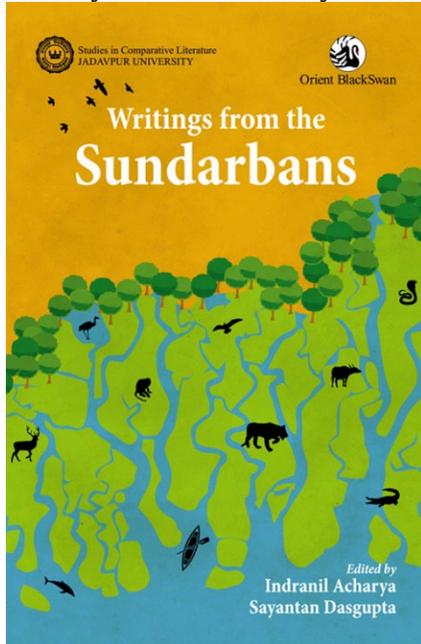


A Crocodile in the Matla River

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'Writings from the Sundarbans' is a new anthology that translates literary narratives composed in Bangla, in English. Here's an excerpt from the short story 'A Crocodile'

A crocodile in the Matla River ate Buri's mother. Kailash Morol came running to the village early in the morning to bring this news. Everyone in the village rushed to gather around his house on hearing it. He was still panting while streams of sweat ran down his body. His eyes were bloodshot.

'A terrible thing has happened. You will not see Buri's mother ever again.'

A howling Buri was sitting near his feet. She was a girl of about thirteen or fourteen. Her father had already passed away. Now even her mother had been dragged away by a crocodile, leaving her with no one to call her own.

'What will happen to me? Who will look after me?' Anxious questions about her future poured out of Buri as she wailed.

'What is the point of crying, little girl? Is your Kailash *khuro* not still alive?'
'But *khuro*, how did Buri's mother get dragged by a crocodile? Only last evening *khuri* came to visit our home. She chatted with our Puti's mother for a long time and even said "Why don't you find a good match for Buri? So quickly has Buri become of a marriageable age! A girl in bloom like her should not be sitting in her mother's home!"'
Kuber rambled without a pause.

'How can I say how Buri's mother ended up in the crocodile's mouth?', Kailash defended himself impatiently. 'Listen, Kuber! I had gone to Sridharpur market town. Stocks of goods were supposed to come to the godown there. I was sitting on the bank of the Matla when all of a sudden, in the hazy, gathering darkness, I could make out a woman getting into the water. After a while, she cried out—"Save me! Save me!"—and I realised that a crocodile had caught her. But in an instant, everything was again silent over the dark Matla waters.'

Kuber persisted with his queries. 'But why did the woman enter into the Matla waters so late in the evening, and what proof do you have that she was Buri's mother?'

'I don't know all that. But I'm certain that it was Buri's mother. We lived next to each other for so many years; you say I wouldn't be able to recognise her? I could tell that it was Buri's mother as soon as I heard her voice.'

Buri's crying had become more intense as she listened to her Kailash khuro's dreadful descriptions. Tears were pouring from the very depths of her heart. Buri's father had passed away when she was a mere child of five years. There had been some altercations with Kailash khuro over farming a two-*bigha* plot of land in the Gobindopur fields. Buri could not recollect all the details. She could only remember the blood-splattered corpse of her father lying in the field in Gobindopur. It was a horrible sight. Someone had crushed his head. Not a single bone in his body was intact.



The saltwater crocodile, found in the Sundarbans, is the largest crocodile species found in the world. Photo: rima das mukherjee/Shutterstock

Buri had been sobbing all this while but now she became quiet. A tight knot formed in her chest. She shrieked, 'Kuber kaka!'

'What is it, child?'

'Can you take me to the banks of the Matla once? A crocodile could never have killed my mother.'

Kailash now bellowed with rage, 'Am I lying then, you slut!'

'Shut up, uncle. Why are you abusing Buri? You're the headman of the village', Netai cautioned

Kailash, stepping forward from the crowd.

'How am I abusing her?' Kailash immediately toned down his aggression.

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It was the season for the rains. Dark clouds covered the entire sky as winds rushed in from the south-eastern corner. Would it rain today? The turbulent waters of the Matla were dashing at the banks like intoxicated cobras. Fishing boats were plying these turbulent waves with their nets in search of the hilsa fish. The boats of Ramjan Ali and Kuber floated next to each other.

Kuber shouted from his boat, 'Ramjan bhai, have you seen the sky? There might be a storm coming this evening. We should fold our nets soon.'

'Yes, Kuber bhai. I think so too.' The wind seemed to be getting stronger and clouds were rushing through the sky like dark giants.

The fishing boats milled around the piers of the Sridharpur market town. In this market, Kailash Mondol was a wholesaler of fish; he had been the only big trader of fish in the market for a long while. But Ghanashyam Das had recently set up his shop in the market. The man was able to buy all the stock from fishermen by paying high prices. Kailash Mondol found this insolence on the part of Ghanashyam Das quite intolerable. But the man obviously had money from the time he used to smuggle goods to Bangladesh through the deep forests of the Sundarbans. Kailash Mondol was not a novice at this game either. He too had lots of experience in the smuggling business.

Kuber's boat soon reached the market pier. Many other boats crammed close to his. An inky darkness had spread over the entire sky. So intense was the darkness that you could not see anything even a few feet away. The wind had also started to pick up by now. The Matla seemed to be seething.



Fishing along the creeks and streams of the Sundarbans is one of the main livelihoods of the people living around the mangrove forest. Photo: r-d-p/Shutterstock

A large brick room with a double-gabled roof stood adjacent to Kailash Mondol's shop. A hurricane lamp with a low flame was casting a faint glow in the room. A window had

been left open in it. Through that window, the inside of the room could be barely made out in the low light. Kuber could see Kailash and Biharicharan discussing something as they stood facing each other.

Sometimes Biharicharan would roar with laughter and the strains of that laughter would reach Kuber's ears. He somehow felt suspicious. Kailash Morol should not be in his shop so late in the evening. He must be plotting something; the man was rather crooked.

Darkness seemed to be descending with the approaching wind at an alarming rate. Maybe a storm would soon rise. Bolts of lightning were ripping the pitch-black sky apart while the clouds roared like lions. Kuber sat quietly in his boat. 'What are you thinking so intently, boatman?', Golok asked him. Golok had worked in Kuber's boat for a long time. He was approaching his fifties but his hair and beard had already turned white. He had no family to call his own, neither had he married. His life revolved around Kuber's boat. Kuber had tried to convince him to get married and start a family but Golok turned a deaf ear to all his urgings. All he would say is that it was better this way as there was no one to hold him back in life. Kuber had also stopped pushing. Sometimes, however, even Golok felt that it would have been better if he got married—maybe he would have had some peace in his life. He still remembered Kusum's pretty face although it was such a distant memory. Golok was then a young man of twenty and Kusum had been just fourteen. She would often come to Golok's house with her mother. God alone knew what she chatted about so incessantly with Golok. He remembered one particular day often. Ranihati's Charak fair was very popular. People from dozens of villages would come to participate in it. One day, Kusum suddenly came and asked him to take her to the fair. Golok vividly remembered holding hands with her as they walked through the fair. . . rode the Ferris wheel. After suffering from fever for three days, the same Kusum had passed away. Golok pulled himself out of his reveries. Why was he having all these thoughts?

Kuber was still sitting silently.

'What are you thinking so deeply, boatman?'

Kuber did not answer. He was still trying to understand what Kailash Mondol was plotting so late at night. Kuber would often have anxious thoughts about his wife Lokhkipriya at home. She would be waiting with her children anxiously for him to return. The times were not very good. Everywhere there was fear and dread. No one could foresee what would happen to them. Kuber thought about Buri's mother. How did she end up getting eaten by a crocodile? He still could not believe it; it seemed impossible as though this was a story made up by Kailash Morol.

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