stayed in Gaṅgāsāgar for the night. Ours was a short conversation, as they had arrived only shortly before the generator in Rudrānāgar was turned off and Sāgar bound to sink into darkness and sleep. What is more, they were tired from a long day between the airport, a roughneck drive south into the delta and finally several hours of shooting while drifting along Ghoṛāmārā and briefly on the island itself. The distinctively Bengali urban middle class woman who had arranged their trip and assisted as translator, had already retired to her room; and with sunrise a taxi would take them back to the city. Therefore, our conversation was little more than an exchange of itinaries. Yet it was sufficient to elucidate a pattern mirrored in conversations with islanders who had taken part in this type of interaction with global media. I like to think of these interactions in terms of excursions.

Rushing in and shooting footage on the fly, the presence of the journalists is almost paradoxical. Indeed, it might be questionable, if theirs is a presence after all. Yet the time spent with journalists, musings in front of the camera and the attention gained therewith had a lasting impact on many of my interlocutors. Most of the residents would at some time or another point to the stream of reporters that had shown up over the years. If only to relate it to the futility of interactions with wider audiences and the frustrated hopes for improvements even in the face of considerable outsider attention. Others, however, emphasized the small joys, if I may call it that, stemming from these encounters. Simply because I had ethical objections toward the staging and consumerism implied in the typical, hasty round-trips the camera teams preferred, I had never joined one of these excursions. Even though, several 'refugees' from Sāgar's colonies and, therefore, also several of my friends from Gaṅgāsāgar Colony had repeatedly embarked on such trips. Interestingly, the basic pattern remained alsways the same: The team would show up out of the blue, invite some of the 'refugees' into a rented trawler, float along where the islands were shrinking and asked the islanders to reminiscence in front of the camera. Watching *Mean Sea Level* later in Berlin, I was struck how the filmed brothers in the opening scene constructed the banks of the lost island around the Bodhitree, *that* Bodhitree alluded to in, what I have called, the story of tree and children (see chapter 8.3.4.). In fact, they used the tree as an anchor within the remembered territory, as a sunken landmark which invited to revisit the vanished places and to measure distances to long disappeared places. While the tree was, therefore, included into globalised imageries, its significance within the climactic event referred to above and, by extension, for the legibility of the erosions, was lost to the cinematic desires of the camera team. Focusing, as it were, on disappearances and victimization.

Once, upon returning from a few days in Kolkata, where I had attended civil society meetings and pursued archival research, Anil Seth told me that yet another reporter had come and had taken him back to Ghoṛāmārā. He was glistening with excitement. Several months had gone since he had been able to go to the island the last time. So he was happy to have received the chance, he said, to see his brothers and their families again and to update on the island with his own eyes. As inclined already, the relations with Ghoṛāmārā were quite tight, yet few had the time or money to go there regularly. Even while the residents were certainly well informed via the ubiquitous mobile phones and daily gossip, these hardly could satisfy the longing many felt to go on an actual visit.

Unannounced, then, a small group of strangers knocked at his door around noon one day. Assisted by two Bengali guides and interpreters brought from Kolkata, the team had arrived on

the island in the morning and after some shooting in Lighthouse, they were now looking for resettled islanders before they would leave for Kolkata with nightfall. Here they were looking for an old couple with grandchildren from Ghoṛāmārā. As they, so he went on to say with his relatives nodding, had been bent on filming an old displaced couple together with their grandchildren against the backdrop of the island. He did not mention the label 'refugee' as we spoke, but that must have been the label under which they eventually would appear on screen. Anyhow, the film team had been asking around in the Colony for persons who would fit their demands and ultimately they had arrived at Anil Seth's house. Before that they had been led by helpful residents, so he said, to other houses, too. But either were the elder persons bound up in other tasks or sick or the children were unavailable for the day. His immediate neighbour, Sheikh Sheimal who had a flock of grandchildren had not been asked simply because he was, so Anil Seth told me, too young. The film team insisted on elder persons for their shooting. The frames envisioned by the team could, one might say, not have been realized so far and so they had kept on searching. Be that as it may, Anil Seth was home and free as was his wife and one of their grandsons. After quick introductions, the trip had been agreed upon. The fact that they were in the process of preparing lunch and therefore not immediately ready was quickly solved: the team promised to pay their lunch on the way. Upon my inquiries, the Seths insisted that they had not earn money with the trip. Their fabulous hospitality and friendliness certainly lends creditability to this. And even if they did negotiate payments that would ultimately not alter the dynamics which I want to stress here.

Shortly afterwards, they had entered the car rented by the journalists and drove with them north towards Kachuberia, the ferry point for both the mainland and Ghoṛāmārā. On the way they stopped in a restaurant and had lunch together. Anil Seth and his wife boldly emphasized the festive, abundant character of the meal and it marked, together with the very ride, certainly a highlight of the day. From the northern tip of Sāgar, then, they had embarked on a rented trawler and set out for Ghoṛāmārā. Close to the shores of the tiny, yet famous islet they had stopped and filmed. They had been talking a bit in front of the camera, but what seemed to matter to the film team, Anil Seth said, was their gesturing and, more precisely, the gestures they made for their grandson.

After shooting aboard, they only had little time on Ghoṛāmārā itself. When the trawler arrived there, it had already been four in the afternoon. Standing on the edge of the water they showed the team and the filming lens where their house had been and laid out how they had received land in the Colony. With great disappointment they had learned a little earlier that it was already

too late to guide the team around on the island. The Seths therefore could meet only few acquaintances and had to skip roaming the island. Very much to their regret. Instead they had to get back onto the trawler. Otherwise they would have had to stay the night (as the last public ferry was by then long gone) and they would have missed the chance for a free and comfortable ride back to the Colony.

In Kachuberia they had said goodbye as the journalists embarked on another ferry back to the mainland and the islanders were driven back home to the Colony. Again, to their excitement, in a taxi. Sadly, none of the residents could remember the names, company names or even the nationality of the film team and I therefore never managed to watch the outcome of this quick filming. Residents assured me that this was the way encounters with film teams typically took place. Most – although not all, as the deeper researched aforementioned film by the CSE substantiates – were marked by hurriedness.

Although the relations were marked by glaring economic disparities, the Seths were not simply the naïve exploited villagers. True, there were most likely far from receiving a fair share in the economic value the footage might (or might not) have solicited. Yet, they gained by the interaction. Many spoke in excited voices about the material benefits, about the brief experience of wealth that came along with it. As well as, of course, the possibility to return for a short visit. On the one hand, they enjoyed a rare, extremely rare ride in a taxi and a private trawler; and they indulged in the hearty meal offered on the way. Without wanting to re-emphasize the redundant and misleading imagery of the simple-minded peasant and rustic simplicity, this still meant an extraordinary experience in the present of extremely poor islanders. In the way, they spoke of it, it became clear that it was a joyride precisely in the hassle-free nature of the ride, its speed and the means open only the wealthy: the private car (*private gāṛi*). And as such it gave yet another layer of glamour to the in itself already somewhat extraordinary situation. I use the term 'glamor' only hesitantly and for want of a better term. But how else to capture the fascination of all matters cinematic, of rolling cameras and all sorts of fancy technology condensed in the notion of the movie (*filim*); or the simple interest shown by wealthy strangers connected to, what appears to be, exotic nodes of power?

Through this particular excitement, the somewhat fading past of displacement was time and again revitalized and related to the present. The past emerged as an exciting rupture of everyday routine; as a moment where a particular episode of the past became noteworthy and meaningful or even exotic enough for the global audience to take notice of it. However, this interest or, better: the concrete engagements seldom went beyond preconceived pictures. Enfolded in the

economic disparities, therefore, lurked a particular poetics (and politics) of pictures. The episode related here makes this blatantly clear. It may be not only understood as a moment when difference and victimhood was staged, but as an aestheticized arrangement of certain people within 'their' ruined landscape. The insistence on an older couple and their grandchildren is just that: as a composed picture it relates to imageries of suffering and refugee-ness and illustrates, at the same time, the temporal anxieties of climate change. Through their position, gestures and reminiscences culminationg into a cleverly composed imagery of transgenerational transmission, the Seths were giving a face to something as invisible as Climate Change. In a word, they became proxy witnesses (see Chapter 4.6. above).

Yet, the reverberations of these relations and image practices do not end here. For the filmed islanders may be instrumentalized, but they certainly are not passive foils or shadows. Through these encounters the recollections themselves and the framing thereof most likely begin to be particularly shaped. It is, of course, difficult to estimate the transformation of social memory within the methodological approach of this thesis. But some tentative observations may be in order. I ground these in the emphases emerging in these very encounters and a contrast with wider narrative strategies.

These excursions allowed for a return. A particular past and its place was revisited. Surely, the ambivalence of absent places becomes virulent again: the places are gone, yet the ruins of the island served as a reminder and, in a sense, a continuation of that what has vanished. Ghoṛāmārā was visited here, to be more precise, as a *continuing* presence of a past, as 'lieux de mémoire' (Nora 1989) even while the places dwelled had vanished and with it large parts of the population. In the same time, these revisits were always a stark reminder of the loss itself. Upon approaching the island, so much became clear during conversations on the public ferry whenever I visited Ghoṛāmārā, the state of the island was measured by all those who do not regularly ply the route. It is measured against that what was and against a baseline, a moment when the erosions began to become felt or were often enough fictively framed as beginning (see Chapter 8.3.1.). Actually, only few muse and reminiscence in the way the brothers did in the opening scene of *Mean Sea Level* described above. But many conversations began, so much I can say, to evolve toward the pitiful state of the island as the ferry draws near. In this way, the mere visit served as a moment of re-collection – necessarily in the ambivalent way inclined by the hyphen. In other words, with the fragile land the equally fragile past was revisited and reworked.

Yet through these encounters not only the land is revisited, but a certain relation to it: a stance toward the land and a particular moment in the past. They were led back (and were nostalgically content, even eager to do so) as victims, as those who could not cling to the space and had to move on. This, of course, is not to incline that they saw themselves as victims or part of a victimized population. In fact, the fascination to go back may rest have to a certain degree also in the possibility to revisit a hazardous space that they had managed to leave; as a volatile coast that was given up in favour of a, for the time being at least, considerably more stable position. But returning on the boat, in conversations with journalists and under the gaze of the lens, the moment of loss was emphasized once again. That is, what these encounters were all about. In all instances – either in actual films or in narrations about the encounters – the moment of reminiscences and of gestures into the muddy waters is central. Indeed, the imagery has its profound powers: I was repeatedly struck myself by these gestures and stereotypical narrations as I conversed with villagers on boats or embankments. But, of course, the power of the gesture and the allusion to a moment of rupture does not have an effect only on observers. It shapes also the way the past is treaded into the present and the imagined future by those who gesture and talk; and those who see older people gesturing and talking. The particular encounter between the Seths and the journalists is emblematic in this regard. The latter insisted on the accompanying grandchild surely to compose a moving picture of survival in the past and the threats of an uncertain future. Yet, they also produced a moment where the past was reinvigorated in the child – both, as a burden and an instance of distinction.

Certainly very impressive for the child, which had been hurdled into the centre of attention right under the watchful lens, this holds true for many others, too. Particularly in the observation of and the talk about this or parallel encounters. Paralleling encounters with agents of rural development and surveys of all kinds, the team had relied upon residents who willingly guided them to the house of their envisioned frame – i.e. the elderly displaced couple. Moving about in the colony and introducing themselves here and there, they had been observed by bystanders or neighbours. Much of the talk concerning this incident was framed by the puzzlement known to the craft of ethnography since long: Why do they come here? Why do they want to understand how our poor and undeveloped affairs go on? Attempts to answer these questions, referred back to the moment that was seen by many as decisive for the past of the Colony: displacement by encroaching waters. Throughout all the certainly well-grounded mistrust or, to put the other way round, the awareness of these encounters' exploiting nature, the debates related time and again to the past. And forestalled the obsolesence of the past. However, if memory is understood

to be the ephemeral outcome of remembering and forgetting, as Augé implies, then we have to understand these conversations as crucially shaping the past remembered themselves. Memory, thus, turns out to be the outcome of complex relation between people and things, between memories' various scapes. The past emerges here, in a word, through particular tropes and incidents. While this holds true for all memory, not always is the local so tightly, yet so delicately related to trans-local spheres. Debating observations of film teams or of comparable encounters is a moment where 'public memory' (Casey 2004), interrelates in mutual ways with localized patterns. The actions of persons associated with a distant public are – in themselves as much as through the interpretations they provoke – important nodes of the past remembered. By the same token, they became sites of the production of new memories: far from being irrelevant and without consequences in local lifeworlds, the encounters with arriving and departing strangers became memorable in themselves, invigorated certain parts and nourished them through these brief and uneven encounters with exotic strangers. They were spectacle, distinction and source (of so far only frustrated) expectations of an overall betterment.

To outline outcomes of this incidental memory work, I will now turn to tropes emphasized through these. Basic and often taken for granted is the imagery of singular displacements. In both senses of the phrase challenged throughout this work. The islanders interviewed were framed, for one, in the language of stability and fixedness. If only implicitly and taken-for-granted, islands are treated as stable, as of a durable existence with certain people inscribed into it. Needless to say, this feeds into particular strategies of seeing land and their populations. Land, as I have noted above, to be the mute background of human activities; and populations being orderly and neatly tucked into them – what emerges is, in a word, a world without movement. Much ink has been spilled on these conceptions, their pitfalls and ongoing relevance in the present predicament. I want to restrict myself and point only to the denial of deep pasts of seldom voluntary mobilities; the denial of what I have called circuits of displacement and emplacement. In these interactions only one moment – that of loss to a river or better here: the sea – has been emphasized; and the islanders implicitly engaged along the lines of the notorious 'sons of the soil'. Pre-existing mobilities as much as hybridities are overshadowed in favor of a single process that makes them, what they supposedly are: islanders who fell off the grid of 'their' island. However, I do not want to suggest that the imagery of displaced islanders is imposed by external observers or that it is entirely misleading. Indeed, the horrors of erosion and the enduring uncertainty about what it is that has befallen them, obviously contributed to singling these dynamics out. Yet in an interaction with very external observers this moment is

only further emphasized; as it is the foundation principle, the potential for these interactions to evolve in the first place. And it is a moment, I have to repeat, within diverse histories that emerges as decisive, if not *the* decisive one. To be sure, this very dynamic permeates also my research as also my research was driven by the interest in that one moment. Although I realized in the process that I have to take it rather as a starting point rather than an sufficient characterization, I certainly cannot entirely step beyond it.

In the process the silences are only deepened. For it is this moment of loss, of falling off the grid that constitutes the relation and that is invoked in conversation. And not the humiliating experience of retreat of repeated losses. True, many attentive observers have an ear for the processual character of losses, for the number of times people shifted their belonging and houses were rebuilt. Nevertheless, the main interest lies elsewhere: in the moment of rupture and the arrival in the colony. Silences about the in-between hence only do flourish.

Secondly, I noted an eerie, ambivalent usage of labels which was relied upon. Or better: labels that were and were not arriving in debates in the Colony. With Lohāchara having earned reputation as, what seems to be, the drowned home of (India's) first Climate Change victims, the interest of arriving journalists stemmed clearly from this or closely related assumptions.

The idea that the submergence is *only* or *foremost* an outcome of Global Warming goes unchallenged in global mediascapes. Still, the relations with external observers have hardly emerged as sites from where knowledge about the multiscalar dynamics of Climate Change emerged. Neither took quests for such a knowledge take their cue, nor have political demands evolved from here. Again, this is not to say that environmental deteriorations were not noticed. They clearly were and they were engaged with through localized practices. Similarly, do I not want to re-emphasize the misleading imagery of the naïve peasant relying on information by external knowledge brokers to know what befalls her and to take actions. However, the hybridity of knowledge about environmental changes (on all levels) has been repeatedly demonstrated. Here the potentials of exchanges for all levels is ultimately self-evident: as much as policy debates depend on localized knowledge and capacities, dispersed communities would certainly benefit by understanding what is befalling them. If only to make their voices heard in complex political architectures of claims.

I was struck therefore that throughout my fieldwork the notion of 'climate change' hardly figured in the sense applied to it now in most global debates. One could see shifts during, for example, the intensively broadcast Climate Change negotiations in Copenhagen coinciding with my fieldwork or with awareness programs organized by NGOs (see Chapter 7.4.). The

engagements with journalists and film makers devoting their work to picture consequences of climate change, however, were of no importance.

Only very rarely had encounters evolving around staged memories and particular ruptures indeed begun to be turned into sites of friction in the sense introcuded by Tsing (2005). From here the present of environmental changes began to be framed as one Climate Change and the past of displacement as one of a ‘Climate Refugee’. To illustrate these dynamics, I will now turn to one of the most exciting episodes in the life of Sheikh Motalib and its wider relevance.

I have known Sheik Motalib since my earliest days in Gaṅgāsāgar Colony. Resembling yet another journalist, I had immediately been referred to him. As noted on the outset of this thesis, I was urged to speak to him, as he well versed, so I was told, in the things that brought me here. Inded, knowledgeable he was – yet having embarked upon research on the uses of history, its poetics and politics, his knowledge was neither more nor less profound than that of most others. What set him apart from other residents of the Colony was something else. It was, I began to realize later, his distinction as a specialist in dealing with interested strangers. He had achieved, in other words, the reputation of being a key person for those inquiring about the sinking islands. It was not so much his brief formal education that helped him in this regard, so much I could reconstruct, but rather his skills in politics. He had been a member of the Pañcāyat in Ghoṛāmārā and wielded influence that was superior to those of his erstwhile neighbors. Through the ties of *parti* and the powers of office he had managed to arrange for piece of good land not only for him but also for one of his brothers. Similarly, he was the only inhabitant enjoying employment within the state bureaucracy. Working since several years as a clerk in the youth hostel close to Kapil Muni’s temple in the heart of Gaṅgāsāgar he had a steady, if small income beyond the uncertainties of paddy agriculture or the hazards of other commercial work. He appeared, therefore, to be not without some pride and a sense for distinction when he strolled every early afternoon to the youth hostel: holding firmly onto his umbrella – which clearly signalled that he was not manual labourer – he would unfailingly greet me whenever we met with a loud English ‘How are You?’.

Whether his peculiarity to weave English words into Bengali conversations and to indulge in accounts of, how he called it, ‘objective facts’ (e.g. exacts size of the islands, number of people affected and so on) dated back to his tenure in rural offices or effectively helped him to take up a position there, remains unclear to me. But both, this proficiency and his statue in local politics helped him to establish the status of a local authority on Ghoṛāmārā. While not being a teacher, in his performance of distinction, rhetoric abilities and his pleasures to do so, he certainly

resembled a rural *bhadralok* as close as possible under the given circumstances. These performances were probably decisive that one day a few years ago, Miss Maitrī Dāsgupta from distant Kolkata had knocked at his door. She had been doing so as the regional officer of Greenpeace India and invited Sheikh Motalib as a representative of the people from Ghoṛāmārā to New Delhi. Or, to stay true to the label under which he would appear in the nation's capital: as representative of the climate refugees from the Sundarbans.

Sheikh Motalib had readily accepted the invitation and a few weeks later, in April 2008, he set out for Kolkata. There he was to meet with staff from Greenpeace and together they boarded one of the most luxurious, fast and costly trains the Indian Railway had to offer – the *Rajdhani Express* bound for New Delhi. Now, whenever we sat in his mud house and talked about the present, he would at one time or another retell this journey. His excitement and deep satisfaction of having seen this and, even more, of having taken an active part became unmistakably clear. As if there was any need, his glistening eyes stepped in and underlined the joys of the event and its memory. Indeed, these were times when he had been involved in the world of upper-class mobility and come close to the circuits of power. In New Delhi, then, he had been put up in a hotel room, guided around in the city and taken to a conference. Needless to say, he was impressed by the city and by the exuberant feasts he had been invited to. For the first time in his life he thoroughly had had the opportunity to enjoy an air-conditioned room – invited to stay as a guest of honour and not merely hurdled through as a petitioner in the office of a powerful bureaucrat. Moreover, wherever he went during his stay in the capital, he had been offered delicious and exotic foods in huge quantities.

Although he never phrased it that way, it is tempting to relate his experiences with Greenpeace India to the melancholic reflections by Nur Noa Mohammed that open the ethnographic parts of this thesis (see Chapter 5). For a spell of a few days, Sheikh Motalib was in the lucky position to catch a glimpse of a world that seemed to be out of reach: a world that was not marked by mud, a world appearing to be developed and matured (*pākā*). It comes to little surprise, then, that the journey itself figured so prominently in his narratives; and within these the motif of the effortless travelling aboard the luxurious train. More than a quick and convenient mode of transport, the *Rajdhani Express* clearly set his journey apart from being stuck in a backward, disaster-prone area as much as it distinguished him from the travels of labour migrants who had to travel in compartment trains and in crowded busses. It indexed power, access to an exotic world and also the escape from worldly struggles.

Obviously, travel, accommodation and food were much more then only means of transport and sustenance to him: Throughout our conversations they overshadowed the reason why the trip had been done in the first place. The mundane conference, in other words, was remembered in hazy terms and reluctantly told about. It vanished behind the glamor and excitement. It did so, I suggest, because the conference's objectives and procedures remained fundamentally opaque. I do not understand this to be evidence of the misleading argument according to which rural and urban India or its elite and common people were ultimately incommensurable. Instead, I want to emphasize that this encounter is comparable to the encounters engaged with above in their staging of islanders and the imbalanced power relations entailed therein. As much as it was unclear what the conversations under the watchful eyes of the film camera were *really* about, the political or discursive dimensions of the meeting in Delhi remained cloudy. Surely, I have to be cautious here, as Sheikh Motalib was the only islander I could identify who had been invited to the city as spokesperson – and I have to ground my criticism therefore on the recollections of one person only. Yet, and this is crucial here, regardless of the diffuse memories of the formal program, the journey certainly seems to have had a considerable influence on Motalib's thought. It underscored particular memories and produced new ones. Through the emphases of particular pasts as staged and performed in Delhi and the weight of the spectacular journey itself, a particular notion of the refugee was at least cemented. Perhaps even installing in the first place.

Thus, Sheikh Motalib was one of the very few islanders who quite frequently used the notion of *udbastu* or *bastuhārā* (refugee, lit. home-less) in various speech situations and he was the sole residents who relied upon the English noun 'refugee'. As the reliance of the label 'refugee' clearly implies, his encounters in the India's capital and among its circuits of power prioritized the experience of erosions. Similar to the encounters with journalists alluded to above, the moment of singular loss, the falling off the island itself – figuratively put – marked the core of the interest here, too. It served as dynamic making Sheikh Motalib's plight noticeable, rendering his presence at the margin of global discourses meaningful and gave it an aura of urgency. To be sure, this moment was clearly balanced with an interest in the present living conditions and the volatile futures, as related publications by Greenpeace and media accounts suggest. Yet, the very sinking of the island served, here once again, as precondition for the journey and its main concern. Visiting New Delhi, Sheikh Motalib revisited his past and gained new memories that were tied to one particular angle on the past. He was, so he recollected, invited to talk about the coastal erosions, about the loss of the islands. Moving about and interacting at the conference

in New Delhi, hence, his past appeared as 'refugee's past'. Saturated as the event was with the imagery of climate change, refugees and environmentalism, the greater currency these notions had for him is little surprising.

Travelling to New Delhi and back, he had become one among the, as Marino called it, 'poster children' signifying Climate Change (Marino 2013, 196f). In contrast to members of several coastal populations in the Arctic or the Pacific, who were shown to be highly reluctant to take on the role as powerless victims of global changes (Farbotko 2010; Farbotko and Lazrus 2012; Marino 2013), Seikh Motalib embraced these labels. In part, surely, because they accentuated the resettlements' legitimacy and because the narratives of climate change and environmentalism invigorated meaning where otherwise only uncertainty prevailed. But also, I suggest, because they fed well into the wider pattern to emphasize victimization while enacting agency. Seen in this light, the adoption of the label 'climate refugee' qualifies as yet another hybridisation of labels and of ideas. For beyond the hybridized ways to know what befalls society, it is bound up, too, with the poetics of remembering. Indeed, with the reworking of and culmination in particular pasts.

8.6. Summary: Resilience in Shallow Places

Moving through a set of glimpses into a past not forgotten, in this chapter I have engaged the histories of being in place. These are characterized by, what I understand to be, circuits of displacements and emplacements. Mobilities as much as perception of here and elsewhere are, I have argued, structured by repeated losses. If anything, this perspective on the past defies assumptions of fixedness and victimization. For the present has to be understood as an outcome of actively navigated deprivations and disasters.

~~Although the imagery of floating things and~~ populations has repeatedly emerged, the assumed victimization and objectification is belied by moments of departure, enterprise and arrivals. Approached from another angle, the very navigations and emplacements bear, as I have argued, the signature of loss: agency, identities and a sense of belonging are all tied to master narratives of flight, dispersal and dis-placements.

Seen through the twin perspective of cyclical losses and the enigma of departure, the shrinking and sinking of islands once dwelled upon, emerge as merely yet another instance of displacement. The assumption of 'primordial losses', of experiences utterly new as much of the

writing on climate displacements assumes (see e.g. Sakakibara 2008), is therefore misleading. Yet, the latter emphasizes a sense of surprise, a novelty of the experience of shrinkages that was shared by my interlocutors. To be sure, it were not the transformations of the waterscape that appeared as shock, but rather their very negative nature: the absence of accretion, of arising or returning grounds throughout the last decades.

Against this background, this part of my thesis was also testimony to particular traits of social resilience. Complementing above mentioned economic strategies as well as the mastery of political networks and imageries resulting in resettlements, we saw, what I call, an ethics of endurance at play here. Rooted in histories of loss, the very present past of marginalization and despair, the ensuing disasters, displacements and impoverishments had steadfastly been endured. To be sure, the staying back of most islanders relates to immobilities of poorest populations, indeed: the already noted impossibility to move out of hazardous conditions by precily those who ar most vulnerable. Yet the countlessly repeated phrase 'Where else to go?' did not only capture this, but hinted also at the successful avoidance of flight while the places sunk themselves. The phrase and embedding narratives were thus testimony to endurance, resilience and dwelling in the present – all firmly rooted in shared sentiments of suffering. The latter enabled, as I have shown, particular sets of relations, perspectives and practices within a given present; and shaped the expectations of the future.

Apporached differently, one might also conclude that particularly the shallowness of the places, their youth and the not yet fully grown relations to them served as important moments for the resilience observed. Engaged as containers of joys, nourishment and comforts, they had still not grown in counterparts or canvasses of identities, the material 'counterpart' in which belonging might be rooted. What I want to emphasize, concludingly, are simply those fragments of resilience as they are, both, pervading these pasts of despair and growing therefrom. Resilience emerges, thus, as hidden in unlikely, ugly and even appalling dynamics (Scheper-Hughes 2008).

9. Encountering Destruction: Hybrid Knowledge and the Powers of Uncertainty

It was early on one of those hot afternoons just before the rains, when we sat in Kajol Māitī's battered restaurant and talked about the yearly sinking of the *melā* ground. As the sun baked the dirt road which led from the bus stand right to Kapil Muni's temple and on to the beach, the hotel owners gave their best to haul in pilgrims. But they were few and often not interested in simple dishes made of rice, shipped-in vegetables and fresh fish. We, in any case, had had our fill and while Kajol Māitī's first wife sat on the restaurant's veranda to look out for customers, he himself stretched out on of the benches and puffed *biṛis*. Even with his worn-out hair coloring – which had been accentuating, rather than hidding his proceeding age – he still was an impressive figure. In the prickling heat just before the rains only more so. Now that he avoided shirts whenever possible, he was clad just with a *gāmchhā*-like piece of cloth around his hips printed, as it were, to resemble the spotted skin of a leopard. In this attire, he reminded me of the god Śiva – who is depicted on popular prints very often as an ascetic dressed only in just that, a leopard-skin. Indeed, Kajol was a devout Hindu. Yet, sitting with him it was not difficult to conjure images of him as the successful actor of local theatre groups he once was. By the same token, his more recent career as powerful local politician of the CPI(M) and as self-fashioned leader of Gaṅgāsāgar Colony seemed to be far more remote.

It was not the first time that I had taken lunch here and talked afterwards about the past and the present of the colony. On this day, the conversation took other turns and ventured towards business, this time of the year and the famous Kapil Muni temple itself. Soon the rains would start and with it the time of the really high spring tides. Then, as every year around this time, the whole vast *melā* ground in front of the temple would be flooded for at least a couple of hours and the ocean would be seen licking directly at the steps of the temple, he said. And, indeed, it was to do so. In contrast to the petty shopkeepers in front of the temple, for him this meant neither risk nor annoyance, but was rather part of seasonality (Krause 2012) illuminating the immensity and power of the surrounding waters. This proposition mirrored, perhaps, the fact that he never lost any land.

Be this as it may, the conversation took a sarcastic twist as he smilingly pointed to a popular rumour about Sāgar. Outside Bengal it was be widely believed, he said, that the whole island remains sunken in the river for the whole year and emerges only for a couple weeks around the time of the annual fair in January. With his background in show business and politics, it may be no wonder that he quickly related this obviously erroneous rumour to promotional activities

of clerics and businessmen, as well as to overeager believers in distant parts of India. As much as rumours are embedded in larger narratives and can persist only through them, this idea surely relates to the powerful imagery of Kapil Muni's cave. Both underline intimate relation of sea and islands, of land and water evolves along cosmological dimensions and sacralized practices. Kajol Māitī's interlinked sequence of observations, then, points to the very space which is of crucial importance to various layers of transregional perceptions of Sāgar and its environs. That is, the inhospitable salty field stretching between the temple and the beach, made barren by hour-long floods a few times every year, traversed by pilgrims throughout the year and reworked by hordes of workers in the winter months developing a mini-city. If these dynamics were not enough to signify the ambivalences of the river and goddess Gaṅgā in its southernmost reaches, they were deepened by the much smaller, locally-organized festival devoted to Gaṅgā that was to take place here, too, with the penultimate full moon of the Bengali Calendar, the *Phalgun Purnimā* in March or April.

At that time, right with the onset of the summer heat, the season of hazards had yet to set in and pilgrimage traffic was slow. The prestigious office buildings lining the *melā* ground lay vacant again and the bustle and glamor of V.I.P. visitors had all faded. All was changed back to the normal state of deserted bungalows, 'field offices' with locked windows and emptied ponds. Then, far removed from the watchful eye of regional audiences and in defiance of the hegemonic myth, the fishermen's own Gaṅgā Pūjā was pursued. Articulating a different, marginalized conception of the riverine Goddess in a sense, it was a ritual that is not, on an island resting beneath the sea.

His lives as a theatre actor, politician, contractor, and now restaurant-owner notwithstanding, Kajol Māitī was, as I said, a devout man. And as much as he had capably navigated through his various lives, he commanded diverse rhetoric styles accommodating several layers of meaning. Insisting – as only a few other residents did – on the purifying powers of the riverine Goddess, he also laughed about the odd ways, the island was seen by outsiders and the strange ways of the riverine deity. To make matters more complicated, he would indulge in long elaborations on hydrology or anthropogenic changes to the waterscape, only to come to the conclusion that these were simply the outcome or the contours of the goddess' plays. Talking to him was one of those moments when diverse publics intersected and heterogeneous logics were laid bare in their entanglement. Being iconic – to me, the student who tried to unravel the ways the river was thought – his ways were still far from being exceptional.

In debating erosions there were not only many voices to be heard, but often enough gave the voices in themselves witness to diverse and hybrid forms of knowledge. Even during rather 'private' encounters, when I spoke with islanders secluded in shade or insulated by the noise of a trawler passage, a multitude of approaches began to make itself felt. Dialogues – in the sense of two people speaking on a particular subject – were, hence, marked by shifting regimes of interpretations and interlaced patterns of speech. Forms of knowledge steeped in western-modern science were entangled with parallel forms of environmental knowledge and localized cosmological ideas. What is more, these diverse approaches were entangled in figurative speech or the language of political claims. All relating uneasily to each other in their epistemic differences.

On the following pages I will untangle the most important, that is the most widely alluded to elements and conceptualizations set into motion here. How the configuration of these imageries was ultimately played out, with but one exception, did not depend on clear-cut social categories and thereby patterned perceptions. It is not that fishermen or survivors or women would subscribe to a particular model or theory respectively and thoroughly. Rather were articulations and their interrelations played out in concrete dialogic situations. Accounting for much of the complexity, they were they deeply involved in notions of responsibility. Likewise, they were ultimately rooted in the texture of the disaster. The temporality and quality of the erosions, that is, it's unfolding as 'slow violence', actually deepens, I argue, what has been shown for a wide array of interpretations of disastrous environmental changes: a complex host of interpretations unfolding simultaneous at times; and being susceptible to a dramatic sense of uncertainty.

I will begin the engagement with the how and why of erosions by analyzing the processes through which erosions were understood to be engendered. Only then will I engage the 'nature' of the river and her actions: that is, metaphorical and cosmological dimensions. Through this approach I do not intend to prioritize western-scientific conceptualizations or claim that they hold true for everybody. I do so, because most conversations – shorter ones and also those that extended over months – started with, what I call, techno-ecological explanations. They were unveiling underlying layers gradually: metaphorical speech patterns and cosmological conceptions that uneasily related to notions of 'mere' environmental processes and to politics. Building on that I will outline tremendously powerful notions of an ultimate safeguarding; and, finally, moralizing constructions of futility that were frequently voiced to explain why they found themselves in a place haunted by these hazards. Through this approach I hope to capture localized engagements with erosions. To account for conceptual obstructions and toxic

uncertainties related to the disaster's very texture, I will have to trace meaning in, as Tsing compellingly framed it (1994, 279), "[…] the zones of unpredictability at the edges of discursive stability, where contradictory discourses overlap, or where discrepant kinds of meaning-making converge […]".

9.1. 'Eco-technological' Explanations

Beyond cosmological dimensions alluded to by Kajol Māitī, the waters were, of course, known through their very materiality. The importance here is to attest and engage the simultaneousness of these varied approaches. In other words, the river is neither exclusively the body of god, nor exclusively shaped by hydrological processes. These two perspectives have to be understood to be as mutually intertwined. If only – to repeat a sentiment pervading through various discussions – because the currents and the waves are the means by which the river does what gods do.

That being said, I am now turning to what was sometimes called 'environmental laws' (*prākṛtik niyam*). In fact, most conversations would take the observations indexed with 'environmental laws' as a starting point. On and off the embankments there has been a talkativeness about the workings of the currents and waves that tends to overshadow figures of speech relating to ritual dynamics. Surrounded by mighty rivers, the workings of the tides and an open ocean, currents and waves certainly were fundamental importance not only since the onset of shrinkage. To measure, classify, and predict the flow of currents and wave attacks is crucial dimension of localized environmental knowledge in instable waterscapes (Schmuck-Widmann 2000). This predominance of localized equivalents of valid scientific categories – current, wave, velocity, tidal influx etc. – might appear to be related to the high impacts of western science. However, observing the same waterscape, localized knowledge of the environment unsurprisingly emphasizes very much the same material processes. The questions is, thus, not for scientific accuracy, but for the way environmental hazards are constructed at the interface of materiality, politics and cosmology.[252] The category of 'environmental laws' bridges these distinct bodies. Familiar as currents or waves may seem – at least through the eye of a hydrologist or river-dweller – they are, ultimately, not.

[252] A mode that governs the workings of scientific hydrology, too – albeit following other routes and imageries. Marshall Sahlins has, for instance, reflected on the ubiquity of cosmology also among those who often claim to be 'free' from it (see Sahlins et al. 1996).

In the same time, broader ontological constructions of these involve nothing less than appropriations of material environments (Luig and Oppen 1995). Currents and waves transcend, hence, a neat distinction between nature and culture as a socially mediated fact and it is here that the hybrid interplay across bodies of knowledge unfolds.
In localized perceptions and interpretations currents (*srot*) and waves (*dheu*) were, furthermore, most often interrelated with each other, yet conceptually distinguished. Being seen by most at work in one and the same time, the differentiation matters nevertheless. Within the framework of eco-technological explanations of erosions, they are therefore ultimately to be addressed in their own terms. This, again, does not allow for a clear attribution to persons or groups, I have to emphasize, but for a differentiation of dialogical patterns, interpretations and, hence, notions of responsibility. As an attribution of blame and a call of justice, the latter is, of course, in itself politically relevant. While the accusations I am referring to now are ultimately aimed in the same direction – that is, the regional bureaucracy – each of the two constructs takes a particular routes.

9.1.1. On Currents

Although all waters surrounding the islands are perpetually in motion, not all currents were seen as equally dangerous. The hazardousness of particular currents is, of course, a relational category. Yet, this relational nature was, in local speech patterns, limited or unmade.
The emphasis on tidal flows marks one end of the spectrum of explanations. Paralleling certain scientific discourses, off-flowing tides were framed in localized figurations as being particularly destructive. They were widely seen as doing so through the dramatic accelerations of speed and velocity of riverine currents. Throughout this approach, erosions were relational in so far as their *increased* occurrence is underlined: the tides emerged, in a word, as accelerating what the currents do. By locating the destructiveness in tides, they were explicitly treated as beyond the influence of society. This, relational dimensions overshadows partly social vulnerability and the social fabrication of currents.
This interpretation was competing with another one. Particularly when lloking at the quicker eroding northern parts, their detrimental position right in the way of powerful *artificial* currents – making the island liable to social interventions in the riverine waterscape.
Earlier I had shown that the relations with the bustling port city of Haldia situated right across the Huglī are tense. On one hand, it was an important node in labor mobility and partly still

embedded in networks of kin that several households highly depended upon in their struggles to make a living. The relations with and perceptions of Haldia were spurned, on the other hand, by suspicions and a clear sense of injustice against the background of uneven development (see Chapter 8.1.2.). Rooted in hearsay and media publications, as well as in the careful observations by numerous labour migrants plying back and forth, the immense interventions into the environment around the busy port have become, thus, another major frame to make sense of the shrinkages.

Since its inceptions, so-called deteriorations of the river channel have become a serious problem in Haldia, too. Massive sedimentation have been feared to have an impact on the growth (N. Mukherjee 1968). But since Haldia had already become high priority – infact it has been one of very few bustling economic centre in a overall stagnating economy of the state –, governmental authorities stepped in quickly. Thus, in the 1980s walls were erected in the vicinity of the harbour and underneath the water surface designed to avert erosions and perhaps to slow sedimentation in the channel leading up to the port.[253] In Haldia the government was seen as willing and capable to take effective measures to counter changes in the river. Against the background of everyday relations and media coverage on the 'boom town', the walls were known all too well and despised on this side of the Hugī. What is more, they were despised on this side of the Huglī for their influence on the currents. They have, so I was told by various islanders, diverted the currents so that they are now directly hitting Ghoṛāmārā, eroding and destroying it.

The argument at work here – diverted currents erode the island, our island – introduce a motif surfacing also in the closely related idea that ships are responsible. In both frameworks the endangerment and, ultimately, the vanishing of Lohāchara, Supāribhāṅgā and, in future also, Ghoṛāmārā is negatively tied to the interests of powerful actors of the state and corporate world. If only indirectly and *only* as a most likely unintended, yet neglected outcome. This argumentation did, interestingly, not only emerge as an interpretation of the occurrence of erosions themselves, but figured prominently also as an imagery to capture the dramatic increases in erosions in the last few decades. This discursive development is clearly facilitated by the congruence of both explanations: many understood the diverted currents to be as wrathful as they were seen in their conjuncture with the 'natural' force of out-flowing tides. Furthermore

[253] Beyond being documented in the port's archives (File *Review of Amelioration Scheme for Hooghly River*, Administrative Department, Marine Archives Kolkata), these walls have also attracted some media attention. Particularly with a view on countering the claim that the islands would be sinking as victims of Climate Change (alone) (see e.g. A. Ray 2009).

I want to stress that political dimensions within this strand of interpretations is severely limited: It had been constrained to the immediate environs and the recent past. Thus, only the times since Independence and the mouth of the Hugli itself were addressed. The deep changes into the riverscape brought about by the Farakka barrage upstream, for instance, were left out of the picture. Neither mentioned, finally, were the detrimental effects of the settlements themselves. Few were bso old to state that stretches of the coast if not the whole island were in the process of being sacrificed for the sake of the port. That is, for the greater interest of development and industrialization of which Haldia has become an emblem on contemporary Sāgar. It comes to little surprise that the claims of rehabilitation or equally versatile measure to safeguard the eastern side of Hugli (and thus the islands I am concerned with) voiced towards the port authorities remained unanswered. This does not mean that no works were done; but rather that contemporary works by extra-local government agencies were clearly subjected under another trajectory and the claims for rehabilitation or justice ignored.
During my fieldwork contractors and subcontractors working for the port authorities began with, what came to be known, the bouldering of Ghoṛāmārā's west coast. That is, they were fortifying the fringes of the islands with concrete boulders tied to each other and enfolded in large mats (Cf. also T. Ghosh, Bhandari, and Hazra 2003).[254] Doubtlessly, these were the sturdiest interventions seen in Ghoṛāmārā for a long time:and they altered erosive dynamics on the shores of Ghoṛāmārā facing the wide Huglī River considerably. With the contractors putting up, transport vessels arriving and, finally, many islanders taking up work as unskilled labour, for the first time since long there was activity beyond the mere reconstruction of collapsed embankments and the recession of helpless onlookers. Many islanders I spoke with, on and off Ghoṛāmārā, between 2009 and 2011 took this as a positive sign and felt their hopes reviving that Ghoṛāmārā would persist or that the shrinkage would be stopped. In the colonies, too, the bouldering was taken as auspicious news. Now, finally, the works waited for so long had started. After years of empty promises, so it wavered through the meetings, they had finally begun to safeguard the island.
On one of my visits to Ghoṛāmārā I had the chance to speak with one of the subcontractors. He had come from far Murshidabad, a district several hundred kilometres in the north, and was bent on performing the authority and whiffed superiority he perhaps thought was needed. Taking a stroll with him, he made it unmistakably clear that the bouldering was not done to

[254] Actually, one mat would as a ground layer be fixed to the coast and laid out so to cover the island's edge until quite deep in the river. Then the boulders were to be planted and a covering mat laid on top.

safeguard the island, but to improve the channels of the port. Or, at least, to slow down further deteriorations. For, he explained, the port authorities saw the massive erosions as a negative influence on the condition of the waterways: the lands evaporating here would by and large remain in the mouth of the Hugli and cloak it even further (see Chapter 3). Thus the port had financed the bouldering. Sure, the outcome was the same – strengthened countermeasures against the erosions – but the reasons differed. They had not been commenced to improve fragile lifeworlds nor as answer to a call for justice or right as citizen, but a self-interested interaction to remove the nuisance of channel decline. In the construction activities, the interests of the port authorities and those of the islanders were coinciding only by chance.

Against the background of this double indifference of the state – construction of walls and absence of thorough countermeasures – the islanders on and off Ghoṛāmārā continued to demand political initiatives to stop or diminish the erosions. In the context of divergent explanations and complex architectures of responsibility, these claims certainly rested on diverse imageries. Beyond the right as citizens and owners, they tried to make their voice heard also in the language of sacrifice and protection. For in the altered figuration of flows and currents, Ghoṛāmārā's position came to be understood as not only exposed and intensely affected, but also as stopping the currents from attacking other islands. Taking its cue from the understanding that Haldia's seawalls direct powerful current towards Ghoṛāmārā, it is but a little step to assume that they would hit hard on Sāgar's northern parts once Ghoṛāmārā have vanished. As Sāgar lies within their assumed path towards the southeast (see figure 2). For the time being and as long as it exists, Ghoṛāmārā emerges, in the eyes of many islanders, as something of a bulwark. "After Ghoṛāmārā has gone, the currents will hit Sāgar and then also Sāgar will vanish," was the way Nimāī Pradhān[255] put the basic idea during one of our conversations. In slightly altered forms, this theme pervaded discussions within offices on the threatened island and in homes in far-flung colonies at the same time.

While the political message is obvious, I want to dwell for a moment on the precise way it is – as a project and a claim – brought forward. Two related layers are particularly noteworthy. In its emphasis on protection, on one hand, it relates implicitly also a moment of sacrifice. After all, the island was seen as subjected to artifically redirected currents causing immense suffering. In contrast to certainly comparable contexts where people experience themselves as suffering and more or less willingly giving themselves or their assets as sacrifice for the project of

[255] Interview, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 22.7.2009

industrialization (see i.e. J. P. Parry 2008), I never encountered a sense of willingness. The moment of sacrifice, indulged in during encounters with officials to make plights heard and to work toward improvements, was, therefore, bound up with notions of force and the impossibility to step out of harm's way. Now with the urban elites having turned deaf, the moment of suffering was to appear, intentionally or not, as a moment of protection and sacrifice for the sake of nearby Sāgar – and, thereby, an island that is far more significant in the national or regional order.

In its emphasis on protection the imagery mirrors – on the other hand – the idea of the Sundarbans as protector of Bengal's cities and plains. As I had noted above, the forested islands have a long history as being framed as somewhat of a buffer zone between a capricious sea and the urban centre of Kolkata. Informing colonial perceptions with respect to cyclones and storm surges, the notions reappears in envisioned futures of climate change. In either case, the amphibian scapes appear as a bulwark supposedly tempering the hazardous bay. Ghoṛāmārā's exposed position within devastating currents, to return to the argument at hand, may very well be seen as intertextually linked with the overarching relevance of the Sundarbans; yet it turns this imagery on its head. For here it is not so much nature that has to be held at bay, but the outcome of development measures. The hazard approaches, hence, not from the void that is the sea, but from the more prosperous areas upstream. With character and direction inverted, possible future victims and, hence, addressees of the prognoses were seen as somewhere else, too. Ghoṛāmārā and its population emerged here as sacrifice and bulwark for much more famous Sāgar. Likewise, the inversion of the imagery allows for the reactivation of the channels of the localized state. For the claims were directed less towards Port Trust engineers or urban officers, but towards Sāgar's local politicians. Pressure was being levelled, in other words, along political networks that have proven to be efficient when it came to the governance of resettlement of displaced persons.

Shaping the riverine scape so thoroughly, currents were often also thought to be related to storms. To be more precise: responsible for the route storms take and the precise location of their landfall. During one group discussion in a tea stall[256] where the diverse layers of causal explanations emerged and where discussed, Sombhu Kajli elaborated:

> Sambhu Kajli: Into that direction where the currents (*srot*) are, storms go to. Into the direction of stronger currents (*karent*), [the storm] wanders off. … Into which direction goes the storm on-top of the current, on-top of the sea, losing his powers,

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[256] Group Discussion, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 28.1.2011

> in which direction will he go? When the Storm is on an eastward current he goes towards east, when he is on a westward current he goes towards west. When a storm emerges in the Bay of Bengal, we have learnt this from the newspapers, he meets either Bangladesh or Orissa. On this side of the Bay of Bengal is Orissa, on the other side is Bangladesh, when in the east or west storm is, in the current …."
>
> Paśupatti Giri: "… river current (*nadi srot*) …."
>
> Sambhu Kajli: "…. there he will emerge. Coming from there, he goes into either side and that is why storms fall very rarely onto Sāgar."

Mirroring the voices of many others, this short excerpt illuminates what I understand to be the riverine character of the sea and hints at another dimension that I will take up soon – the uniquely spared position of Sāgar. Similarly, it points to the diversity of localized knowledge: The media is directly alluded to as a source of knowledge and indirectly also through the use of the anglizised notion of *karent*/current. The body of scientific knowledge, however, is not simply adopted, but rather included into an ultimately hybrid conglomerate of localized knowledge. Complementing the combination of western-scientific and metaphoric thought, this conversation followed another line. To explain the erratic nature of cyclones, it mapped this hazard onto another, that is, currents. Emphasising thereby, once again, the extraordinary powers invested in currents. Albeit ultimately impossible to prove, it is tempting to relate this significance of currents to localized taxonomies of what the real disaster is. For the fact that they are steering cyclones only enlarges their power; and reduces the significance of cyclones indirectly further. The conversation illuminated, in any case, how hazards are made sense of through each other; in hybridized forms, or along, what might be called, routes of knowledge.

9.1.2. Waves

Waves form the second trope of what I understand to be the eco-technological trajectory. Resembling perceptions of currents in many ways, their potential to erode spaces was is tied to three entangled, yet analytically separable dynamics: there were seen as the ocean pressing in and; as effects of marine traffic; and, ultimately, as quality of the river. These contextualizations of waves were to a higher degree tied to particular locales and patterned environmental experiences. Among the islanders who shifted into the colony from Botkhāli, as well as among those who still reside there, waves have predominantly been understood as encounters with the sea. While the people from or on Ghoṛāmārā were rather emphasizing traffic and riverine characteristics.

Paralleling scientific accounts, riverine and marine waves were on the islands widely understood to be attacking and gnawing at the soft landmass. By many, they were therefore seen as complementing or falling together with the workings of the currents. Many others, however, blamed the waves as causing the submergence of their erstwhile homes alone. In either case, waves were understood to unfold their destructive powers always on the water's surface. They were, in contrast to the hidden works of deeper currents, always directly visible. Beyond these basic assumptions, the seasonality and the responsibilities vary greatly.

In the sea-facing village of Botkhāli the waves were framed as being the most important means of erosions and, thus, particularly dreaded. To be sure, all residents I spoke with acknowledged flows of the waters in one way or the other. Most spoke of the tides and their rush towards the embankments; as well as increasing pressure of the sea according to the seasons. Both these dynamics, however, were made sense of through the imagery of the waters pressing in. Pressing in, the wave activity increases – as geographers would put it – which translates into more erosions.

To explain these observances, the residents of Botkhāli relied on several patterns. Some explained it along a complex interplay of hydrological processes in the vicinity of the shore.[257] Others emphasized the nature of the river: its grace and its play along the lines that I will introduce below. As here, too, the waters were in everyday speech addressed as riverine and imbued with the language of imponderability.

A third pattern emphasized winds and here mainly the onset of the dreaded winds from the south. Hailing in the rainy season, the latter were seen to turn the waves even more rude and destructive. Being implied into the seasonality of the environment, the winds nevertheless did not emerge as a quality or a characteristic of the river. Originating in the vast open sea they were, to be more precise, neither thoroughly part of the waterscape nor beyond it. Yet, they figured as another dynamic increasing the hostility of the waterscape; beyond the interventions by men. Throughout these approaches, the ruinations remained an outcome of either elusive entities or of hydrological patterns beyond society. The political emerged here only indirectly: as the absence of interventions.

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[257] As, for instance, the small group of civil society actors around Prātāb Berā. They blamed the turbulences arising from the collision of riverine currents (from the Muṛigaṅgā River) with the seawaters pressing in from the South. These turbulences, they argued, turn the waters off the shore rough and hence highly destructive.

This explanation drew some of its authority from the fact that it formed also the understanding by foreign engineers who had studied the situation, so it was remembered, a few years ago. Yet a seawall to divert the currents which the engineers argued for had never materialised.

In contrast to these approaches, many islanders from and on Ghoṛāmārā tied wave activities explicitly to social interventions in the waterscape: to the marine traffic. This theme did never surface in debates in Botkhāli. With Ghoṛāmārā and Sāgar flanking the port channel, ships were easily to be spotted from literally every elevated ground on their western banks. As dots on the horizon and as giants towering over the islands. To be more precise: Within (and only within) the framework that the erosions were due to waves, ships were seen by many as the culprit. As they were seen to produce or aggravate waves ultimately gnawing away their lands. They were understood to do so either through their gigantic forms influencing the waters; through their movement within the waters; or, finally, through the movements of the rotor blades propelling the steel colossuses.

Before I turn to political repercussions of these explanations, I will have to reflect on their social embedding. For here the prevalence of the explanation can be directly related back to social categories. To blame ships, their movement and their engines has, to begin with, been highly controversial. Gender and the degree of education appear as immediately relevant for the emphasis or the refusal of this theme. During my stay in the colony, women were much quicker to blame the ships. Whereas, on the other hand, those of my friends and interlocutors who strongly related to scientific or learned (*shikyo*) discourses and who were keen on performances of scholarly attitudes, the idea was quickly dismissed.[258] It is important to note that in-between these poles a huge variety of ambivalent allusions, of implicit reckoning and, in formal conversations, also a suspiciously weak refutation of the ship's causation emerged. The idea of ships as agents responsible for the shrinkages, hence, was far from being held dear by the stereotypical village women.

Contested as it was, the reference to ships and waves involved very often emotionally highly charged outburst. And was related to political claims. Particularly in the early phase of my research, a considerable part of the women lamented that precisely there, where once their house stood, now ships (*jāhāj*) would move back and forth. While this phrase-like lament that I heard repeatedly,[259] of course, does not attribute a causation or responsibility, it still evokes what is at stake here: a sense of denial and displacement of localized lives in the face of capital. And it is perhaps the power of the imagery, its condensation of a deeper sense of injustice that explains why the figure of the ships gave room to passionate laments.

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[258] In the light of the decades of critical feminist scholarship, I am very uncomfortable with the explicit and implicit polarizations brought forward here. Yet they were met on the ground.

[259] "āmāder yakhan bāṛī chilo, ekhon sekhāne jāhāj yātāmāt karche."

In ensuing narrations – which I thought inappropriate to record – it became clear that lamented was not only the succession of home and ship, but the destruction of the former through the latter. That, in other words, ships were understood to be responsible for the erosion, that they were not only thriving on but had enacted an eviction of sorts. Similarly, they were seen to do so through the waves that emanated from their very movements about the riverine space. It mattered little, then, how precisely waves were produced. Important was the monstrousness of the very ships: in its appearance of solid steel, its gargantuan proportions; as much as in the aloofness and carelessness of those who steered them. Both perspectives are indexed already in the notion of the ship (*jāhāj*) along which the narratives evolved. For the latter differs from the much more fragile boats (*nouka*) and trawlers (*trawler*) used locally – it indexes a colossus moving from port to port.

Port authorities denied the blame resolutely[260] and the protagonists of global commerce were physically far removed from the accusations. As inaccessible as the urban bustle of ports, trade and seafaring was, the ships represent, I suggest, political priorities that may appear as nothing but obscene in the rural hinterland. Not the well-being or survival of its subjects, but the concentration of prosperity in urban centres. The cargo ships seem to condense this emblematically.

But while one or several of these constructions of cause and responsibility were attributed to by almost every islander I spoke to, the cosmological and ritual dimensions were equally widespread. Indeed, they were intertwined with the assumptions outlined so far. I will now turn to these.

[260] Interview with Raja Ram Singh (Deputy Commander of the Sāgar Lighthouse), Lighthouse, 23.1.2011

9.2. On Ambivalences of the Localized Gaṅgā

> The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever changing, ever flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga.
>
> Jawaharlal Nehru, *in his testament*

Hardly any ritual practice has had such a profound imprint on the perception of Hindu South Asia as the worship of the river Gaṅgā. From the source to the mouth of the river places deemed holy are lined up as on a string of pearls. A vital line of North India, as object of devout practices and as medium of deliverance the river seems to be unique. Yet as a model this uniqueness is transferred or duplicated in various other places or virtually re-discovered in remote parts (Eck 1998a; Feldhaus 1995). The culturally-mediated appropriation of the material river is, therefore, entangled with many other water bodies. These appropriations are, the same time, in an uneasy, sometimes contested relation with the biophysical contamination and degradation of divine waters in times of loosely regulated industrial complexes, of a rapid demographic growth and massive use of pesticides. Yet, neither the entanglement with other streams nor the immense pollution undermine the outstanding role attributed with the river.[261] In the opposite: to many these developments only seem to lend a further credibility to perceptions of the rivers as pure, benevolent and auspicious (Alley 1994; Alley 2003; Haberman 2006).[262] For the Gaṅgā remains, as a Bengali proverb has it, the mango among the waters.

However, In the river's lowest reaches, literally, in the mouth of the river, both, the divine river were engaged in much more ambivalent ways. For the riverine goddess emerges as, perhaps the most crucial, motif along which environmental hazards were perceived and interpreted. Allusions, metaphoric figures and ontological attributions voiced across everyday conversations and festive articulations were pervaded by the idea of a powerful, yet hazardous

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[261] Of course, within the breathtaking variety of told, retold and reworked mythological figurations and theological tenets, one also finds statements implying only a secondary role of the Gaṅgā. In his ethnography of pilgrimage and the holy city of Ayodhyā, Peter van der Veer shows, for instance, that among the city's priests the river flowing through Ayodhyā is thought to be more pure than Gaṅgā. Seen to be flowing from Viṣṇu's tears, the Sarayu is understood to be even more pure than the larger river which is depicted as emanating from Viṣṇu's tows (Veer 1984, 60).

[262] This imagery is elaborated on and added another twist in Bhupen Hazarika's popular Bengali song *Bistirna Dupāre* (roughly, Beyond the Shores) – a song that was translated into various Indian languages and still enjoys tremendous popularity. Registering the injustices, fights and devastations throughout India, as a poet he asks the river why it still flows. While the song certainly is a social and moral critique of the postcolonial predicament, it also relies on the imagery of the pure and transcendent river untouched, yet repelled by the sinful doings of man.

divinity. These engagements were not limited to Hindu islanders, but were followed by Muslims in very much the same way. I want to stress at the outset that these engagements – be they implicit, metaphorical or practical – are instances of a localized syncretism and hybridity. On the following pages I will outline aspects of these localized conceptions and carve out deep dissonances with hegemonial concepts of the riverine goddess.

Hailed by the arriving pilgrims as auspicious (Marglin 1985), the water body and deity was framed by the islanders in somewhat different terms. While the identification of liquid matter and divine body was upheld, Gaṅgā emerges nevertheless as ambivalent at best. This ambivalence, I argue, is articulated in three motions. First, the endangerment by the river which emerges as sometimes as a gluttonous, erratic entity. And second, through a set of material exchanges that aim at restoring bounty and safe passages. All these rest, thirdly, on the assumption that the waters flowing around the island are the divine river itself. I will have to begin, therefore, the latter identification.

9.2.1. Surrounding Waters

The ambivalences of the waterscape resurface in conceptions of the surrounding waters themselves. Seen from an embankment, the water *is* and *is not* the Gaṅgā. For it is similarly Hugli, the river in abstract terms and sea. Being far from trivial, these diverse categorizations and interpretations are perhaps better understood as being folded into each other than as being 'merely' simultaneous. Permeating each other, they are relied upon according to specific discursive situation. In everyday conversations, hence, all surrounding waters were most often labelled simply as river (*nadi*) and further differentiated only in more detailed conversations. For the umbrella term unravelled quickly, giving way to more detailed speech patterns. All three common names of the river – Gaṅgā, Hugli and Muṛīgaṅgā respectively – found application to index the biophysical entity in its concrete course. However, only the name Gaṅgā relates the biophysical entity to religious dimensions. That is, among islanders and pilgrims alike, only the latter name was used when conversations touched upon sacralized dimensions. Overshadowing, thus, other available names and negating their applicability as label for an object of veneration. Obviously, this pattern rests on Sāgar' significance within the mythical descending of Gaṅgā and the intimate relation island and river are understood to share in.

What is more, beyond all surrounding river channels, also the sea came to be identified with Gaṅgā. Gesturing out in the open or talking of their experiences during, what I would understand as, deep sea fishing trips, most of my interlocutors would speak of Gaṅgā or river interchangeably. This relates, on one hand, to localized environmental classification and, on the other, to a socially-mediated interpretation of the sea as Gaṅgā herself. I will turn to the classification first. The western-scientific practice to distinguish between river and sea along the coastline was not followed here. Framing printed maps and official discourse, it was defied in everyday speech. To residents the river was seen far from ending with an imagined line associating this island with a neighbouring island and yet another one to form a unified coast; only to differentiate between land and water, between continent and sea. Rather were waters exceeding well into the south beyond the coasts of Sāgar understood as river or Gaṅgā. (Never, I insist, as Hugli.)

While in many conversations river and sea were used interchangeably, this does not indicate that localized taxonomies would not integrate the sea or that river and sea appeared as generally identical. To be sure, for most practical relations and following from the land-based framework of islanders, the brackish waters flowing around the islands were very much alike. In their riches and in their threats, and regardless of their position in the divide between continent and sea. Yet, of course, the sea existed in localized environmental thought as a distinct environment. It is only that one had to travel on-board of a trawler for several hours to reach it. Interactions with the waters near and far from the shore underscore the differentiation – interactions that make the difference between the brackish, muddy waters (of the river) and the more dynamic waters (of the sea) susceptible to embodied experiences. Rooted in practical, embodied experience the difference culminated in the trope of nausea, loneliness and fear that was intimately related, as I have shown above, to the practice of deep sea fishing.[263]

Yet, the classifications rests firmly also on the relevance of the riverine deity for the island herself. Priests, pilgrims and politicians gather at the temple complex facing the sea to worship Gaṅgā, to honour her arrival on earth; and they immerse in the waves gently rolling in to purify themselves in the very body of the goddess. As precisely the space where river and sea unite (*sāgar saṅgam*), the watery surroundings stretching towards the horizon were in themselves part of the sacralised river. They were meaningful to them as such. The beach of Gaṅgāsāgar

[263] Note, furthermore, that this borderline is once again quickly shifting and uncertain as it is subject to the tides, seasons and currents constantly transforming the marine scape.

appears, thus, first and foremost, as the bank of the holy river and not as shore facing the Bay of Bengal.

It may appear paradoxical against this background that islanders perceive of the bathing site as beach (*saikat*) or banks (*kūl*) rather than as a *ghāṭ*. And that in direct contrast to the perception by many pilgrims, fair administration or the authors of pilgrimage manuals.[264] To speak of *ghāṭ* alludes strongly, yet not necessarily, to the existence of steps leading towards a waterbody. To be sure, the Gaṅgā as well as a range of other sacralised water bodies throughout Bengal, are framed by such steps and architectural structures associated therewith. Being emblematical localities of South Asian river worship, the latter have been the focus of fascinating studies on ritual practices and everyday engagements with the localized environments (Alley 1994; J. P. Parry 1994; Doron 2008). The relative rarity of the label *ghāṭ* when it comes to Gaṅgāsāgar may appear to be related to the wide and 'undeveloped' character of the shore, yet it points beyond this mere physical appearance. For in various rural contexts, particular river banks are not structured by steps or framed by specific architectures and still framed as *ghāṭ* (Blanchet 1984, 67). In these latter cases, then, the notion of *ghāṭ* obviously implies or marks a space of access to water that is, first, imagined as being permanent and, second, a specific site for communities, even culminating in the generation of collectivities as such. The rarity of the label *ghāṭ* for the banks lining the island should not suggest that these transition zones are not understood as bordering a river, but they point rather to the differences in attitudes toward these waters between the pilgrims and the islanders. Ultimately it hints at the fact that these simply are not the *ghāṭs* – in the social and ritual sense – of the islanders.

While the classification of the surrounding waters as river and riverine goddess was shared between islanders and pilgrims, the conceptual and practical engagements differed greatly.

The intention of most pilgrims to immerse in the waters to wash

As mentioned already, most of the pilgrims sought the waters and immersed in them to wash away impurities, to follow obligations or in order to ask for favours, rest firmly on two interlocked assumptions: firstly, that the goddess is purifying in her material presence and powerful; and, secondly, that her material presence makes a convenient access to her power possible. They were unified by a sense of purity, auspiciousness and fertility imbued in the riverine goddess. In contrast to these conceptions, the river and the goddess is engaged with as

[264] During the *melā*, for instance, signs were put up on the vast festival area as well as loudspeakers were broadcasting information to assist the masses. In either case the bathing site was addressed as *ghāṭ*.

an ambivalent, potentially threatening entity by the residents of the Colony. It is to these patterns that I will turn now. But I will have to take a detour: via localized worship of goddesses.

9.2.2. Interlude: Worshipping Localized Goddesses

At several junctures I have hinted in passing at the worship of particular goddesses among the islanders, at deities often labelled as 'village deities' or fierce goddesses (Caldwell 1999) and at associated practices subsumed under the rubric of 'folk shaktism' (McDaniel 2004). Among visitors and scholars alike, Hindu Bengal has become famous as a hotspot of this particular branch of religious doctrine and practice. While most of the attention is directed towards urbanized patterns and the notorious goddess Kālī (see e.g. Kripal 1998; S. Gupta 2003), rural constructions of female divinity have also been widely researched (e.g. McDaniel 2004). Particularly in rural Bengal the intimate entanglement of so-called fierce goddesses and a somewhat less fierce Vaiṣṇava deities has been emphasized.[265] Against this background, I want to reflect on the role of these locally also widely worshipped goddesses for socially-mediated appropriation of nature. I do so partly because the worship of the snake goddess Manasā and the fever goddess Sītalā has been overshadowing the ritual practices embarked upon by, say, the pilgrims. The main reason, however, is that dogmatic ideas and ritual practices directed towards these goddesses emerge as a foil for localized engagements. Taken together, these three deities can be understood as instances of a mutual identification of a particular deity with particular patterns of environmental hazards. To set the horizon for localized interpretation of Gaṅgā, I will outline only one of the other two goddesses: Manasā, the goddess associated with snakes. While the mode of localized engagement could be demonstrated also with the other, I am doing so because Manasā seems to be more frequently worshipped in domestic and public

[265] The similarity and mutuality of the above mentioned domestic shrines and practices is but an instance of this entangled relation. For one of the two shrines was customarily devoted to Manasā and thus to a quintessential 'fierce goddess' and the other to Kṛṣṇa – an emblematic figure within *baiṣñab* pantheon. In all their contradictory diversity they are also bracketed by theological similarities. In one of his highly influential works on Hindu religions David Kinsley (Kinsley 2000) outlined for instance that the Kṛṣṇa and Kālī (which can be understood as the emblematic deity of Shaktist traditions) have a great significance at the margins of what often has been called the Aryan heartlands (i.e. Bengal) and that both are thought of having a 'hot, voluptuous quality' and are associated with fluids.
Other famous instances would be the emphasis on goddesses in Bengali *baiṣñab* ritual or the immense influence of devotional practices (*bhakti*) on shaktist rituals. In Bengal's far south it is quite difficult to distinguish Hindus along these two major traditions. It would rather make sense to subsume single practices or stances to one tradition respectively – however, some are also internally ambivalent and defy clear distinctions.

rituals. That being said, I do not want to level out considerable difference between the two deities.

The precise genealogy of Manasā is lost in history. Being identified with tribal populations by some and located in the classical *Purāṇa* literature by others (e.g. Zbavitel 1976, 163), she is intensively worshipped by large parts of Bengal's population since the Middle Ages. Both, the expansion of her popularity and her entry into history are related to distinct body of poetic eulogies, the '*Manasā Maṅgal'*.[266] Through the latter a distinctively Bengali vision of the snake goddess emerged: she became an ambivalent goddess merging notions of fertility and destruction (Dimock 1962; Dimock and Ramanujan 1964; W. L. Smith 1980). In textual traditions and contemporary practice she emerges as a deity whose worship is not established once and for all;[267] and as one that is somehow repulsive.[268] That is, her reception unifies, perhaps paradoxically, notions of terror and love-provoking motherhood. The fundamental theme within her mythology, then, are her attempts to enforce devotion towards her against the will of (stubborn) humans.[269] To prove her position as person of extraordinary powers she is understood to send snakes.[270] Snakes appear therefore as a means to secure a sense of sovereignty. Within this framework, snakes are relieved of being an integral part of East Indian environments or one of the greatest hazards of wet-rice cultivation *alone*. But they emerge as embodiment and means of predominance of a personified divinity craving for human devotion, *too*.

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[266] Needless to say, the appearance of not one, but countless poems claiming the title *Manasā Maṅgal*, these long poetical works are devoted to ascendance, meaning and ritual of the goddess. Furthermore, what came to be known the *Maṅgal* literature or poetry, the *Maṅgal Kāvya*, was prominently shaped by early *Manasā Maṅgal*.

[267] A common theme in the *Maṅgal Kāvya* literature and hence Bengal popular religion with a shakta bend. For the text bodies of the latter are since the Middle Ages dominated by the *Maṅgal Kāvya* (McDaniel 2004, 21). It is, as Malcolm McLean (1998, 101) notes, a common theme of these long poems is to "[serve] to extend the worship of the Goddess to the higher castes."

[268] In an interesting piece straddling the lines between theological speculation and philological analysis, the renowned scholar of Bengal Edward Dimock, has engaged this paradox. As a preliminary conclusion, he has brought forward the idea that conflations of love and terror, of motherliness and beastliness can be seen as teaching a message about fundamental characteristics of being. The decisive moment here is, so he argues, that experiences normally ordered in diachronically sequences (the time of plague, the time of joy and so on), do emerge here in a synchronous fashion (Dimock 1976; see also Kinsley 1988, 211f)

[269] Elaborated upon in many stories, these dynamics are enshrined, of course, in one of Bengal's most popular stories: the story of Behulā and her husband Lakhindār (see e.g. Hauser 1998, 81 – 92). The events take their cue from the refusal of the bridegroom's family to worship Manasā, who in turn orders for Lakhindār to be killed by snakebite in their wedding night. Brave as the wife is, she refuses to cremate her husbands and travels with the corpse for months down the river ultimately reaching the abode of the Gods where she obtains his re-awakening. During these events and from then on, the couple become ardent devotees of Manasā.

[270] According to Hindu mythology, Manasā is born from the semen Siva spilled while thinking of his wife in a beautiful landscape. Set free, the semen flowed along lotus stalks into the underworld where Manasā is born from it. Still in the underworld, she is granted powers over snakes (Dimock 1962).

A number of scholars have postulated that the genesis of a so-called 'snake cult' is to be causally related to the spread of snakes in the delta. Mirroring this approach, the equally popular 'fierce goddess' Sītalā has been causally related to the poxes haunting Bengal since centuries (Nicholas 2003, 167 – 191). Yet, the explanation of religious practices as nothing but an answer to historical experiences; and as a moment stabilizing a shaken society is functionalist in a reductionist fashion. Recent studies have shown that the rituals of these and related deities unfold along complex moralities, political negotiations and localized encounters of the present (see e.g. Nabokov 2000; Ferrari 2007; Harms 2010).

Parallel to interpretations of other environmental hazards, the interpretation of snakes as metonymic index or as embodied form of the goddess marks only one fragment of social engagements with the material world. Albeit, an important one. More important for the matters at hand, however, is the stance toward the deity herself. These could be broadly characterized as an involvement with practical matters. Mirroring the literature, most of my interlocutors insisted that these deities were related to mundane affairs: To abundance, success and well-being at home. Conversely, the negation of these ideal states has been framed as wrath of deities not sufficiently worshipped. Craving for love and sacrifice, so my interlocutors had it, the deities would unleash scarcity, sickness and misfortune among forgetful people.

What emerges, therefore, are patterns of ritual practices undertaken to ensure the appeasement of wrathful, even choleric deities; to please them becomes paramount if only to ensure their kindness. For the time being. The ritual encounters unfold, therefore, in repetitive patterns spanning daily rounds at domestic shrines, regular fasting (*brat*) and yearly festivals at village temples. In their pomp and festivity particular the latter are important moments for the village public. Contemporarily, both of Gaṅgāsāgar Colony's temples organized a yearly Pūjā. Organized by a committee of women, the preparations, rituals and, of course, the associated entertainment enfolds the largest part of the Colony.[271] True to the outlined pattern, it is undertaken to ensure the individual and collective well-being and safety from what has aptly been termed as violent mothers (McDaniel 2004). In rural Bengal the benevolence of fierce goddesses is mainly entailed in the absence of wrath and in material exchanges that do not involve her material presence. The fascinating approaches to fevers – which are seen by many

[271] The most important island-wide festivals for the snake goddess, however, fall on the *ras pūrṇimā*, roughly in November. Among these the melā in the compound on Mansādwip in the centre of the island and the smaller, yet also renowned temple of Mansābāsār neighbouring Botkhāli certainly stand out. Both attracted wide audiences from distant villages and are the focus point of intense ritual practice and a good deal of excitement during their colourful festivities. Their timing certainly emphasizes once again the ambivalences of the full moon – yet the festival itself does not occur in the most hazardous time of the rains.

as the manifestation of the goddess and, thus, her blessing – are something of an exemption (Greenough 2003; Ferrari 2010).

9.2.3. Localized Perceptions

Against the background of specific environmental experiences, socially-mediated appropriations and, last but not least, regional theological developments, Gaṅgā emerges as unreliable and dangerous; as predatory, greedy deity. However, mainstream Hindu perspectives on Gaṅgā resting firmly on mythical conceptions pervaded the Colony, too. Popular media, devout literature and the pilgrimage traffic itself were sites of on-going exchanges and frictions; sites, that is, from where perceptions of the river became bound up in a process of unbroken exchanges, re-shaping and contestation.

Intricate as it is, the dynamic is not to be framed as a classical antagonism or dialectic between hegemonic and subaltern articulations. It is not that one could easily contrast a Gaṅgā of the pilgrims with another reading of this divine figure by islanders. For analytical purposes, however, I will speak of the hegemonic (notion of) Gaṅgā and the localized Gaṅgā – yet I understand both to be as poles in dynamic rather than a pair of opposites.

Pervading conversations and interactions, these hegemonic conceptions of Gaṅgā's nature and beneficial powers (Alley 1994; Eck 1998b; Alley 2003, 50 – 67) were in an implicit, sometimes open contrast with localized perspectives. The latter did not only feature a more distanced relation to the river, but are articulated in a somewhat hesitant and cautious way. They emerge in jokes, in particular ritual patterns, in the situation of Gaṅgā in particular temples and not in others (see also Jalais 2010b, 137f). Most importantly, however, they were imbued in metaphorical thought permeating and allowing to interpret scattered evidence (see also Heuzé 2012).

The power of theological constructions plays out in a place and situation saturated with deep uncertainties – uncertainties that are rooted in the workings of loss; uncertainties situating the goddess rather in the context of threats and dangers. To illustrate these conceptual issues and heterogenous practices, I will turn to another event during my fieldwork and its repercussions.

Particularly through the chronic shortage of power and money on the island's edges, the exploits of the Indian film industry were a matter great excitement. Several of the greater and lesser religious festivals have been accompanied or, in the case of lesser important ones, celebrated through publicly screened films. Arranged by clubs or temple committees and propagated by

word of mouth, these public screenings were highlights in the monotonous routine of rural life. While on most occasions the films were in no way connected to the sacral character of the day, some organizers took pains to relate one with anotother. Serving as encounters with the exotic worlds of Indian cinema, the latter were sometimes also instigating engagements with hegemonic visions of important Hindu figures. During my fieldwork, in the night of Śivarātri saw the screening of one episode from the extremely popular TV-adaptation of the Rāmāyaṇa. Śivarātri – literally, the night of Śiva – does not figure particularly prominent on rural Bengal's calendar of festivals. The festivities in the colony were very therefore limited. The committee of the second temple, however, had arranged for a small TV-set, a generator and a DVD-player and screened the mentioned episode. Adjacent to the temple the audience had assembled in the open and was watching the screening crowded, as it were, around the small screen. It was the famous episode on the Gaṅgā's descending onto earth: with Rām and Lakśmaṇ being portrayed as reaching the waters of the Gaṅgā only to be told her story by sage Viśvāmitra (Sāgar 1987). Before the episode was shown, one of the most influential members of the committee, Anil Seth, himself a very devout figure and important informant, had told me, that the film was shown as it was connected to Sāgar Island and illuminated a crucial deed by Śiva. That is, his help during the river's descending. As noted above, mythic accounts have it that Śiva steps in and averts the splitting of the earth by tempering the river's force with his hair. Mirroring the textual original, Sage Viśvāmitra narrated on screen that from here on the river was flowing to everybody's delight into the netherworld. Underlining the imagery of Gaṅgāsāgar as underworld, these descriptions denied the river's hazards. True to the epic and the hegemonic concept, the dangers seem to be strictly limited to her downfall from the sky.

The screening happened in the first months of my fieldwork and it allowed for a clarification of the tensions surrounding the goddess. In the reactions and debates that I took part in the ensuing months it became clear that one could differentiate roughly between two positions. On one hand, there were those very few resident more or less actively subscribing to the hegemonic notion; the majority, on the other hand, was much more reserved towards the deity. Both, to make matters more complicate, took part in devotional activities – be they of the quotidian or the festive kind. But only those falling under the first category regularly sought the beach for a ritual bath or joined the masses during the peak of the fair. Belonging to this group did not coincide with particular caste groups. They were, however, older persons, shared a history of repeated losses and, this seems to be more relevant, not directly involved in fish work of any kind. While it may be argued that the non-partaking in risky travails on sea privileges more

benign conceptions of the riverine goddess, they actually have rather abstained due to ritual constraints.[272]

Most others, conversely, had a very reserved, if not ignorant relation to the activities Gaṅgāsāgar seemed to stand for in the eyes of outsiders. They did not take ritual baths in the sea and frequently put away with it. Repeatedly I was told mockingly that there was no need to join the bathing pilgrims as they were living here and touched the waters all the time. While the latter exclamations were only theologically consequent and can be understood as a very literal reading of the proverb that one needs to bath in Gaṅgāsāgar only once in a lifetime, they stand also in a stark contrast to, what might be understood as, the '*ghāṭ* culture' observed, for instance, in Varanasi (see Alley 2003; Doron 2008). Thus, they underscored only the somewhat hesitant and hostile relations to Gaṅgā.

The difficulties lay precisely here: Nobody I spoke with negated that the goddess was powerful. Quite the opposite: her powers were never in question; and it was precisely because of her powers and intimate connections with one's life trajectory, to one's own survival that Gaṅgā had to be worshipped. As much as the other goddesses introduced above and perhaps with more fervour than these. She was tied to the farewell at sea, to the riches of the waters upon which everybody depended, and to an overall well-being. Beyond allusions and more often: metaphorical constructions of her voracious and erratic behaviour, as well as ritual obligations to most there simply was little more.

In the night of Śivarātri there was no devotional moment nor was lively debate after the colors and sounds of the TV set had faded. It was as if the screening was merely entertaining, were it not for the isolated grudgingly remarks occuring in the days to come. How did it come that only her downfall had been taken care of? And not what was happening here? Why was her greediness not to be checked? And to whom should they turn? For the deed by Siva offered, I argue, the opportunity to accommodate both versions of the goddess – the benign and the dangerous – in a single moment; it served as an addendum or somewhat hesitant critique to the

[272] My interlocutor and friend Anil Seth would be a good example here. He is member of the *Māhishya jāti* – a group commonly associated with agriculture and explicitly barred from fishing. As one of the most pious Hindus of the colony, he took the caste-specific proscription seriously and eked out a living entirely on land. In contrast to most of his fellow *Māhishya* from the colony. It seems to be fair to suggest, therefore, that his perusal of a more benign conception of the riverine deity is rooted more in devotion than the absence of hazardous experiences at sea.

hegemonic version. Implicit to these hesitant statements were constructions of the divine river's nature, her very Being – a conceptualization I will turn to now.[273]

9.2.4. As Gluttonous Person

Beyond these re-workings and interrogations of riverine divinity along the otherwise persuasive means of hegemonic popular culture, localized approaches are on a somewhat more sublime level enfolded in the particularities of speech patterns. Everyday conversations and elaborate narrations alike are permeated by patterns of figurative speech articulating and further embedding socially-mediated perspectives on the river. In this chapter I limit my interest to elements of figurative speech that frequently appeared in conversations on environmental hazards and related to the nature of the river. In an intertextual perspective, these appear to be in a dialogue with the imagery of an ultimate safety that I will outline in the ensuing chapter.

In a wide range of contexts – across history or the globe – it has been documented that multivalent environmental threats often tend to be condensed in a personalized, anthropomorphic form. On the islands and with respect to the river's onslaughts this pattern was followed. Anthropomorphic approaches were surely nourished by the popular Hinduism's tendency to imagine streams and waterbodies as deities (see e.g. Feldhaus 1995; Eck 1998b; Lahiri-Dutt 2000), a tendency documented in various cultural formations and recently theorized as 'hydrolatry' (Strang 2004, 83 – 102). Yet, as will have become clear by now, the object of the islanders' hydrolatry is of a rather odd and ambiguous sort. Defying glorifying takes on the riverine goddess, it also stopped short of framing the waters as a murderous person (akin, for example, to the notorious 'Blanke Hans'[274] haunting the Wadden Sea region as death personified). The river and its threats appear instead to be framed as an overtly powerful, greedy and, particularly, a gluttonous person.

Among the works of Jagannāth Māitī – the island's 'popular historian' (Fabian 2007, 77) – one also finds a comprehensive guide to Sāgar Island: to its present and recent past. To do so, he

[273] It is also interesting to note that the mode of saving the world – the male actor promising to perpetually working against the threatening danger – resurfaces in the imagination of Kapil Muni. For once again it is a male actor and a yogi who safes a worldly realm.

[274] The example of the 'Blanke Hans' is selected neither entirely arbitrary nor to establish a stark contrast. But is justified insofar as both landscapes – the delta's coastal fringes and the Wadden Sea region – share a fair deal of similarities. Both are perennially threatened by submergence, storms and death at sea (see e.g. L. Fischer 1988; L. Fischer 2005; Kempe 2007). All the while political contexts differ greatly – letting the Wadden Sea region being valued and thus actively safeguarded by the German state, while the coastal fringes continue to be a neglected marginalia of India.

follows the administrative grid and patterns his elaborations along the village units (*mauza*). Writing on the past of Ghoṛāmārā, or to be more precise: past of one of its villages, Khāsimārā, he writes (Māitī 2008, 11):

> "After the good times, for the villagers difficult times began. Slowly areas disappeared in the awful mouth of the Huglī River and were to remain in its stomach."

In an evocative tone, these formulations introduce a riverine actor performing erosions in nothing but a voracious manner. Striking and full of drama, Māitī's phrases are certainly not poetically overdramatized when compared with statements of his fellow islanders.

By way of metaphor, two conceptual domains – i.e. the river and the person – are related to each other. One class of events is made sense of in the light of another. Following Blumenberg, the fundamental qualities of metaphoric thought rests in its facilitation of understanding where there is none (Blumenberg 1981). Chaotic features of the world are made legible precisely through the idiomatic connection with other, more reliable things or processes. Distancing as this may be, it also enables, what Briese called, a 'bridging' (*Brückenschlag*) into the world: metaphors let the elusive appear legible, allow for an access to the inaccessible (Briese 1998, 12). And, yet, the very connection between domains tends to slip attention, even conceals its nature all while the connected domains are mutually shaped through metaphorical thought.

Following the approach of conceptual linguists, I understand statements like the one mentioned so far as metaphorical statements that allow to be assigned to specific, overarching 'conceptual metaphors' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Brought forward in 'real' conversations or media, metaphorical statements embody, cement and circulate conceptual metaphors which are still to be extracted only through analysis. In other words, ubiquitous as metaphorical approaches and statements may be, the underlying concepts are often far from clear. In figure 14, I have arranged some of the most pervasive statements being relevant here and subsumed them to, what I identify, as the conceptual metaphor. The latter is, as common among linguists, written in capital letters.

Against this background, I return to Māitī's prose. Because they introduce fine-tuned conceptual differences underpinning the personification of hazardous shrinkages as workings of a voracious person. As can be seen from the short excerpt, the devote writer of pilgrimage manuals and popular histories of his island, applies, what might seem to be the geographically correct name, Huglī, to the destructive river. While in most of his writing he clearly frames the river flowing around the island as nothing less than Gaṅgā. What he does, therefore, is treating

one and the same material entity – the river – along two distinct conceptions. Not thoroughly, but for large parts. He bifurcates Gaṅgā from Huglī, reserving the divinity for some traits and framing other, less benevolent processes through the hardly sacralized term Hugli. Now while the bifurcation may be most thoroughly and straightforward in Māitī's prose and oratory[275], it pervades narratives in the Colony in a much more messy way. The aim of this section is therefore not so much to clearly dissect these speech patterns and identify them with certain social categories, but to follow their usage and illuminate their logic. Not only because of their difference to hegemonic notions of Gaṅgā, but also because these patterns emerge as further layers in localized attributions of causality.

Three broad patterns are to be distinguished. The first, exemplified already, frames the erosions as outcome of the river Huglī's voraciousness. The second, however, understands them as the outcome of Gaṅgā's actions which are often, yet not always as framed to her voraciousness. And the third one – ranging on a different, yet closely related pane – treats the erosion themselves as a voracious person.

Only the priest serving the Colony's temple followed the first approach and alluded the destructions to the Huglī, thus reserving the label Gaṅgā for other, more benign affairs. Even the most devout Hindu residents, however, related the shrinkages to the sacralized river. Without necessarily subscribing, I emphasize, to the view that all this is due to the river's greed. During many conversations the erosions would simply state that it had been literally eaten up by Gaṅgā (*Gaṅgā kheyeche*; *khete-khete Gaṅgā nadi chale gachhe* and so on). Others would other evoke her body parts: the disappeared land would be staying within her stomach (*pete thākbe*), or had disappeared in her mouth (*Gaṅgā mukhēr madhye adr̥śya haye geche*) when we talked about the land. While still others alluded in passing that they were landless because the land had disappeared, literally gone into the Gaṅgā (*Gaṅgāy chale gachhe*).

Now it might be objected that this approach mixes linguistic patterns of a particular language up with metaphorical thought, that it overstretches the meaning of a pervasive verbal construction. It is certainly true that the Bengali verb 'to eat' transgresses English usages by far: in a literal translation, bullets are eaten by victims of gunfire (*guli khāoyā*) as much as cigarettes are while smoking (*biṛi khāoyā*). Without doubt, these figurations pinpoint to the thin line between figurative thought and socio-linguistic difference – after all, one might ask, who decides which bodies of knowledge are distinct and brought together in their assumed disparity

[275] As substantiated in an interview I held with him in his house (Interview, 25.04. 2009, Rudrānāgar); and during a speech he gave during a function at Sāgar's Book Festival in 2011.

via figurative thought? Does the popularity of 'to eat' in these examples not simply imply a model of the body and the person that is permeable, subject to transmutations and flows? And therefore notions of selfhood that have been often remarked upon in South Asian societies (see e.g. Marriott 1968; Marvin Davis 1983, 74 – 78; Akhil Gupta 1998, 286 – 288)? Be that as it may, the personhood of the entity taking something in, is never at stake: It is a person, in either case, that is taking in bullets, smoke, or food. However conceived of, however malleable. By the same token, it is a person that is described as taking in pieces of land. Perhaps along another route, my overall argument of the personification of the hazards is retained.
Yet what qualifies it beyond doubt as figurative speech are the further attributes mentioned. The pervasiveness of mouths, stomachs; of horrid or awful appearance; and of digestion shared between the narrations listed in this chapter. It is instructive in this context, furthermore, that the activity of currents and waves is hardly framed through verbal constructions that imply 'to eat', but are rather tied to the verb 'to break' (*dheu bheṅgeche*, *srot bheṅgeche*). While currents and waves were indexed as breaking, only the river or the erosion itself is framed as taking the matter in. In a physical sense.
Mirroring Māitī's phrases partly, yet coining them on the divine river, Nimai Pradhān[276] for instance said:

> "The river has taken away our land: Slowly, slowly over many years. Now it is all gone. … It was the Gaṅgā that has eaten it up and now it rests in her stomach (*peṭ-e thākbe*)."

As can be seen from this excerpt, the disappearances were bound up in discursive tension: At one and the same time they seemed to be the matter of a river in the broader sense and Gaṅgā in particular. As should be clear from the preceding chapter, both labels are to a certain degree used interchangeably. What is more, the river appears in Hindu thought and localized approaches as the goddess herself. Neither an incarnation, nor in a metonymic relation, but as substance or being. The shift between river and Gaṅgā is, therefore, not to indicate a sense of separation between the biophysical entity and the body of the goddess. Yet, this and similar utterances can also be read as substantiating a certain hesitance when it comes to attributing the damages to the divine river, the riverine goddess.
Interwoven with these, a third pattern involved the personification of the erosions themselves. Bhāṅgan – which is used to translate erosions covering the syntactic field of breaking and

[276] Interview, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 16.11.2009

bursting – appeared also as a voracious person. Differing from the other conceptions insofar as that *bhāṅgan* implies a conception of erosion that is stronger focused on the land and the fixed (instead of waters and disappearance), it is operates very often also along similar patterns of figurative thought. I have included one exemplary statement from a narration I cited already in an earlier chapter in the table as well.

RIVER IS A VORACIOUS PERSON

"These 10 [*katha*] eaten up, 10 [*katha*] eaten, 10 [*katha*] eaten all went into the middle of the river of the Gaṅgā … Through eating it disappeared." (Binodini Das, Ghoṛāmārā, 19.11.09)

"Then [after 1855] the originally unified land began slowly and through the huge mouth to be torn apart." (Māitī 2008, 14)

"Our land rests in the river's stomach … Gaṅgā has eaten it all." (Bhārat Mandal, 3.12. 2009)

"With the embankment broken, the soil was eaten away." (Sheikh Motalib 11.5.2009)

EROSION IS A VORACIOUS PERSON

"But now Ghoṛāmārā is in the mouth of erosion (*bhāṅganer mukh-e*) and breaks apart." (Uttām Pradhān, Nov 2009)

Figure 14. Conceptual Metaphors (1): RIVER & EROSION IS A VORACIOUS PERSON

9.2.5. The Grace of the River and its Play

Regardless if interpreted along personalizing metaphors or direct allusions to divine actions, the question why the river does what she does demands explanations.

In conversations on shrinkage, three notions were resurfacing throughout: the idea of grace (*mahimā*), play (*khelā*) and, what could be roughly translated, as duty (*dharma*). In Hindu traditions and beyond, these three notions are in themselves complex and related to each other. In their respective ways, they hint at the workings of transcendental actors, their overarching powers and, then again, the laws to which these actors abide.

I begin with the notion that seems to be the least strategic: playfulness. In South Asian traditions, play is a highly significant mode of engagement with divine actors. In two intertwined modes: as performance and embodiment of divinity (Wulff 1995; Sax 2002; Hauser 2006); and, on the other hand, as perspective on what is experienced to be the erratic behaviour

of deities (M. McLean 1995). In rural Bengal as I came to know it, this double relevance was to be indexed with the notion of *līlā*, while the wider used concept of *khelā* was limited to the latter sense. *Khelā* refers to the play of deities one had to endure and could only do so much as witness; an activity one would have to accommodate with (cf. Searle-Chatterjee 1979, 270). Many of my interlocutors would, therefore, blame the 'plays of the river' (*nadi-r khelā*) in a resigned tone. Clearly, these patterns of speech, once again, set personalizing metaphors into motion. I subsume these under the conceptual metaphor 'RIVER IS AN IMPONDERABLE PERSON': a heading that is valid also for the imagery of grace and duty (see Figure 15).
In a similar vein, the equally widespread formula of the river's grace (*nadir mahimā*) was used. Yet, I suggest, slightly more with a view on creative effects or potentially benign effects. Take, for instance, the following excerpt: [277]

> "It is the river's grace (*nadir mahimā*). One island will break, one island will come up. The grace of the river. One island breaks, but the soil is not eaten (up), the soil is broken (to pieces), again something else will be … this is what happens."

In contrast to notions of irresponsibility, the third notion, *dharma*, was used to underscore the subjection of actors and their actions under impersonal laws. In ambiguous ways the imponderability of the river's actions was resolved by explaining it with universal laws. Not in the sense of scientific laws but rather through Hindu notions of situated duties. That is, through the obligations, rights and conducts each actor has by virtue of her being in the world (see Michaels 2006, 30 – 32). To be sure, the idea of divine grace and divine play are just that: they are the duties of divine actors. Hindu traditions are brimming with stories adding further plots and meanings to, what might be perceived, unjust behaviour of gods embedding it in greater plans and schemes.[278] Particularly when looking at the gods, duties and righteous intentions are understood to be hardly discernable to the human eye. They also appear to deny being straightwordly explained by notions of hierarchy and purity. However, I want to emphasize the role the idea of duty in making erratic behaviour and essential threats explainable. Precisely in explanations that hint at deeply ingrained strategies to accommodate non-understanding. For the insistence on *dharma* amounts ultimately to an explanation of one perplexing experience with yet another. In writing this, I do not want to re-emphasize orientalist constructions of

[277] Interview with Pratāp Dās, Ghoṛāmārā, 19.11.09
[278] Indra's theft of King Sagar's sacrificial horse being a good example: Classical texts insist, for instance that Indra stole the horse purposefully to let Kapil Muni burn the Sixty Thousand only to bring Gaṅgā to earth. What many frame as an act of jealousy and divine irresponsibility or reckless play, is reframed as part of a greater scheme to bring fertility and purity to humankind.

ignorance and the like, but rather underscore that metaphorical thought surely acts as a bridge into the world in the aforementioned sense. Albeit in the perplexing mode of producing intelligibility by denying it. That is to say that in emphasizing the illegibility of divine actors, the idiom of grace and play does not *totally* abandon the legibility of their actions. They appear merely to be beyond *human* comprehensibility.

RIVER IS AN IMPONDERABLE PERSON

"This all due to the play of the river (*nadir khelā*). Breaking here, putting land there, we can't do anything but follow." (Bansuri Lāl Jānā, Gaṅgāsāgar Colony, 7.7.2009)

"It is the river's grace (*nadir mahimā*). One island will break, one island will come up. The grace of the river. One island breaks, but the soil is not eaten up, the soil is broken [to pieces], again something else will be … one comes into existence." (Protab Das, 19.11.09, Ghoṛāmārā)

Figure 15. Conceptual Metaphors (2): RIVER IS AN IMPONDERABLE PERSON

Throughout their, what might be termed, religious dimensions, these approaches are tightly interwoven with what I call the eco-technological imagery. A clear example for these complex entanglement was voiced, for instance, by Binod Hāldār:[279]

> "No, I do not believe that it happens because of the ships, they are too far away and their rotors too deep in the waters. It is happening due to the currents. Look, how quick they run along. … But why it happens, I do not know. It is the river's play [*nadir khelā*]. One island goes, another comes up. Gaṅgā gives and takes as she pleases. Why – how would I know?"

One qualification applies: The play or the grace of the river could easily be seen as the driving force or the logic of 'riverine' currents, waves and soil structures. However, I cannot think of one instance, where the river's play, grace or duty has been framed as acting through the interferences by greedy politicians, that is, through diverted currents or cargo traffic. While the waves and currents were, thus, doing what gods do, social interventions were only that and nothing more.

More than the metaphorical framing of the river as a person, the figuratively patterned perception as a *voracious* and *imponderable* person moves it closer to the violent and dangerous

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[279] Interview Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 6.7.2009

goddesses Manasā and Sītalā. It is, therefore, only consequential that the riverine goddess is addressed locally in rituals that are fashioned and made sense of along a very similar pattern. To this figurations and their difference to the hegemonic patterns I will turn now.

9.2.6. The Localized Gaṅgā Pūjā

Beyond the intricate domain of speech patterns and discursive variations, the differences between what I understand to be the localized and the hegemonic Gaṅgā play out in public ritual as well. I had mentioned above that most of my interlocutors were very reluctant to use or acknowledge the *melā* as site of ritual activity (Samira Dasgupta, Mondal, and Basu 2006, 14). The latter was, in contrast, reserved for a smaller festival, their very own Gaṅgā Pūjā.

It would certainly be no exaggeration to understand the ritual form – as public ritual, as a Pūjā among others – already as a deviation. However popular and diverse the social institution of an annual 'Pūjā' is in contemporary West Bengal and to how many deities they are devoted (see i.e. McDermott 2013; McDermott 2009), the institution of a Gaṅgā Pūjā in coastal Bengal seems to be traceable only among certain fishing communities (Raychaudhuri 1980, 128 – 130) or dock workers in the river's lowest reaches (Bear forthcoming).

When the ritual had been taken up precisely on Sāgar, was impossible to ascertain. Very few argued that it was performed since times immemorial – and tried therewith to add legitimacy or value via its longstanding continuity. Most people I met, however, attributed the beginning sometime within the last few decades and connected it to the dramatic increase in fishing activities on these shores. Performed in the household, if at all, public Gaṅgā Pūjās became regular features on several beaches across the island. The intensified interactions with the marine waters – so much seems safe to say – lent additionally weight to these ritual practices. It also fed, most likely, into a re-formulation. The localized Gaṅgā Pūjā became the collective worship organized by local fish workers. Through the ritual localized perceptions of risky waterbody have been articulated along the twin themes of safety and prosperity. Laura Bear's elaborations on the intentions to stage a Gaṅgā Pūjā in urban docks by its workers captures the scenes on Sāgar's beaches quite well. She writes (Bear forthcoming):

> „[T]he worship of *Ma Ganga* particularly underlines a mutual labour of renewal between worshippers and the goddess that fills the material world with life. .... It they said showed their ‚respect' for the river as a dangerous force that had to be mastered by marine skills just as Śiva had controlled the Ganga's force as she fell to earth."

Located on fringes of the grasslands accommodating markets during the annual melā, the much smaller Pūjā clearly separates itself from the pilgrim festival. The separation is articulated, among others, in the fruits of worship aimed at, but also in the time, in the actual activities, and its actors.

Most obvious, perhaps, is the difference in time. While devout Hindus all over India worship Gaṅgā on its presumed arrival on earth in June or, more relevant here, on its presumed arrival at the sea in mid-January (*makar saṃkrānti*), the fishermen focus on a full moon in-between. That is, their festival culminates on the *phālgun purnimā* occurring in March or April. In doing so, they follow the Bengali astrological calendar, the *panjhika*, and pinpoint their central ritual activity on what in contemporary Bengal is largely a *purnimā* of secondary ritual importance. This schedule is less obvious as it may seem. Anurag Danda, for instance, notes that fishermen on the nearby island of Moushuni performed their Gaṅgā Pūjā in mid-January (Danda 2007, 122) and, therefore, most likely on Maha Sankranti.[280] Similarly, the fishermen studied by Raychaudhuri observed their annual Ganga Pūjā on *makar saṃkrānti* (Raychaudhuri 1980, 123). On Sāgar, in contrast, the *makar saṃkrānti* to many was economically speaking the single most important time of the year and a time of utter excitement. In this time of the year, the fish workers (as virtually everybody else in the southern parts of the island) were preoccupied with the splendour of the *melā* and hardly could make time for anything else. It stands to reason that the localized Pūjā has been shifted for this reason. Nevertheless, more than just a convenient solution, the temporal distinction mirrors divergent conceptions of the riverine goddess and cements these.

Beyond temporality, the difference between the two festivals devoted to Gaṅgā is further accentuated in their organisation. As with the other Pūjās in Bengal, the rituals were organized by a committee set up well in advance. In contrast to the festivals devoted to Manasā and Śītalā which are organised in their entirety by localized women groups, the Gaṅgā Pūjā on the beaches of Sāgar and elsewhere were organized by formalized groups of men. Thus, a joint committee elected by the organizational bodies of the dry fisher workers, trawler-based fishermen and *mīn*-collectors respectively had been set up. Proudly, my interlocutors pointed out that its members

[280] Following his interest in the possibilities of collective action, Danda mentions the ritual in passing. Collectively organized by local fishermen under an elected body, he writes only that it is performed in mid-January. Since *makar saṃkrānti* is, as mentioned above, the only Hindu festival with a stable date on the Gregorian calendar and therefore always occurring on the 14th of January, I consider it safe to assume that the Gaṅgā Pūjā on Moushuni falls on *makar saṃkrānti*.

hailed both from the Hindu and the Muslim community; and somewhat more hesitantly that the elections were influenced by party politics.

None of the priests from nearby Kapil Muni temple was either asked to be involved in any activities or even visiting the festival. It was emphasized, instead, that the rituals were undertaken by local (*āmāder, desh-er*) *purohit* from Sāgar. This, in fact, did not articulate long-standing relations of a given committee to their respective group *purohit*: In contrast to the 2 to 4 purohits engaged by village festivals for *Manasā* and Śītalā along lasting relationships, for the Gaṅgā Pūjā around 10 purohits have been invited on an irregular basis. That is, three purohits, I was told, have beeninvited every year, while the remaining personal changes yearly. The denial of 'foreign' priests from the nearby pilgrim centre articulated therefore rather a divide and the emphasis on a local ritual, than an exclusive relation with particular priests.

The placement and assemblage of the ritual space inscribed the distinction further. Situated close to the main temple, it was utterly unrelated to it. Indeed, the congruence of proximity and absent connections only accentuated the rift. In contrast to most other rural Pūjās, it is limited to temporary constructions (*pandal*) and temporary statues of deities (*murti*) – that is, it did not involve the usage of permanent structures or reactivation of structures deserted throughout the year.[281] Perhaps to make up for the missing permanent place of worship, but more likely in line with the wealth generated through fishing, both, structures and statues were much more splendid than those of the other rural *Pūjās* I encountered. In the *pandal* itself, the goddess was depicted in a way that parallels the materialization of the more famous goddess throughout contemporary West Bengal: in a human form, young, attractive and richly adorned in a festive splendour.

The distinction rests, furthermore, in the character of the Pūjā as spectacle and entertainment. Surely, the annual pilgrim fair is, as I have noted above, a spectacle – yet, the spectacle is not part of the festival but rather a corollary. The Gaṅgā Pūjā included, in contrast, open air screening of films, groups of baul-singers invited, highly specific rituals included and, of course, speeches held by local dignitaries (*function*). More or less related to religious themes and more or less strongly integrated into 'folk shaktism', these elements clearly localize the Pūjā in the contemporary landscape of Bengal's public religion.[282] In line with Bengali goddess

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[281] Several shrines across Sāgar stood deserted all over the year only to be reactivated for festivals. The local Gaṅgā Pūjā, however, did not unfold along such structures, but rather fully impermanent tent-like structures.

[282] The literature on festive rituals and public religion in Bengal is exceptionally rich, yet devoted to a large extent to urban articulations. But here the moment of pomp and festivity has been well documented, as has been the obvious element of entertainment(see i.e. P. K. Bose 2008; McDermott 2009; McDermott 2013).

worship, the element of material regeneration and what might be understood as a pragmatic satisfaction of a (folk) deity's needs (McDaniel 2004, 28 – 32), are in focus here. It can be seen in the rich application of fertility symbolism (flowers, water, fruits, bowls), as well as in the loving stance demanded from the ritual specialists for the ritual to be effective. To be sure, *bhakti*, the loving devotion toward particular deities, dominates the ritual practice in Hindu Bengal, but it doubtlessly is in itself an important offering the so-called folk deities are thought as literally craving for. Another being the sacrifice of material offerings. The fabled and much anticipated offerings of fish were cleary typical paraphernalia (incense, fire offerings [*homa*], fruits). Caught by the fishermen or bought by the committee, these were offered to the deity as sacrifice, later cooked and eaten by the attendants in a feast.

These offering and practices – as much as the overall Pūjā – were, so I was told, to ensure the safety while crossing waters and rich catches. While there was much discussion, indeed obvious and situated differences of what was aimed at most strongly, these two themes pervaded the perception of the ritual. In a more abstract vein, the Pūjā was thus aimed at material exchanges and the production of benevolence by an erratic and dangerous deity governing localized lifeworlds.

Underlying these practices, the element of regeneration was emphasized most strikingly, perhaps, in the ritual called *gajan* included as a minor ritual into the Gaṅgā Pūjā and considered a climax because of its spectacular nature. Once widely spread throughout rural Bengal, it has often been framed as a ritual of spring that aims, as Ralph Nicholas (2008, 1) writes, "[…] to bring back fertility, all kinds of fertility – in the fields, in the waters, and in families." To ensure this, Śiva, the sun and the male deity Dharma[283] are worshipped through rather dramatic acts involving artistic performances on wooden constructions and, sometimes, also self-inflicted injuries of ritual specialists. Performed regularly elsewhere, *gajan* were held on Sāgar only at certain Gaṅgā Pūjās and here by troupes invited from the mainland. Beyond fertility, this ritual's emphasis lay clearly on masculine agency – substantiated by the troupe, their actions and the deities worshipped. The celebration of masculine agency related the *gajan* to the second important dimension of the localized Gaṅgā Pūjā. That is, the balancing, pacifying and, latently, also the limitation of the riverine goddess through masculine agents. Featuring ritual activities towards Śiva, the *gajan* ritual clearly underlines his worldly powers. As this has been one of the very few venues where Śiva was worshipped. Since he was on contemporay Sāgar primarily

[283] This deity's name is not to be conflated with the general tenet of one's place in an encompassing order and duty mentioned above.

encountered through the myth of Gaṅgā's descending, I understand the ritual to be related to the broader motif of control over environmental hazards emanating from male, transcendental actors.

It certainly would be true to state that Gaṅgā has been engaged in ritual practices following the logic of dangerous mothers: Female deities are addressed with fervour and festivity; with an eye on being spared by the furious aspects of 'divine mothers'; and through an emphasis of devotion. Yet, with respect to the goddess and river Gaṅgā a paradox emerges: interpreted and addressed along the logic of dangerous, but motherly goddesses of a somewhat lesser order, the real threat that emerges from the sacred river, so to say, remains fundamentally unaddressed.

On Sāgar the localized Gaṅgā Pūjā straddles along a paradox figuration. The deity was addressed along the logic of village deity and along the twin practices of material exchange and regeneration; and through the honouring of presence so as to avoid her wrath. Yet, what has to be understood as the real disaster remains unaddressed in the ritual itself. In contrast to other parts of Bengal, a ritual formation to explicitly address erosions has not emerged. In his study on riverine erosion in Khazipur in western Bangladesh, to give an example, Mohammad Zaman mentions such ritual engagements (1999, 200). Among the Hindus of the area it is common, he writes, to direct pujas at a personalized water deity (*jol devota*). Muslims living in Kazipur Thana and beyond, however, address Khwaj Kizir – a saint who is understood to be the king of water and deemed responsible for erosions. To avert erosions, the villagers seek to pacify him by particular rituals (prayers, offerings, mass prayer). The non-emerges of parallel perceptions or rituals is surely not rooted in interpretations, for instance, of the river's ravages as kind of boon or grace (*māyer dāyā*) – in the way feverish people would perhaps understand illness to be a presence or the grace of the goddess (Ferrari 2007). Nor because the goddess would be considered to be detached from worldly affairs – indeed, she was addressed here as in other contexts (Jalais 2010b, 137f) as fully enmeshed into the mundane and tied to everyday risks. Yet protection from submergence and or the forces of disastrous events are sought somewhere else: from divine, masculine actors.

This is also related to patriarchic perceptions of land, earth and abundance – and, thus, to the goddess Lakṣmī. Prominently integrated into ritual practices among the islanders, Lakṣmī, the wife of Viṣṇu, was nowhere depicted as fierce or greedy. In a rather stark contrast to shaktist traditions,[284] she is seen as quintessential wife: timid, domesticated, yet bountiful (see Marglin

[284] I use the qualification since recent works have shown that shaktist traditions are nonetheless very compatible to patriarchal patterns. Perhaps more in practice, than in theory. For even in the scandalous, outrageous 'Left

1985; Kinsley 1988, 19 – 31). In Bengali perceptions, young brides are equated with the goddess and a house where a married couple resides, appears as one where Lakṣmī dwells. As a complementary part of a domestic union, married women were widely seen to ring in and embody the bountiful goddess. Yet, this relation implies the subordination of women under the groom: only after marriage they were understood as fulfilling their potential to embody Lakṣmī. Their complementariness, then, is qualified or better: severely limited through the very hierarchical relation figuring as precondition for the relation in the first place. Only through subordination the potential unfolds; and wholesomeness is achieved only through male rule. Needless to say, these perspectives were bypassed, contested or negated in practice, yet they continued to inform gendered conceptions (Donner 2008). In daily rounds of worship or the more elaborate festive Lakṣmī Pūjās women strive to ensure well-being in the family or, collectively, the neighbourhood. Similarly, it is worth noting that although ripe paddy is in its magnificence, beauty and promise identified with Lakṣmī once again, it needs, as noted above, men to prepare the field and to start the process of cultivation. This only emphasizes, I argue, the importance of a complementary moment, an instance of a sexualized union between male worker and field to unlock the potential, to activate powers entailed in the soil and to arrange for sustenance of sustenance. While he patriarchic framework clearly applies, this is not to negate the organization of festive Pūjās as venues of empowerment, networking and joys. This logic becomes significant, too, with a view on possible ritual engagements with the loss of land and therefore with the muddy materiality of soil that was seen as part or abode of the goddess. Without succumbing to thin unilateral explanations, I want to suggest that the fact that Lakṣmī was never thought of as being the right to address when it came to erosions are rooted in the twin notions of timid character and potential waiting to be activated. Gaṅgā was, as many told me, asked for a safe passage on the waters or for a rich catches as much as Lakṣmī had to be worshipped for a good harvest; the persistence of the earth, even though the earth was identified with her, was never thought as being her domain. Or as practically engaged with in such a way. Safety of the land had, as I will show later, wrought from male deities.

Kapil Muni being the most important among them. This of course is not meant as a reflection on the powers of such a ritual over the workings of the erosion, but rather on the powers that it would have for the constitution of the community. If only, to allow for a more thorough, less

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Hand'-Practices of Tantrism, once famous in Bengal, the women integrated into the ritual were little more than objects needed to attain spiritual or material benefits by the male practitioners (Urban 2003).

volatile interpretation of the disaster. Here the imagery of Kapil Muni appears as much more 'reliable', too. I will explain in the next chapter.

9.3. In the Hermit's Shelter

Within the sacral geography of South Asia, Sāgar enjoys insofar a peculiar position, too, as the divine sage Kapil Muni is said to have practiced meditations, performed his powers within its confines. For religious dimensions of the interpretations of localized environmental relations and their hazards, this conception is highly significant. It frames the island, as I have shown above, as a liminal space of social order, even as a threat to the order elsewhere. Yet in its very liminality and emptiness, it marks the sphere of influence and sovereignty of Kapil Muni. Among transregional pilgrims both interpretations are only of a limited significance; yet they powerfully influence quotidian interpretations and engagements of the islanders.

Both allusions overshadow further dimensions widely attributed to the divine ascetic. Neither the idea that Kapil Muni founded the Saṃkhya-system of philosophy; nor his prominent inclusion into the Vaiṣnāva-pantheon seems locally of significance. Against the background of the 'identificatory habitus' of the Hindu traditions, as Axel Michaels put it (2006), this denial certainly is surprising. Even more so when set against the dominance of Vaiṣnāva traditions (*baiṣñab dharm*) in rural Bengal. But this non-identification and non-integration of Kapil Muni with influential figures does so much as to emphasize the exceptional role attributed to the ascetic and, by extension, his space: the island.

In analogy to Gaṅgā, Kapil Muni marks a field of difference between localized and encompassing interpretations. Kapil Muni is by the most islanders neither worshipped on shrines nor through institutionalised practices. Particularly devout residents of the Colony certainly joined ritual ablution on *makar saṃkrānti* and pay afterwards tribute to Kapil Muni in the temple. Beyond that, however, I was unable to locate even one more shrine devoted to Kapil Muni and frequented by islanders.[285] Practical worship is limited, hence, to cheap prints adorning houses, buses or tea stalls and that are engaged with in diverse manner – spanning ignorance with inclusion into rounds of daily prayers. Yet, the absence of an institutionalized worship is not to be conflated with meaninglessness, irrelevance or irreverence toward the sage.

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[285] The shrines housed in several *āśram*, most notably in the Kapilānanda Āśram, are frequently only by the staff of the respected institutions and by pilgrims (either those who stay there or those who extend their ritual activities in Gaṅgāsāgar by a round of worship in the *āśram*).

It is better understood, I argue, as slip side of Kapil Muni's crucial role and his identification with the length and breadth of the island.

Indirect engagements with the sage have been peervasive. In interpretations of environmental processes, Kapil Muni emerged crucial: As a powerful saviour and as interlocked with the present of the island. Both – the narrative structures and metaphorical connections implying the divine sage – establish what I understand to be an imagery of ultimate safety. That is, the socially constructed and deeply ingrained idea, according to which the island and its residents are – in the face of all environmental hazards and degradations – still spared from their worst consequences. The imagery of safety has been sustained through a cluster of diverse components all related to some extent to the figure and story of the saint. I will illuminate these interpretations and metaphorical relations now one after the other, beginning with spatialized notions. In doing so I hope to substantiate that the hold the idea of Kapil Muni had on the present inverts the ritual irrelevance.

Crucial and articulated predominantly in metaphorical fashion, then, was the socially mediated positioning of the island in space itself. Within 'Hindu' mythology and cosmology Sāgar marks, as noted above, a space deep beneath the ground, an underworld. Indeed, to some, nothing less than the deepest place on earth. Canonical texts, oral traditions and contemporary footpath literature give at times detailed accounts of the plights of the sixty thousand sons, digging from west to east through the depths of the earth (see e.g. D. Sen n.d.; Māitī 2001). Finding the horse (and the sage) only in the last searched direction, east, and there in its extreme depth.

In this framework, then, Sāgar emerges as an awkward space: as netherworld, as a space deep below the surface dragged, so to say, into the open by an army's devastations. Even while the idea to dwell in an earlier netherworld or an extremely low region potentially entails uncanny associations, the latter never appeared in conversations in the colony. Very prominent, on the other hand, were what locally seemed to be the advantages of being situated in such a way when it came to environmental hazards.

While it may certainly be true that Sāgar experienced in the last few decades a disaster-gap (see Chapter 7.1.), these decades also saw an unprecedented media coverage on storms, cyclones and super-cyclones affecting the subcontinent's East Coast in particular. The current absence of devastating storms coincided, therefore, with an increasing awareness about the suffering on nearby coasts. Many I spoke with knew very well of the frequency of cyclonic devastations in nearby Bangladesh; the brute force and sheer amount of victims during what came to be known the 'Orissa Super-Cyclone' (1999) similarly had a powerful hold on the imagination in the

colony. The reasons why the island Sāgar – nested right in the middle of this hazardous region – had been spared, begs explanation. I have engaged one moment of localized explanations already – that is, the entanglements of storms with currents.[286] Wider spread, however, was the idea that storms simply did not touch Sāgar because they passed by it flying through much higher layers in the sky. They failed to bring harm, in other words, as the island was seen as too low to be in their way. These and other statements emphasizing the positive effects of Sāgar's extremely low character relate, I argue, to the cosmology based in the myth around Kapil Muni. This, of course, is not to say that islanders dwell only on these modes of interpretations and are beyond the reach of other patterns of explanation. Nor that these patterns are in an opposition or defiance to techno-ecological patterns of explanation. Rather do they seem to be nested in or interlocked with other modes of thought and relied upon to make sense of partial *exemptions* from hazards. After long elaborations on the genesis of cyclonic pressure fields, many of my interlocutors pointed at the depth of the land. "This is the deepest place of the earth", said Anil Seth once mirroring the voices of many others,[287] "The storms spare Sāgar because Sāgar is situated so deep that the storms rush high above it without touching it."

Throughout this thesis I have tried to show that Sāgar resembles and is seen to resemble surrounding islands in many ways. Histories, quotidian relations and vulnerabilities are shared throughout the deltaic islands. As countless other islands, it was understood as a salty terrain; threatened by submergence; young and until recently very little but wilderness. In a word, it was seen as a recently claimed *jangal* in hazard-prone region almost like any other island in the vicinity. Yet it differs from these shared characteristics and histories through the cosmology steeped in the myth around Kapil Muni. Both approaches (that of similarity and difference) interlaced in actual conversations – a figuration underlining the flexibility and multi-dimensional nature of localized interpretations.

But while the island's position in the netherworld was seen as accounting for the absence of storms, by the same token it also entails dangers. For it puts the fragile landmass of the island closer into the reach of the river and the sea; and enhances, in other words, the vulnerability towards floods and erosions. This notion is clearly alluded to when islanders speak of the island

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[286] Others voiced a local meteorological model that equated the movement of cyclonic fields with a character of the Bengali script, the ba (ব). Storms – so it was said – followed one of the two lines originating from the lowest point of the letter and crush into either Orissa or Bangladesh: Sāgar was situated in-between and was thus, so the model had it, saved.

[287] Untaped Interview, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 24.7.2009

as a ‘flood zone’ (*bonya elaka*). The safety from one hazard, emerges, in a sense, as the vulnerability to another.

Yet, in quotidian remarks or more elaborated debates on the fragility and uncertain future of the island, Kapil Muni emerged as a protective, benign ruler. Most often it took the simple, yet evocative form of identifying the island, literally, with Kapil Muni’s very worldly realm and that in a way which paralleled arrangements of political power. Countless times I was told that one should not worry as this was Kapil Muni’s police station (*kapil muni thānā*). To be sure, the entanglement of worldly and sacral power alluded here is not uncommon throughout South Asia. In the condensed form of, what I understand to be, a divine policeman it emerges as a counterpoint to, or at least a commentary on the powers of so-called village goddesses, Gaṅgā’s ambiguities and ultimately also the powers of the state. While the latter are, in other words, unreliable or hostile, the islanders saw the hermit as powerful and dedicated protector. The island emerges, in a sense, as the hermit’s shelter. At the same time, however, was the ability or willingness to protect in itself repeatedly contested; indirectly and in a somewhat apologetic way. Against the background of recent experiences, this imagery certainly crumbles and the protection of a masculine actor has on Sāgar’s coast become questionable to a few. I will give two of the most pressing examples: the ongoing protection of storms; and the ubiquitous shrinkages of the island.

The cyclone Aila held, most notably, the potential to question both moments of the idiom of safety. For the cyclone had not drifted by high in the sky without touching the island; and it had, as it were, brought considerable damages to certain parts of the island. Among those residents of the Colony who strongly relied on religious notions, it was postulated that Aila’s trajectory had actually made the island’s very protection visible. The latter became clear, so it was argued, in two ways. On one hand, with respect to the actual course taken; and on the other hand to the precise timing of the event. The protective influence of Kapil Muni came to be seen, I was told, insofar as that the landfall did coincide neither with the spring tides nor the most dangerous seasons. In all the destruction brought about, Aila still appeared long before the onset of the rains and therefore in a season of comparatively low water levels even during high tide. What is more, the storm was remembered as having had its landfall on Sāgar neither during high tide nor during a spring tide. If anything, this temporal context guaranteed that Sāgar sustained, according to my informants, only minor damages during the disastrous event. To many this particular timing was not the result of chance, but the product of directed timing. Kapil Muni came to be attributed with weakening the storm and reducing havoc by influencing

time of the landfall. Needless to say, this relativization angered the people in and from Botkhāli who had seen massive destruction and the losses of land because of the storm.

Similar interpretations apply to the route of the cyclone in space. To be sure, the cyclonic field's enormity precludes the realization or precipitations of its (precise) movement in space. Intensive media representations of recent storms, however, allow for very detailed mapping of storms, their advances and the debris left behind at least in retrospective. Radio features and daily newspapers ceaselessly gave updates on actual routes through maps or, what is more important, enumerations of affected localities. Between lines, maps and debris, storms have become, in a word, news. Yet, as routes taken and as routes *not* taken. Building on these, in conversations throughout my fieldwork Aila's precise course was seen to illuminate a further moment of protection bestowed by the sage. It had struck land 'only' on the islands extreme east, had destroyed 'only' Botkhāli and turned away then toward other islands in the east. The main temple, the most villages and also the largest part of the colony remained by and large unaffected. They were affected, as noted above, only within the limits of what was expected throughout every rainy season. Trees were uprooted and others snapped of, roofs were removed and a few embankments collapsed. To be sure, those dwelling on or adjacent to vulnerable embankments saw their houses and fields threatened and also harmed and emphasized, therefore, the eventfulness of the storm, its extraordinary quality and vehemence. Yet many others of the residents framed the storm as a non-event. It could have remained, so it was argued, such a non-event through the protective powers of the sage who was credited with re-routing the storm's path through space. During a group discussion in the house of one of my informants, Nitarānjān Paduā, this idea was eloquently invoked by his friend, the *purohit* Subrata Rāy.[288] To much avail the latter said,

> "When, after Aila had struck, the helpers sent by the government arrived, they saw that on Sāgar only one house had been destroyed, but that the neighbouring islands had become like cremation grounds. This is due to Kapil Muni."

While Kapil Muni's protection has been experienced during the recent cyclone itself and here, so to say, particularly in the devastations brought to others, the recent shrinkages of the island entail much more ambivalent perspectives on the sage's agency. As noted in the onset, the dramatic erosions of recent decades have not exempted Gaṅgāsāgar itself: even while the

[288] Group discussion, 31.07.2009, Gaṅgāsāgar colony

situation seemed to be quite stable during my fieldwork, immense shrinkages had made the recess of the temple into the interior made necessary several times throughout its history.
Conversations on these displacements and mobilities lead ultimately into deep uncertainties. For the very mobility allows to be framed, at its most extreme, as the resettlement of a localized divinity, as outcome of the limits of his powers. Most likely for these reasons, conversations on the displacement of the temple itself were characterized by ignorance and silences. To be sure, the movements of the temple may be something very casual or unsurprising in a world that is experienced as being perpetually transforming. Yet I think that, both, the (forfeited) ignorance and silence actually cover a sense of disturbance. For the imagery of a receding temple condenses the contemporary predicament of the island emblematically as much as it makes divine agency uncertain. Localized engagements with this facet of environmental history unveiled cultural and narrative strategies relating the powers of the sage over erosions in general.
On one hand, then, many conversations were marked by a switch in frames of reverence – i.e. by the turn-away from cosmological and religious thought. No-one of my interlocutors wanted to question Kapil Muni's agency with respect to erosion nor articulate a sense of abandonment by a protector. In place of such statements, conversations were quickly shifting towards, what I have called above, eco-technological approaches, localized hydrolatry or the broader characteristics of the river. Hence, towards the culpability of ships, port authorities or the vagaries of the water.
More than silence and avoidance, these discursive shifts point at implicit contestations of Kapil's agency. For the devastations brought about by interventions or the vagaries of a gluttonous river's grace underscore the limited powers of the divine protector. He is portrayed here as having, in a word, little to answer the environmental changes. Others, I must add, put forward perspectives on the sage that imbued him with a powerful influence on the daily rhythms and seasons and, hence, the hazard of erosions. Devout men, as for instance old Devnonā Jānā, credited in their assessment of the island's condition clearly Kapil Muni with the placidity and low height of spring tides rushing against Sāgar's shores. Not only would he arrange for the island being spared by storms, but he "[…] also let the *kaṭāl* never rise higher than to the knee".[289] It will have become clear from these elaborations that there were stark differences between (the degree of) agency attributed to the divine yogi. These

[289] Devnonā Jānā, 1.12.2009, Gaṅgāsāgar colony

conceptualizations were far from uniformly spread across social categories and matters of contestation throughout. Bordering the uncertain and blasphemy, the contestations were most often rather evolving along shifts in the frame of reference than in the direct contestation of divine powers. An important moment in these debates was, what has to be understood as the re-establishment of his agency through the very language of grace (*mahimā*) and play (*līlā*) that was relied upon to make sense of the changes. For it was not only seen as a quality of the riverine goddess, but of the hermit as well.

On Sāgar's coasts, a moment of legibility of divine actions and, thus, a conceptual stability was drawn from the idea that parts of the island may certainly disappear, yet never the whole island. This, I was told, is guaranteed by Kapil Muni; and over this he eagerly keeps watch. In all the erratic behaviour, as a bottom line, so to say, the island's continuing existence seemed guaranteed. Precisely, once again, because the island is the hermit's very shelter and his dominion. "No, Sāgar is the place where Kapil Muni resides, it is his police station. It will not sink," said Sheikh Shor[290] echoing thus many other similar statements. Conversely did neither recent nor the forecasted erosions question the continuing existence of the island or the protection by the divine sage.

What is certain however, is that they were engaged with on the conceptual level through an emphasis of masculine powers. The continuing existence, the striving of the population was attributed to a divine, yet very alert masculine ruler striving the line between transcendence and immanence. Paralleling the famous mythological story of Kerala's sinking and resurfacing,[291] here, too, the land is guarded from the waters and water-borne hazards. In contrast to the southern case, here it was not a martial, divine Brahmin who forced the sea masses away, but a divine yogi safeguarding this island.

These conceptions are mirrored, furthermore, in localized approaches to the Muslim saint Pīrbābā identified with and revered in Hijlī Śarīf. As noted above, his powers were invoked through famous episode and associated image practices depicting the saint as defying British troops through tigers (see Chapter 8.2.). But his powers, or better: their relevance within the present were extended famously to survival in hostile environments and ongoing

[290] Interview, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 12.12.2009

[291] Hindu mythology has it that the sea itself had difficulties in accommodating her waters after Gaṅgā had reached the shore and began flowing into the ocean. As a consequence, large territories of what today is the South Indian state of Kerala are said to have been submerged by the risen waters. Seeing the plight of the southern land's residents, the mighty Brahmin Paraśurām (himself an *avatār* of Viṣṇu) stepped in. He threatened the sea god Varuṇa with his bow to withdraw. In terror the sea god followed the order and gave Kerala free. Still very famous in Kerala (Eck 1998a, 72f), yet never alluded to on Sāgar, it is among the very few hints at the danger imminent in the waters of the celestial river.

environmental navigations. Ideas of control of dangers loom large, as is obvious in the story of the tigers called to safeguard the tomb from the British army. Other narrations and practices, however, point to, what is understood to be the powers of the saint to avert dangers associated with water in the widest sense. Be it in the form or floods or during shipwrecks at sea (see also Giri 2007, 35). While his influence is, therefore, hardly explicitly applied to questions of erosions, the underlying emphasis on masculine actors to counter suffering still shines through.

9.4. Moral Geographies: On Karma and Futility

The elaborations on deities and other divine actors I have given so far substantiate the difficulties to address the slow violence of gradual changes. The integration of religious imageries into hybrid bodies of knowledge operated along more abstract notions as well.

One theme is, of course, the notion of *karma*; and another being allusions to individualized prayers and emotional stances subsumed under the heading *bhakti*. Both themes, I emphasize, were enlisted as retrospective explanations for what had befallen society or single members. Likewise, they were marked by deep ambiguities when it came to possible translation into the present. In regional debates on shrinkages, localized references to karma or devout prayers tend to be, as might be expected, cited as instances of a so-called fatalism and subsumed to the powerful imagery of static, backward rural populations. This mode, I argue, misses the point. For the interpretations in terms of *karma* or devotion have to be seen as attempts to come to terms with collective misery and entangled, furthermore, with political and cosmological dimensions.

Allusions to *karma* resurfaced throughout my fieldwork. Strikingly, the concept set into motion more often by Muslims than by Hindus of the colony – underscoring, thus, once again the mutuality of both 'communities'. Yet the notion was mostly used in a hesitant and vague sense. It never was used to explain particular losses or individualized suffering (see Keyes and Daniel 1983), but served rather a broad horizon of collective involvement, of a particular suffering resulting from hazy trajectories. After a long conversation on the causation of erosion and the emphasis on currents as instances of a personalised riverine entity, Sheikh Shor,[292] for instance, insisted:

[292] Interview with Sheikh Shor, Gaṅgāsāgar colony, 28.1.2011,

> "It has something to do with karma. […] Our forefathers must have done something wrong that we ended up here on these islands."

Mirroring a wider shared sentiment, through these vague reflections he made clear that past deeds were relevant for present and recent suffering. Interestingly, they have benn limited to a collective level and their situatedness in space. Typically for this pattern of interpretations of that what had befallen society, it remained on a very abstract level, thinning individual responsibility or particular episodes of suffering out.

The second pattern – i.e. of prayers – strongly emphasized their very futility. In contrast to elaborations on karma that said something about a particular situatedness and about consequences of earlier actions, allusions to prayer and devotion emerged mainly within narrations of failure. To the latter they added a layer of inefficiency. Prayer, thus, became relevant in negative ways: through that what could not have been prevented. But it is important to note that, what is inefficient is not the prayer itself, but the way prayers were thought to be brought forward: inadequate or lacking. Hence it is the stance through which prayers were voiced, so the argument goes, and not the ritual form itself that accounts for failure.

The erosions could not be stopped, so it was voiced in many conversations, because the islanders either had not prayed earnestly or not devotedly (*āntarik*) enough. Both judgements ultimately hint at the same assumption: to an individualized affair of the heart. For the emotive stance of devotedness and love is what makes, according to the logic of *bhakti*, rituals efficient.[293] These dynamics are illuminated tellingly by a parable that enjoyed some popularity on and off the embankments. It is, what I call, the parable of the boat.

With Lohāchara it was, I paraphrase, like with a boat (*naukā*) caught in a storm: all people in the boat call out for god or their respective gods but die, ultimately, when the boat sinks. This shows, I was reminded, that the inmates were not praying with their heart or, to be more in line with the original phrase, that it was not an affair of the heart (*āntarik kathā chilonā*). Being collectively in danger, the call for god's helping hand emerges as a matter of individualized actors and – translating a founding idea of bhakti into the discussions of hazardous environment – the truthfulness of their hearts. This constellation pervaded lesser elaborated allusions to prayers – prayers to stop the erosions, to save the island from sinking and that were private and never public. It resurfaces in its gravest sense in this parable's climactic emphasis of everyone's

[293] The approach is, as has been widely shown, also applied to ceremonies where priests have as ritual specialist take care of the proceedings not only because only they are entitled to do, but also only they are deemed to be capable to pronounce sacralised utterings correctly. Also these strongly formalized practices are thought to be efficient only if the person who holds the ritual does so as a person infused with bhakti.

death. The application of the parable on the past of erosion, furthermore, unfolds the tension between society and individual, between collective threat and individual agency pervading localized interpretations of particular environmental hazards. The theme pervaded as an intertextual element various narratives of localized environmental hazards. The most obvious cases are that of fishermen lost at sea – either as a past remembered or as a motif of religious discourse – and that of mighty floods negating the land. Whenever calls for help of transcendental entities do figure in these narrations, they were an intimate affair between individual and god – and not a matter of the collective. Being apt for a situation where survivors float alone in a vast emptiness – or so it seems, for one could ask for the fate of all others – the situation turns on its head when the individualization and internalization is applied on the islanders as a group. While none of the hazards were thought as punishment or test, shipwrecks and floods emerged in religiously accented narrations as moments where individuals could prove their vigor or their devotion. The victims of shrinking islands emerge yet as only further fragmented and as having sustained efforts whose very futility mirrors back on them.

At the same time does the parable draw its power greatly from the simple yet evocative figure of the boat. While this may relate indirectly to the heteropic qualities of the island, it seems more important for the present purposes to engage the fragility of the boat itself. Interpreted as a boat (*naukā*), it is neither a motorized trawler (*trawler*) nor has it the robustness or the massive measures of the ship (*jahāj*) (see chapter 9.1.2.). Through the imagery of a boat at sea, the narrators of the parable, similarly, set themselves, their island and their lives apart from the hopeful, indeed: somewhat playful encounters with impermanence and mobility that characterizes life on the *chars* of Bengal. The imagery of a boat caught by the storm has no room for the resurfacing of the land, nor for a shift onto other, fertile grounds so fundamental for social navigations of *char*-dwellers. Rather evolves the parable around a threat and then: sinking and death.

9.5. Summary: Fragments of Meaning

What we see at work in the complex and hybrid interplay of meanings are, I suggest, the powers of uncertainty. Not in the sense of environmental uncertainty (Spittler 1989; Bollig 2006; Göbel 2009) nor as a cultivated toxic uncertainty (Auyero and Swistun 2009). But rather as theoretical uncertainty arising from and around a vague, not yet precisely captured hazard which nevertheless threatens the existence of the island itself.

Discursive ambiguities are, I suggest, rooted in the material fabric of an amphibian constantly changing waterscape and in the boundlessness of the ritual itself. Conversations on the workings of the erosion – on their how and why – reverberated with various publics, with various approaches and groups involved. There has, in a word, no pervading imagery or framework emerged to make sense of them.

Against the background of threats to the very existence of the islands, I understand the metaphorical framing of the river as voracious and of the island as cave-like territory of Kapil Muni as central fragment within collective interpretations of the present. In and through these, patterns of social memory were fashioned and refashioned in meaningful ways. Narrations of loss and an embattled persistence came to be embedded into a pattern of causal explanations and mythical allusions. Mutually bound up, the remembered pasts impinge on explanatory patterns all over again. Immediately clear when it comes to the particulars of localized knowledge (on time, event, and place of collapses and so on), it applies also to the contours of divinity. For it seems highly likely that the way these deities are addressed emerged particular through these histories. Not as a causal consequence, but in the encounter with hazardous environments; in the vagaries and cyclical losses.

The use of personalizing notions, of food metaphors and figurative constructions of an ultimate safety on one hand feeds into socially mediated interpretations of encroachments. In this they add other layers to the already diverse set of explanations – ranging, as I have shown, from the ecological (in a narrow sense) to questions of political economy. Yet, of course, it would be mistaken to understand these simply as moment of code-switching where the past is patched against the future, the local against the global (Hoeppe 2007). For they are interwoven into other approaches; are instances of uneasy encounters between globalized debates, localized environmental knowledge, and religious thought. In contrast to other fragmentary layers of explanations, the patterns of figurative thought engaged with here entail somewhat sturdy interpretations and help to see, I suggest, uncertain futures in a much more favorable light.

Beyond the circle of devout residents the idea of an ultimate protection was, irrespective however often it has been voiced, questionable in its genuineness. If anything the quick shifts in discursive layers and frames of reference suggest such that. Against the background of complex environmental dynamics, the often puzzling threats to well-being and the resulting deep uncertainties, the imagery of a powerful protector stabilized perceptions and enhances thereby a reliability that pervades quotidian relations. Critical perspectives on an ultimate security were voiced only extremely rare occasions. It seemed as if nobody was willing to shake

at these conceptions. Specific debates and relationships, however, served as arenas to express uncertainties and, indeed, the worries to be anything but saved. Politics in general or situated exchanges with the bureaucracy centred on environmental hazards, established spaces to converse on and mourn about the existential threat to coastlines or whole islands. Without an explicit questioning of the imagery of protection and bypassing it altogether, hence, the deep uncertainties could be made heard.

10. Conclusion

Taking the entanglement of environment and society in everyday lifeworlds as a starting point, in this thesis I have engaged the afterlife of environmental transformations, hazards and displacements on extremely vulnerable islands on Bengal's coast.

One of the main results of my inquiries relates to the structure of the disaster. In contrast to regional and global perceptions, islanders understand the small-scale, slow and predictable, yet unstoppable processes of coastal erosion as truly disastrous. Accumulated events as cyclones or storm surges, which recurrently unleash their potential in Bengal, are largely overshadowed by erosions. I have shown that, what is perceived as truly disastrous, is characterized by spatial and temporal boundlessness. Both, the advancing erosions and the experience thereof, are scattered along exposed coasts and stretched out across years and decades. I have demonstrated that the disastrous erosions result in shrinking landscapes and the submergence of whole islands. For the islanders this culminates in the permanent loss of land and place as they recede with the coasts. Within the drawn-out texture of the disaster, thus, seasonal cycles as well as small-scale devastations, gradual impoverishment and multiple displacements had to be navigated. Highlighting its encroaching nature and the asymmetrical power relations involved in the shrinkages themselves, I have framed the erosion of these islands as an articulation of 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011) and its everyday experience as a form of 'environmental suffering' (Auyero and Swistun 2009). Similarly, I show that this particular figuration of the disaster does not entail an interruption of normality, but amounts to a form of normality itself: a 'chronic crisis' (Vigh 2008).

Against this background, I have shown that the islanders actively face the multiple displacements by shaping its course and by subjecting it to socially mediated perceptions. The latter marks a core concern of this thesis as it allows for the analysis of constructions of meaning and trajectories or events bound up therewith. Not only is the past accessible only through these constructions, but they serve as a prism into the modes of social coping and, therefore, the afterlife of dissolving materialities in the life of marginalized populations.

In due course, I have engaged the perceptions of these hardly visible, yet boundless devastations. Throughout their certainly acknowledged processual nature, I show that narrations are still tied to specific events and meanings generated along heterogeneous discursive formations. On one hand, I have traced distinct markers within the processual encroachments of salty waters and their significance within socially-mediated memories. These are, what I understand to be, the arrival of the coast at one's own homestead or the moment of

displacement when the land had been completely lost and, finally, the seasonal hazardous times. I have argued that the emphasis on events allows for the condensations of boundless suffering, for the integration of dispersed losses into plotlines and produces, thereby, a sense of grip on the past as well as shared trajectory among displaced islanders. Localized attributions of meaning, on the other hand, unfold along a diverse set of overlapping registers. I have framed these as eco-technological and religious-cosmological frameworks, respectively. Both are heterogeneous in themselves. The eco-technological framework involves elements of modern science, localized environmental knowledge and political diagnoses. The religious-cosmological framework, however, involves metaphoric constructions and is characterized by specific localized approaches to the divine river Gaṅgā. Yet, it also includes a powerful imagery of safety rooted in cosmological ideas. According to this imagery, contemporary Sāgar is part of what earlier was the netherworld and, therefore, too low-lying to be reached by the most powerful storms. By the same token, it marks the dominion of the divine Yogi Kapil Muni who, as it is widely believed, guarantees the continuing existence of the island throughout the massive erosions.

Critically engaging with the notion of the 'environmental refugee', I have emphasized the limitations of this influential approach to understand the islanders' lifeworlds. Based on analyses of remembered pasts and their triangulation with additional material wherever possible, I have shown that environmentally induced displacements are embedded in broader trajectories characterized by multiple losses and displacements. Flight, forced mobilities and diverse displacements emerged as recurrent and structuring elements of remembered pasts. Indeed, they accumulate into, what I frame as, master narrative of circuits of displacements and emplacements. The latter structures the past, ties and integrates it into the present and shapes expectations of the future. Similarly, I have demonstrated that environmentally induced displacement are not singular, but involve a complex set of repeated micromigrations through which the islanders literally move about with the coast.

In due course I have shown that recurrent displacements, instabilities and mobilities have an impact on affected societies. Indeed, society and displacements are intimately tied to each other, the former unfolds through the latter. Recurrent losses give rise, I argue, to new patterns of identity and overshadow other social markers in everyday relations. Among displaced islanders I have traced, what Butler frames as, 'community of loss' (Butler 2003). Besides shaping a sense of past and community and, thus, collective identities rooted in shared trajectories, this translates into a certain levelling of social relations coexisting with everyday power relations.

Among the latter, I highlight, rigid exclusions guarding claims to the sociality and its particular past.

Throughout this thesis I have critically engaged the validity of anthropogenic climate change as a heuristic to understand the lifeworlds of displaced islanders. Albeit the reservations mentioned – regarding the causation of landscape transformations, thinned-out accounts of displacements and ambiguous corroborations –, there seems to be little doubt that climate change will further intensify the islands' fragility. The outlook for low-lying, marginal islands as Sāgar or Ghoṛāmārā seems to be bleak, as there is neither a political apparatus in hindsight to tackle climate change on a planetary scale, nor to foster adaptation locally. That being said, slow violence – as it has been discussed here or in a closely related form – will most likely surge. It will make itself felt, will have to be lived with and coped. Inquiries into lifeworlds bound up with slow violence and its afterlife seem, therefore, to be more urgent than ever. Both, to foster meaningful political interventions and to advance environmental theory.

In conclusion, I want to underline the urgency of these efforts by returning to the view from one of Sāgar's embattled embankments. While the erosions are mounting ever more pressure on the island's shores, the forests are cut and the political horizon changed considerably leaving no room for resettlements. The moment when Lohāchara had been sinking and a group of families held on to the island serves, therefore, as a valid description for those displaced in the recent past, the present and those many more likely to be displaced in the future. Similarly, the twin pressure of population growth from within its limits, degradation of land and encroaching sea waters gushing on from outside, make Sāgar's predicament a valid metaphor of the global environmental situation. And while the quest for sustainability appears to be a key concern, those settling on the embankments with dire outlooks hardly will have the means to live sustainably.

Appendix I – Zusammenfassung der Dissertation

Meine Dissertation widmet sich dem Leben mit Katastrophen- und Vertreibungserfahrungen im indischen Gangesdelta. Vor dem Hintergrund dynamischer Materialitäten und historisch situierter Machtverhältnisse werden Ereignisse, Narrative und Praktiken in ihrem lebensweltlichen Zusammenhang erörtert. Entlang dieses Erkenntnisinteresses wird die Ausgestaltung multipler Verschränkungen von globalen, regionalen und lokalen Dynamiken unter ungleichen Bedingungen untersucht.

Meine Dissertationsschrift beruht auf den Ergebnissen dreier, aufeinanderfolgender Forschungsaufenthalte in Westbengalen. Diese umfassten insgesamt 14 Monate und waren von einem flexiblen Methodenmix gekennzeichnet. Das Hauptaugenmerk lag auf ethnografischen Feldforschungen in der Gaṅgāsāgar Colony an der Südküste der Insel Sāgar. Diese wurden durch Erhebungen in benachbarten Lokalitäten, sowie durch den Einbezug von Archivdokumenten und Publikationen ergänzt.

Die Ausgangsfragestellung meiner Promotionsforschung lautete: *Wie bewältigen umweltinduziert Vertriebene ihre von Umweltgefahren geprägte Vergangenheit und Gegenwart?* Der Arbeitsweise der ‚Grounded Theory' verpflichtet, fächerte sich diese im Vollzug der Erhebung in vier Stränge auf. Erstens: *Welche Katastrophen müssen lokal bewältigt werden?* Zweitens wurde gefragt, *durch welche Strategien den chronischen Krisen entgegnet wurde und wird?* Drittens bedurfte es einer Klärung der Frage, *wie erinnerte Erfahrungen erzählt und mit Dingen, Personen und Figuren verknüpft werden.* Schließlich entstand die Frage, *entlang welcher Routen die Insulaner in globalisierte Diskurse eingeführt werden und wie dies in die Gegenwart zurückwirkt?*

Im Zuge der beschriebenen Vorgehensweise arbeite ich erstens heraus, dass sich lokal weder Stürme noch Fluten als katastrophal darstellen, sondern einzig Küstenerosionen. Das Erlebnis derselben ist räumlich gestreut und zeitlich entzerrt. Eingebettet in asymmetrische Machtverhältnisse stellen die Schrumpfungen selbst eine Form ‚langsamer Gewalt' (Nixon 2011) dar. Damit verknüpft arbeite ich heraus, dass die Erosionen weniger eine Unterbrechung der Normalität sind, sondern selbst eine Normalität hervorbringen.

Zweitens untersuche ich die Deutungen der Schrumpfungen in ihrem lebensweltlichen Zusammenhang. Diese sind oft an spezifische Ereignisse geknüpft: Verlaufspunkte im Voranschreiten der Erosion oder vereinzelte dramatische Ereignisse erlauben, entgrenztes Leid zu kondensieren und sinnhaft zu machen. Andererseits sind Deutungen entlang sich

überlappender, heterogener Diskurse generiert. Neben Schuldzusprechungen bringen diese aber auch ein kosmologisch fundiertes Schutzidiom hervor.

Drittens zeige ich auf, dass die umweltinduzierten Vertreibungserfahren nicht einzigartig sind. Vielmehr fügen sich diese in, von erzwungener Mobilität gekennzeichnete Vergangenheiten ein und fächern sich zudem in zahlreiche Migrationen *mit der Küste* auf. In ihrem Facettenreichtum sind die wiederholten Verlusterfahren in jeweils unterschiedlichem Maße von aktiver Gestaltung durch die Insulaner geprägt. Weiterhin stellen Vertreibungen und Verortungen – aus einer anderen Perspektive betrachtet – ein wirkmächtiges Masternarrativ dar, entlang dessen die Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft strukturiert wird. Dieses trifft auch für ein recht uniformes Vergessen einzelner, von Ohnmacht gekennzeichneter Episoden innerhalb des Masternarrativ zu. Gleichzeitig zeige ich, wie spezifische Vertreibungsepisoden zum Gegenstand der Interaktion mit globalen Akteuren und somit in den Alltag wiedereingetragen werden.

Damit verknüpft zeige ich, viertens, dass soziale Bezüge selbst durch den Verlust überformt werden. Er bringt neue Identitäten hervor und überschattet andere soziale Marker in alltäglichen Bezügen. Gleichzeitig sind diese Gruppenbildungen exklusiv und schließen Individuen und Gruppen entlang ihrer anders gelagerten Vergangenheiten aus.

Appendix II – Summary of the Thesis

In this thesis I engage long-term coping with disasters and displacement on the fringes of the Indian Ganges Delta. I analyze narratives, events and practices against the background of and interwoven with dynamic materialities, situated power relations and everyday lifeworlds. In doing so, I examine entanglements across social and material registers under uneven conditions. My dissertation is based on three consecutive phases of field research in West Bengal (India) amounting to 14 months. Most of the data has been generated through ethnographic inquiries in Gaṅgāsāgar Colony at the southern coast of Sāgar island. However, I followed a flexible mix of methods and gained complementary data through inquiries in neighboring localities as well as through the inclusion of archival documents and publications.

My initial research question was: *How do environmentally-induced displaced persons cope with a past and present characterized by environmental hazards?* Following the approach of 'Grounded Theory', I refined this basic question during fieldwork itself. Four problems emerged. First: *Which disasters have locally to be coped with?* Second, I had to ask, *along which strategies the chronic crises are navigated by the local population.* A third theme involved memory and I examined thus, *how remembered experiences are narrated and related to things, persons and tropes?* Finally I asked, *along which routes the islanders have been introduced into globalized debates and how this affected local lifeworlds?*

In following the outlined approach, I show, firstly, that neither storms nor floods are locally perceived to be disastrous, but only coastal erosions. The experience of the latter is spatially scattered and temporally unbound. Unfolding under conditions of social vulnerability and asymmetric power relations, I frame the shrinkages of the landscape as a form of 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011). Related therewith, I demonstrate that the erosions are less an interruption of normality, but bring about a new normality.

Secondly, I analyze interpretations of the shrinkages in everyday lifeworlds. On one hand, I examine the temporality of the erosions. Although of an encroaching nature, in the lives of the islanders they are bound up with specific events. I argue that in a context of unbound disasters the emphasis of distinct moments allows to condense suffering and construct meaning. On the other hand, I engage interpretations and unravel several, interlocking discursive formations along which they are made sense of. Beyond causations and accusations, these amount to a cosmologically derived idiom of safety.

A third line of inquiry relates to the trope of the 'refugee'. Their drama notwithstanding, I demonstrate that environmentally-induced displacements are locally not unique experiences.

But they are better to be understood as instances within broader trajectories of pasts of enforced mobilities. Similarly, they involve repeated micro-migrations through which the displaced move with the receding coast. I argue, furthermore, that this diversity of mobilities and displacements is actively negotiated by the islanders. In questioning narratives, I show how displacements and emplacements emerge as a powerful master narrative structuring past, present and the future. I demonstrate that this master narrative is complemented by an equally uniform forgetfulness about episodes characterized by powerlessness. Turning towards interactions with globalized actors, I show how these are centered only on particular episodes of the past and shape thereby local memories by reinvigorating the latter.

Finally, I argue that social relations are in themselves shaped by sustained losses. New identities have been emerging from the shared trajectory of recurring displacements and emplacements. While shaping everyday interactions and being marked by an egalitarian moment, they exclude other islanders particularly along differing trajectories of the past.

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Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Hiermit versichere ich, Arne Harms, dass ich die vorliegende Dissertation selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel benutzt habe. Alle Stellen, die dem Wortlaut oder dem Sinn nach anderen Werken entnommen worden sind, habe ich unter Angabe der Quelle deutlich als Entlehnung kenntlich gemacht. Diese Arbeit wurde bisher weder ganz noch in Teilen als Prüfungsleistung vorgelegt.

Berlin, den 10.12.2013

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