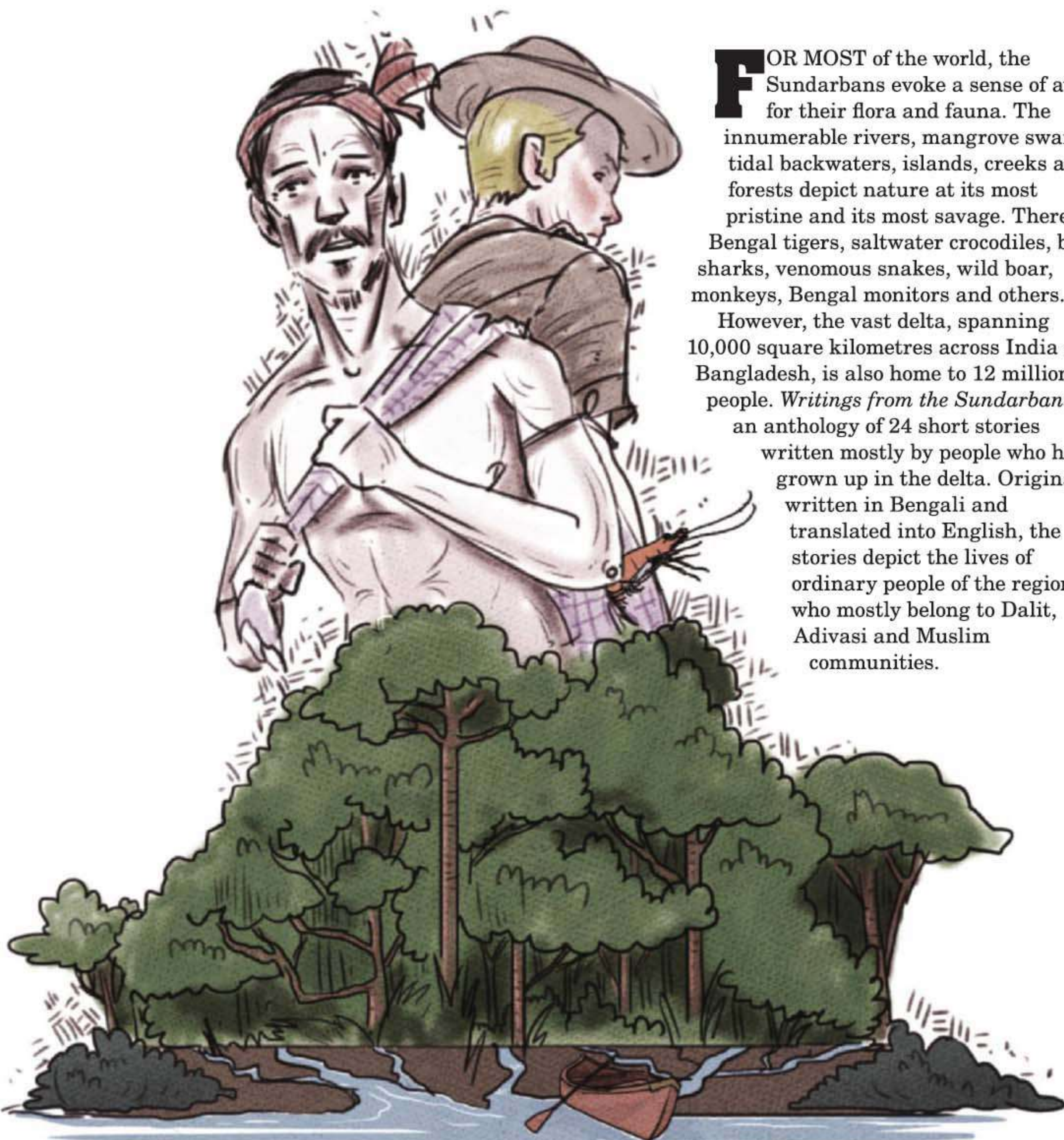


The chronicles of Sundarbans

STORIES OF DAILY BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL OF PEOPLE IN THE WORLD'S LARGEST DELTA

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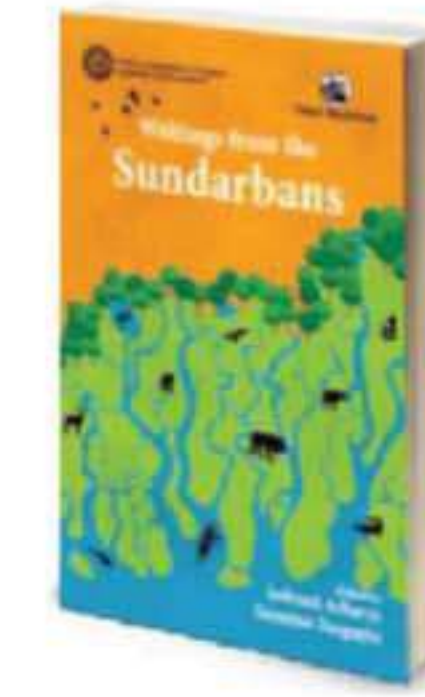
FOR MOST of the world, the Sundarbans evoke a sense of awe for their flora and fauna. The innumerable rivers, mangrove swamps, tidal backwaters, islands, creeks and forests depict nature at its most pristine and its most savage. There are Bengal tigers, saltwater crocodiles, bull sharks, venomous snakes, wild boar, monkeys, Bengal monitors and others. However, the vast delta, spanning 10,000 square kilometres across India and Bangladesh, is also home to 12 million people. *Writings from the Sundarbans* is an anthology of 24 short stories written mostly by people who have grown up in the delta. Originally written in Bengali and translated into English, the stories depict the lives of ordinary people of the region who mostly belong to Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim communities.

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Extremely poor, like their ancestors who settled in this region, the marginalised residents of the Sundarbans turn to the forests—their only source of nourishment and livelihood—mostly for eking out a living as farmers, fisherfolk, shrimp or prawn collectors, honey and wood gatherers. But the flora and fauna make the forest-based occupations quite dangerous. Men form parties and travel on boats deep into the forest to gather honey and precious timber of trees such as *goran* (*Cerios decandra*). They are in constant danger of being attacked by tigers, which is a recurring theme in the stories. Those who collect prawn seedlings are often taken by bull sharks or saltwater crocodiles. These deadly trips have made the Sundarbans the object of the aforementioned awe. People also cultivate paddy in the soil which can at any moment be damaged by erosion or saline water ingress.

HUMANITY AND NATURE

The anthology describes in detail the daily battle for survival of such marginalised populations. The constant battle against the forces of nature—personified by tigers, crocodiles, sharks and snakes—to nourish oneself is a constant theme in these stories. Sample these. In Niranjana Mondal's "The Shrimp-catchers of the Mangrove Forest", the protagonist Rakhil loses a leg to a shark as he is catching shrimp to sell and feed his large family. He is thinking of a better life for his family as the shark rips off his leg. Similarly, in "The Second Death" by Jaykrishna Kayal, Chhibas, a member of a party of wood collectors, is attacked by *boro miyaan*—a euphemistic term



Writings from the Sundarbans

Edited by Indranil Acharya,
Sayantan Dasgupta

Publisher: Orient BlackSwan
MRP: ₹690.00 | Pages: 232

for the tiger in the Sundarbans. He survives, only to be killed by an official's bullet after his boat is discovered by a forest patrol. In "The Will to Live", Biswajit Halder tells the story of Mahadeb, a wood collector who is killed by a tiger in the forest, leaving behind his wife and three young children. (The "tiger widows" of the Sundarbans have been extensively covered by the media. A February 5, 2024 report on *Down To Earth* talks about a landmark judgement by the Calcutta High Court to provide ₹5 lakh compensation to two such women.)

"Kanu", also by Halder, is about a 10-year-old boy whose father has to sell their cow and its calf to pay off their debts. The story ends with Kanu being dragged into the water, probably by a crocodile, while washing his net and his mother Motimala on the river bank being restrained by people as she attempts to retrieve his body. Indeed, women and children are constant motifs in these stories though only one, "My childhood: An Oral Narrative", has been authored by a woman, Archana Mondal.

The anthology also deals with sensitive topics. "The Chronicle of Hariya Dom" by Shyamal Kumar Pramanik talks about caste

discrimination prevalent in the region, while "Suleiman Fakir", also by him, highlights religious discord among communities. "Nostalgia or Stories of Roots and Soil" by Apares Mondal delves into the plight of refugees from East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) who have settled in the Sundarbans.

The region has long been on the margins of the Kolkata-centric Bengali imagination. As some of the stories in this book show, the people are considered illiterate, backward and uncultured. "The Maneater or Merely an Account of My Travel" by Bikas Kanti Middy and "Dokhno" by Das, deals with the stereotypes regarding Sundarbans' natives in the minds of Calcuttans.

Translation is never easy. Expressing sentiments conveyed by the language and culture of a people in another tongue requires skillful command over both the languages. And stories in this anthology do a decent job of getting the message of their unsung writers across to readers. It is the common humanity that we all share, the ties of family and the struggles of life which come across in these tales, that resonate with the lay reader.

Lately, the delta has started coming into the spotlight, a process that is often attributed to the publication of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* 20 years ago. The ongoing climate emergency, that has seen several cyclones batter the erosion-prone region—Aila (2009), Bulbul (2019), Amphan (2020) and Yaas (2021)—even as sea levels rise due to global warming, means the Sundarbans will be in the spotlight for years to come. [DTE](https://www.downtoearth.org.in)

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