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Ecologies of capture in Bangladesh's Sundarbans:

Predations on a climate frontier

ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between climate change and criminal predation? Bangladesh's Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, has, over the past decade, emerged as a climate frontier. It is a space viewed not only as a climate hot spot but also as a zone where control and opportunity emerge out of friction between long-standing political economies, new conservation interventions, and the materialities of the mangrove forest. Concomitantly, those who work in the Sundarbans have reported a dramatic increase in banditry and kidnapping. This article proposes the concept of an "ecology of capture" to chart the articulations between such kidnappings and other attempts to control rents, resources, and territory. Seen through the lens of capture, the Sundarbans highlights how the global rush to secure climate hot spots against degradation and displacement produces new configurations of expropriation and exploitation. [*climate change, piracy, capture, conservation, Sundarbans, Bangladesh*]

বিমূর্ত

জলবায়ু পরিবর্তনের সাথে অপরাধ প্রবনতার সম্পর্ক কি? পৃথিবীর সবচেয়ে বড় ম্যানগ্রোভ বন - বাংলাদেশের সুন্দরবন, গত এক দশকে একটি জলবায়ু ফ্রন্টিয়ার হিসেবে আবির্ভূত হয়েছে। এটি এমন একটি স্থান যেটি শুধু জলবায়ু হটস্পট-ই না বরং এখানে দীর্ঘস্থায়ী রাজনৈতিক অর্থনীতি, নব্য সংরক্ষণমূলক হস্তক্ষেপ, এবং ম্যানগ্রোভ বনের বস্তগত সম্পদের দ্বন্দ্ব এই অঞ্চলটি একই সাথে নিয়ন্ত্রণ এবং নতুন সুযোগ লাভের অঞ্চল হিসেবে আবির্ভূত হয়েছে। একই সাথে, যারা সুন্দরবনে কাজ করেন তাদের মতে সুন্দরবনে সাম্প্রতিক সময়ে ডাকাতি এবং অপহরণ ব্যাপকহারে বৃদ্ধি পেয়েছে। এ ধরনের অপহরণ, এলাকার নিয়ন্ত্রণ, এবং সম্পদ ও খাজনার মধ্যে অন্তর্নিহিত সম্পর্ক বোঝার জন্য এই গবেষণা পক্ষে "Ecology of Capture/ বাস্তুসংস্থানের দখলদারিত্ব" ধারণাটিকে প্রস্তাব করা হয়েছে। দখলদারিত্বের দৃষ্টিতে দেখলে, পৃথিবীব্যাপী তীব্রবেগে চলমান জলবায়ু হটস্পটসমূহ অবক্ষয় এবং স্থানচ্যুতি রোধে নেয়া পদক্ষেপ গুলো কিভাবে নতুন করে সম্পদ বাজেয়াপ্তকরণ এবং শোষণের চিত্র তুলে ধরে তার একটি উৎকৃষ্ট উদাহরণ হলো সুন্দরবন। [জলবায়ু, ডাকাতি, দখলদারিত্ব, সংরক্ষণ, সুন্দরবন, বাংলাদেশ]

It is January 2018, and I am sitting with Riton, my research assistant, on a rickety dock in Khalia Chok, a small Bangladeshi village on the fringe of the Sundarbans and the India-Bangladesh border.¹ We are chatting with Shotish, a jack-of-all trades in the mangroves. Sometimes he works as a boatman for tourists who come to see the world's largest remaining mangrove forest, a World Heritage site under imminent threat from both climate change and industrialization. But more often he works inside the forest itself as a honey collector, fisherman, or crab collector. We are talking about the everyday challenges of eking out a living from the mangroves. These challenges are, unsurprisingly, myriad. But they are also in flux. The environmental and political impacts of climate change are reworking this landscape in ways that complicate life for people like Shotish. But other dynamics are also at play. "Now the problem for us is that there are more *dakats* [bandits]," Shotish tells us. Contrasting *dakats* with the Sundarbans's most notorious killer, the Royal Bengal Tiger, he observes, "People don't fear tigers. No one fears tigers. If we are alert, is there any kind of animal who will come near to us? But the *dakats*, if they catch you, then you will have to pay one lakh taka [about US\$1,200]. If they can catch *one boat*, they will take a lakh. They collect this money from us."

This is a common refrain among those who depend on the Sundarbans for their livelihood throughout the Khulna Division of Bangladesh (see Figure 1). The mangroves are a harsh and difficult place to make a living. There are a range of difficulties. Some result directly from climate and environmental change—increasingly frequent cyclones; more people working in the Sundarbans; increasing soil salinity, which makes agriculture more difficult; and the changing availability of marine life as saline balances shift in the delta's rivers. Some difficulties—such as increasingly strident policies regulating who can fish the Sundarbans, how they may do so, and when—are attempts to safeguard the Sundarbans from anthropogenic change. But now a central concern is the risk of capture by *dakats*. *Dakat* broadly means "bandit" and is often translated as "pirate" in the English-language press.² *Dakati* refers to the business of



Figure 1. The Bengal delta and the Sundarbans region. (Amanda Henley, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

being a dakat. It has a rich history in South Asia, articulating both criminality—exploitation, extortion, the control of various business cartels, and more—and anti-colonial and anti-state social banditry.³ My use of the term here follows its broader use in the Sundarbans region, where *dakat* refers, primarily, to kidnapping by gangs of men navigating the Sundarbans's waterways in swift-moving boats.

Contemporary concerns in Bangladesh about dakati are at once unsurprising and puzzling. Organized criminal activity in the Sundarbans has a long history, and dakat groups operating under its murky canopy have regularly appeared as bogeymen for both the colonial and post-colonial state (Chakrabarti 2009; Ghosh 2014; Greenough 1998; Roy 2015). What is more surprising, though, is that dakati not only persists but is also, apparently, on the rise.

This despite the mangroves' increasing regulation through regimes of environmental conservation and more conventional forms of policing and monitoring. The dynamics of encounters with dakats are markedly similar. Fishermen operate in boats of three to six people. When their boats are accosted by dakats, one or sometimes two fishermen are taken and held hostage. They are released when the remaining fishermen pay a ransom (*mukhtipan*) via bKash, Bangladesh's ubiquitous mobile banking platform. The amount demanded varies—I have heard of ransoms as low as 10,000 taka (about US\$120) and as high as Shotish's quoted one lakh. But in any case the procedures are similar.

The rising threat of capture by dakats has become an omnipresent concern, layered on top of and articulating with the other difficulties of working in the mangroves. Tracing the concerns of fishermen like Shotish, dakats move throughout this article.⁴ But this is not an article about—or only about—banditry in the conventional sense. This is because one cannot understand dakati today without attending to the broader spectrum—and multiple forms—of capture that are now reshaping the Sundarbans and life within it. Capture is a signature condition of this climate frontier, a space where patterns of extraction, territorial control, and regulation are increasingly framed against the realities and anticipations of climate change. Here, environmental NGOs seek to capture and secure the space of the Sundarbans for conservation and the future of “humankind”—often encouraging and aiding state actors to capture those who work within its boundaries. Fishermen seek to capture resources such as honey, fish, crab, and timber from the mangroves, surviving through small-scale but environmentally deleterious resource extraction. Forest officials regularly capture fishermen, sometimes demanding that they pay bribes or suffer jail time and the confiscation of their boats, the means of fishermen's livelihoods. NGO and public resources meant for alternative livelihood training and other development schemes in the delta are winnowed away through elite capture. Paramilitary forces seek to make the Sundarbans “safe” for conservation and tourism, and in doing so capture—and sometimes kill—dakats themselves. At broader scales, the very delta region appears as a contested zone where contending forces struggle to capture the delta's present in order to enact their various visions of the climate-affected future (Cons 2020). While the ethical logics and imperatives of all these forms may differ, the delta region at large is a veritable ecology of capture.

Capture as phenomenon and analytic

Here, “capture” is a broad analytic for tracing predatory spatial strategies that deploy force to take humans, animals, resources, and territories into captivity for various ends. In using “capture” this way, I have in mind a different goal

from that of the rich literature on social banditry and on piracy's relationship to sovereign power.⁵ Building on recent work that takes hunting and captivity as a lens for exploring contemporary life, I frame capture as an elementary form of power, one that is integral to frontier space. In this mode of predation, one seeks not to kill, or only to kill, but to seize and control. The dynamics of dakati represent only a single, though particularly revealing, entry point into the ecology of capture in the Sundarbans. Capture encompasses literal practices of capture (removing fishermen from boats), but it also encompasses the forcible capture of rents and resources (Li 2018), the more-than-human networks of hunting and capture that constitute life and livelihoods in the mangroves (Ogden 2011), and projects of capturing and controlling territory—in this case an amphibious delta landscape, as unruly as it is vulnerable (Krause 2017). Capture, as friends like Shotish helped me understand, brings into relation a set of mutually distinct processes of controlling the Sundarbans—conservation, policing, development, dakati, and more.

The global rush to address climate change has provided both impetus and opportunity for a range of territorial reconfigurations (e.g., Cons 2018; Günel 2019; Vaughn 2017; Zee 2017). Exploring such reconfigurations through the lens of capture offers one way to map how territorial (and other) forms of control are disturbed, enmeshed, and reconfigured in spaces that are increasingly at the heart of debates over climate change. Multiple threats of capture mark the terrain of life in such zones. Attending to their overlaps and articulations reveals interrelationships between, for example, regimes of climate change-related development and the territorial politics of dakati. Exploring entangled forms of capture thus provides clues to the complex interlinkages of political economies; territorial regimes of rule; interspecies predation; and the relationships between policies, law, and the forms of life they seek to regulate.

To consider capture in this way is timely. Hunting and predation, long central preoccupations of anthropological theory, have reemerged as core concerns in political and environmental anthropology (De Leon 2015; Dua 2019b; Mathur 2020; Ogden 2011; O'Neill 2019). Challenging explorations of neoliberalism as abandonment, new work on hunting (particularly the hunting of humans) demands that we see predation—whether in the form of piracy, environmental management, border enforcement, drone warfare, or the policing of migrant bodies—as integral to both historical forms of state power and to contemporary life (Chamayou 2012; Mbembe 2019; O'Neill 2017). Taking up this call to reexplore predation and its consequences, a wave of recent work has traced the human and more-than-human implications of hunting through the lens of captivity (Doughty 2019). Focusing on issues ranging from abduction to incarceration, such scholarship asks how captivity structures policy and policing regimes, technology,

and political and popular imaginations (Benjamin 2019; Gomez-Temesio 2018). In this work, captivity narratives emerge as dense sites from which to explore social memories and hidden forms of power (Lepselter 2016). In a recent provocation on captivity, Kevin O’Neill and Jatin Dua write, “Captivity—as event, description, and ultimately an analytic—provokes us to consider anew the complex contours of violence and economy, affect and agency, and bondage and freedom” (O’Neill and Dua 2017, 5). Captivity, they suggest, provides a lens to rethink broader discussions about the interrelationships between criminality, politics, and economy today (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Nordstrom 2007; Roitman 2004).

Building on these insights, “capture” provides a useful and allied analytic to “captivity.” Capture asks us to explore how things are captured and to what end. In contrast to captivity, it attends to how power is imbricated with terrain and geography, how various opportunities for exploitation emerge, and, most importantly here, how various forms of capture overlap with each other to produce surprising new configurations of exploitation and expropriation. On the one hand, capture turns our attention to territory and how certain spaces—choke points, frontiers, shifting landscapes—enable seizure and control (Carse et al. 2020; Li 2018). On the other hand, it focuses attention on predation, the means and ends of taking things captive—a reality brought home to me by how often people like Shotish measure the high risk of being captured by dakats against the comparatively low risk of tiger attacks.⁶ Moreover, the concept of capture demands that we ask how those who are captured understand both the predicaments of and the relationships between multiple forms of predation (Dua 2019b).

The intimate interlinkages between different forms of capture, in their often multiscale and multispecies nature, constitute an ecology that is constantly in flux (Ogden 2011). Shifts in one dynamic within such zones often fundamentally change who and what are the objects of capture (the captured) and who or what do the capturing. Forms of capture often appear hierarchical (more powerful actors capture less powerful ones), but the microdynamics of capture carried out by a range of subaltern and more-than-human actors also undermine and transform attempts by states and international agencies to capture and manage space (Dunn and Cons 2014). Capture, thus, cannot be understood only as a complete act or a singular event. It is a dynamic process in which new and old relations of compulsion and control are worked out, reshaped, and transformed.

This is especially true in the protean, vulnerable landscapes of the Sundarbans. Regularly marked as a “ground zero” of global warming, this climate frontier is increasingly overdetermined by competing claims, demands, imaginations, and projects seeking to capture space, people, and

resources. Arguably, such dynamics are characteristic of parks, conservation zones, and protected areas the world over.⁷ Indeed, much of the history of conservation has been written as a history of “predatory care” (Pandian 2001)—the interlinkage between biopolitical and ecological protection and sovereign violence. In the face of global concerns over climate change—as exemplified by the rush to implement carbon-capture programs and more-stringent conservation regimes—dynamics of predatory care in ecologically vulnerable zones are intensified. The Sundarbans exemplifies the ways that this global rush to secure climate hot spots against futures of degradation and displacement produce new, surprising, and unintended configurations of capture and exploitation. Crucial to understanding contemporary dakati in the Sundarbans is how multiple projects of capturing the mangroves have helped produce the forest space as a frontier where climate and law and order often unintentionally assemble new opportunities for exploitation and crime.

Capture on the climate frontier

Mounting global concern about climate change has generated a range of new dynamics, competing meanings, and projects in and around the Sundarbans. In doing so, they have altered the ecology of capture in this frontier zone. Layered on top of other long-standing political economies and ecologies, they have recursively assembled the mangroves as an emergent kind of resource frontier (Cons and Eilenberg 2019; Middleton 2019; Rasmussen and Lund 2018)—a climate frontier (Paprocki 2019). In other words, the Sundarbans and the delta in which it is situated are a space where opportunity, extraction, and expropriation are organized loosely through friction between anticipatory logics seeking to address global warming, long-standing patterns and regimes of territorial control, and the material realities of delta ecology. These imaginations brush against local practices of survival and making a living in an often-inhospitable climate. As with other emergent resource frontiers, struggles to capture and capitalize on these new opportunities produce terrains laden with risk and violence, especially for those whose livelihoods depend on the forest (Li 2018; Watts 2018). It is out of this frame that new configurations of dakati emerge.

The Sundarbans has long been managed as a “vast wetland frontier” (Greenough 1998, 263). Throughout the region’s colonial and postcolonial history, the mangroves have been regularly framed as a zone of illegibility, one where competing projects seeking to impose territorial rule have been complicated by the mangroves’ protean nature. It has also served as a space of opportunity for many actors to capture resources of various kinds—timber, wildlife, fish, honey, smuggled goods crossing the border from India, and more. Further, it has been a source of refuge—a space

that has offered alternative forms of livelihood in times of political and economic turmoil. It is a space that seems to simultaneously attract, call out for, and defy attempts at regulation and control. Following Anna Tsing, we can aptly describe it as a frontier at “an edge of space and time: a zone of not yet—not yet mapped, not yet [successfully] regulated” (Tsing 2003, 5100).

Dakati, as noted above, has a long history on this frontier. In postcolonial Bangladesh, the practice of dakati has waxed and waned in articulation with both the region's frontier dynamics and broader shifts in the country's political and economic landscape. Dakati in the Sundarbans was once a hereditary business.⁸ But this seems to have changed alongside of the tremendous shifts in the region's political economy after the 1971 Liberation War, in which Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan. During the war, several units of *Mukti Bahini* (Liberation Fighters) were stationed in the Sundarbans—using the cover of the mangroves as a base from which to attack the Pakistani army. After the Liberation War, one of these units, headed by Major Ziauddin Ahmed, set up a syndicate that continues to organize and control much fishing business in the region to this day.⁹ This form of resource capture and extraction begot other forms of capture. New dakat groups emerged to prey on fishermen working the mangroves and the Bay of Bengal, extracting rents and protection money from individuals and boats on a territorial basis. The connection between dakat groups and the fishing syndicate is hazy. Some say that dakat groups clashed with the syndicate, while others suggest that the syndicate controlled both dakats and fishermen. Regardless, the post-Liberation War Sundarbans is and has been a complex resource frontier where the predatory dynamics of both fishing and dakati exist in mutual relation.

In much of postindependence Bangladesh dakati appears to have enjoyed a more or less permissive relationship with the state. Many, including former dakats themselves, told me that dakat groups had financial links with powerful businessmen and government officials who, for a share of dakat profits, helped them manage business arrangements outside the mangroves. Many further report that dakat groups enjoyed a close relationship with forest officials inside the mangroves, providing shelter and bribes that allowed them to pursue their work largely unmolested by the state.

This permissive relationship began to shift with the rise of climate change-related programming in the Sundarbans. Over the past decade, an increase in the global awareness of climate change, together with the recognition of Bangladesh's acute vulnerability to many of its effects, has led to a massive increase in development and conservation funding in the region (Cons 2018, 2020; Paprocki 2018). This has been particularly marked in the Sundarbans, which is vulnerable to a range of climate change effects and which

protects urban areas in the delta from cyclones and storm surges. Awareness of this has led to a wave of new conservation programs and policies. Many of these new initiatives simply intensify long-standing conservation initiatives in the forest. But alongside this new wave of funding there has emerged a set of programs and policies designed to improve policing, monitoring, and transparency within the mangroves.

Such programs affect more than just the criminal networks working in the forest. The mangroves provide a critical livelihood for many who live along its boundaries and work within it to extract fish, honey, timber, and crab from the forests. This kind of resource extraction has a long history (Ghosh 2014; Iqbal 2014). Yet in the past few decades the delta's agricultural (primarily rice-based) labor market has collapsed, concomitant with the rise in brackish water shrimp aquaculture in the delta region. Shrimp, grown for export, requires significantly less labor than rice production. Moreover, shrimp farmers have regularly captured government, or *khas*, land that landless laborers rely on for grazing animals, gathering resources, and gardening (Paprocki 2019; Paprocki and Cons 2014). This has pushed many people living along and near to the Sundarbans to pursue work in the forest. At the same time, a major focus of much conservation and climate change-related policy making seeks to eliminate small-scale resource extraction from the protected forest (e.g., Ahmed et al. 2019). Such programming represents a vision of the Sundarbans in which the mangrove forest figures as a critical resource in need of preservation at all costs for humanity at large, and humans who live along and have historically worked within the forest are figured as an environmental threat (Cons 2020).

The goal of these programs is to protect the mangroves by gradually reducing the extraction of their resources. They accomplish this through a range of techniques, including banning the collection of timber, reducing the number and duration of permits available for fishing, closing the forest to fishing during certain months to allow marine life to spawn, banning nets of a certain size, and more. Whether or not these programs achieve their goal, they place much of the burden of conservation on communities that rely on the mangrove forest for their livelihoods. These new conservation policies are enforced by forest officials who have the power to levy fines, confiscate boats, and file legal cases. Most fishermen describe them as “flexible” in their willingness to enforce these laws. The policies are also enforced by new armed forest patrols, known as “SMART” Teams, which are run through the Forest Department. These teams are funded through national and international conservation programs whose mandate is to protect the Sundarbans from anthropogenic ecological degradation. Most fishermen describe SMART Teams as not flexible in the least.¹⁰

Dakat territories

“Last year, dakats took me from my boat,” says Babul, an elderly crab fisherman who has spent a life working the mangroves. “My brother and I were fishing together. We spent the night in a narrow canal inside the forest. At night, we put a plastic tarp over the boat to keep warm. [...] When the dakats came near to our boat, they started beating on that tarp. They started calling, ‘Hey, get up! Hey, give me money.’” Babul tells us that initially, the dakats planned to take his brother hostage. But Babul, seeing how terrified his brother was, persuaded them to take him instead. During his capture, he was made to cook and to paddle the boats for his captors. He passed sleepless nights, shivering in the winter cold. All the time, he feared imminent violence and death. “They took me and held me on a small boat ... for three or four days. [...] What kind of painful way I spent my time, I could not finish if I spoke to you about that experience.”

Babul’s story is typical of people who fish the Sundarbans. Almost all the fisherman I have spoken to in the delta region have either personally been captured by dakat groups (often multiple times) or had members of their family held for ransom at least once. Many share similar stories of the terror of being captured, the deprivations of being held, and the financial burdens such encounters place on families that must cobble together ransom money from already-lean budgets. But if the experience of capture is common, there is much to suggest that it is also dynamic and shifting.

Historically, dakats served more or less as strongmen in particular locales in the Sundarbans. Fishermen would pay these groups for protection and for the right to fish in their territory—materialized in the form of renewable passes. These passes were purchased from representatives of dakats living in towns and villages surrounding the Sundarbans. Fishermen would then carry these passes with them to show to dakats if they were intercepted inside the jungle. Further, fishermen would also often help dakat groups by transporting food and other goods for them. This relationship speaks not only to a system whereby dakat groups provided security for fishermen, but also to the relative fluidity between “fishermen” and “dakats” identities and jobs. Moreover, it speaks to a dynamic of patronage and rule within the mangroves that is, or was, fundamentally territorial.

Zia Alam, a retired dakat, explained this dynamic to us as a question of managing and controlling space. “Inside the jungle,” he said, “the biggest problem is fighting between groups. If there are two groups in one place, they will fight until none remain. So groups defend the area they control by any means. When another group comes, they will start shooting. We had an area. And mainly we did not leave it.” This system allowed fishermen to know exactly whose territory they fished in. Zia continued,

The fishermen knew what area was controlled by who, so they knew who to give money to. They knew it even better than we did. There were permitted fishermen and also nonpermitted fishermen. If a nonpermitted fisherman came before us, definitely he would have to pay us money. If he could show a pass, he would be able to survive, otherwise.

Alam’s explanation underscores the existence of a profoundly territorial moral economy of dakati (Scott 1976; Thompson 1993). Until recently, dakat groups’ principal livelihood involved extracting various forms of rents from within the territory they controlled. Such territories were well defined, mapping to particular rivers and spaces within the forest. The boundaries of such territory, according to Alam, were established and occasionally contested in skirmishes with rival dakat groups. The relative size of a territory was proportionate to a group’s comparative size, strength, and resources (guns, boats, and networks outside the mangroves).

The management and control of territory through such protection regimes is in no way unique to the Sundarbans. It mirrors legal, illegal, and paralegal strategies employed by syndicates throughout South Asia and elsewhere (Michelluti et al. 2018). Moreover, the capture and control of fields, canals, and rivers for various ends is a common practice throughout the delta region (Cons 2020; Sur 2016). Yet, if dakati in the Sundarbans has historically been a territorial affair, today this dynamic has changed. The emergence of the Sundarbans as a ground zero of climate discourse has led to intense international pressure to manage and secure the mangroves from unlicensed intruders. Further, after a terrorist attack in Dhaka in 2016, the ruling Awami League launched a massive, countrywide law-and-order crackdown, often carried out by the notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)—a paramilitary force infamous for killing those it arrests in “crossfire” (Human Rights Watch 2006). These displays of force had a range of intended and unintended consequences. But one important dynamic in the crackdown was to establish legitimacy by reasserting territorial control through reclaiming a monopoly on predation (Chamayou 2012; Weber 2004). Not surprisingly, a target of these law-and-order operations was the Sundarbans, whose territorial ambiguity has long been a source of anxiety for the postcolonial state. The last few years have, consequently, seen a stepping-up of policing in the Sundarbans by both RAB and the newly formed and well-equipped, internationally funded SMART Teams (see Figure 2). Both these groups target dakats. It is an open question whether such crackdowns are successful in their goal of eliminating dakati. Yet they have succeeded in significantly reconfiguring the territorial basis of dakat activity inside the mangroves.



Figure 2. SMART Teams speedboat, 2020. (Jason Cons) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Dakat groups are now smaller and control less area than in the past, but their predation has become fiercer. Whereas dakat groups used to consist of 18 to as many as 50 people, they now more commonly have five to six members. Because of the increased risk and smaller number of fishermen that each group can target, dakats have dramatically increased their ransom demands. Previously, most fishermen agreed, demands were reasonable—a few hundred taka (a few US dollars). Additionally, the permit system allowed fishermen to operate in relative safety inside the forest. Now groups are demanding amounts that far outstrip fishermen's incomes. As Alam explained, "They cannot control a big space. They catch a few people, but they have to collect lots of money. They have to torture people to get it. If we captured 10 fishermen and we collect one taka per head, we earned 10 taka. But now they have to try to collect the same amount of money from two guys." This places tremendous pressure on fishermen in the Sundarbans. Before, fishermen could predictably work within a single large

dakat territory, but new, smaller dakat groups can control only small territories that often shift. Even where such territories exist, they have little meaning in terms of protection and enforcement. As one fisherman told me, "You may run into one group on one side of the canal and negotiate your release, but then you will run into another at the other end and have to start the whole negotiation again." Thus, old moral economies of fishing have been broken down by the pressure wrought by national concerns over law and order and by international concerns over the planetary threat of climate change. In the process, the Sundarbans has emerged as a new terrain of uncertainty, threat, and exploitation.

The social life of capture (and release)

Kidnapping is only one form of illegal activity that unfolds under the mangrove canopy. As many have traced,

the forest hosts a range of activities, such as illegal logging, tiger poaching (for the lucrative international trade in animal parts), deer poaching (for food), and smuggling—guns, narcotics, fertilizer, cattle, and more—across the India-Bangladesh border (Ahmed et al. 2019; Saif and MacMillan 2016). Residents of the region, and indeed dakats themselves, firmly distinguish between these activities—described as *do nombori* (lit. “second number” or “illicit”) business, and dakati, which typically refers to the kidnapping of fishermen. The distinction between dakati and *do nombori* is fuzzy at best. Most of the region’s journalists, government officials, and residents understand dakat groups to be engaged in all these activities. Further, an expanded view of illicit activities in the Sundarbans considerably muddies the distinctions between who is and is not engaged in dakati. Some fishermen supplement their meager earnings through *do nombori* activities, sometimes in collusion with dakat groups that can supply rapid and armed transportation through the mangroves and other forms of protection.

Dakats whom I have spoken to vehemently deny involvement in *do nombori*, especially any illicit activities that could be interpreted as harming mangrove ecologies. Some Dakats have surrendered their guns to the government and given up dakati (more on the process of surrender below). Surrendered dakats often style themselves as eco-bandits, heroically intervening to stop poachers and to punish fishermen who use illegal fishing techniques. By framing themselves as eco-bandits, they reproduce popular and scholarly imaginations of social banditry as a protest against the exploitation of land and resources (Hobsbawm 2000). While such claims may be true, what dakats are unwilling to discuss and admit to in my conversations with them is shaped, in part, by the terms of their surrender. Surrendered dakats are typically given amnesty for kidnappings, but they may in the future face charges for murder, rape, and other crimes not covered or admitted to when they surrendered, such as poaching and cross-border smuggling.

Dakat groups are typically organized around a single, often-charismatic leader. The groups take on the names or the nicknames of these leaders. For example, a powerful dakat group in the 2000s was known as Master Bahini (Master’s Army). Another range was controlled by two powerful groups run by brothers, one known as Raju Bahini (Raju’s Army) and one as Choto Bhai Bahini ([Raju’s] Little Brother’s Army). These groups live inside the Sundarbans, shifting from place to place, though occasionally establishing more permanent bases. Dakat groups also rely on connections outside the forest for their survival. They work through middlemen in towns and urban areas in the Sundarbans region, and these middlemen provide them with goods, such as firearms and food, and manage their finances, passing portions of their profits on to other powerful elites and gov-

ernment officials in the region to ensure dakati’s continued smooth working.

As a system of rent capture par excellence, dakati enables the capture of wealth through violence and occasionally lethal power (Li 2018). Like the Mafia system that Tania Li describes as thriving around palm oil plantations in Indonesia, the dakat system relies on both the materiality of the Sundarbans itself and a broader network of parties enmeshed in the region’s political economy. Dakati thrives in the Sundarbans in part because the mangroves are a shifting terrain, difficult to map and manage. In the Sundarbans, local knowledge of routes, navigation hazards, and temporalities of fishing and other kinds of resource extraction at once enable dakat groups to exploit local populations and to evade law enforcement. Retired dakats describe the ease with which forest officials could be monitored, bribed, and otherwise evaded. They claim that their situated knowledge of the mangroves’ damp landscape allowed them to move through the forest in ways that government officials categorically could not.

Dakati, of course, has its own sociality. Being a member of a dakat group is more than simply a form of predation. It is a way of life. Surrendered dakats I spoke with all described their current life as more peaceful than life in the jungle. Yet they also wax nostalgic for the community and freedom of dakat life. Women typically do not fish in the forest in Bangladesh, and they are not part of dakat groups.¹¹ Dakats I spoke with vehemently denied that they ever abducted women. And while dakats rely on women to maintain families and, often, businesses while they spend months and sometimes years in the forest, most scoffed at my questions about whether women ever participated in dakati. Consequently, dakat groups are intensely masculine spaces—hunters’ landscapes characterized by the displacement of women (Ogden 2011). Many former dakats speak of the powerful loyalties and brotherhoods that emerged in dakat groups. Some described their relationships as “sharing the same blanket.” Others readily talked about the pain of being estranged from families outside the mangroves, contrasting it with the forms of freedom experienced in the forest interior. In this sense, dakati resonates with social histories of piracy in which the pirate ship figures as a heterotopic space outside the strangling racial and class hierarchies of mainland life (e.g., Rediker 2011). Such socialities speak to the complexities of capture. Entering into the dakati system often involves a multifaceted interplay between forces of capture both inside and outside the mangroves.

The social category of dakat is much more fluid than official and media discussions make it out to be. Unsurprisingly, people often drift into and out of dakati as fortunes and opportunities change within the delta. Dakat groups are composed partly through village and kin networks, but

they also employ men who flee to the forest for other reasons. Joining dakat groups can be a way to escape various forms of trouble at home—legal, financial, and otherwise. Yet the very act of becoming a dakat itself often constitutes a form of capture. Consider, for example, Sayeed's story. Sayeed surrendered in 2016 and now works in the shrimp business. When Sayeed was in his late teens, he and his brother, who had gone into the mangroves to collect firewood, were accosted by dakats.

They took my younger brother, but they gave me a chance to become free. They told me, "Do not discuss anything with anybody. If you tell anyone what has happened here, we will kill your brother. Go and bring food for us." So I left the jungle and returned carrying food for them. After I returned, they said, "*Bhai* [brother], you cannot go now. You will have to stay here for two days. The day after tomorrow, you can go. We have some work that you need to help us with first." The next morning, they said, "*Bhai*, go to your house and bring some rice for us. After eating rice, we will free you both." So I again left the jungle. I went to the nearest village and took rice and chicken. I brought these things back to them. Then they said, "OK, when it is dark, in the evening, we will let you go." For 10 days, it went on like this, this kind *habijabi kaj* [inconsequential, small-job work].

When Sayeed and his brother finally were released, they found that their situation at home had changed. A neighbor in their village with whom Sayeed's family had a land dispute had begun to spread rumors that Sayeed had joined a dakat group. "Somehow, he realized we were captured by dakats. He told me, 'You have given food to dakats. Here everyone knows it. Now the police have made a case against you. Give me some money, and we will arrange a solution.'" Sayeed realized that he was trapped. Unable to pay the man his money and realizing that his situation at home was perilous, he decided he had no choice but to return to the Sundarbans to seek out his captors.

I entered the jungle alone after that. I had no fear for tigers or anything else. When I found them, I explained the situation, and they said, "OK, let's see if we can do anything for you." So I stayed. I started paddling the boat. They made me the boat driver as they went about taking other fishermen. But the people they were arresting knew me also. So the news spread that I was now working with dakats. I was a victim of the situation. [...] What could I do? I had no elder brother, I had no father who I could go to. And my younger brother and sister had no food. I had no relatives who would help our family.

Sayeed's captivity narrative outlines a recursive relationship between forms of capture inside and outside the

Sundarbans. Environmental change in the delta—linked to both climate change and the multidecade boom in shrimp aquaculture throughout the region (Paprocki and Cons 2014)—has pushed the margins for smallholders and landless families up to, and often past, the breaking point. Against this backdrop, land disputes, indebtedness, and legal troubles often push people into dakati—both as a means to escape legal troubles at home and as a way to provide for struggling families. Capture, thus, engenders and extends a set of relational social politics around land, law, and opportunity (Dua 2019a). Moreover, Sayeed's narrative hints at how release may never be complete; release and capture are dialectically entwined. In the Sundarbans release from capture may, and often does, simply open into other forms of capture and captivity.

There is an intimate relationship between what happens within the forest and communities that live on its fringe. Those who flee troubles in their home villages regularly encounter people from those communities in the mangroves. Such familiarity can make return and release even more difficult. As Sayeed sarcastically put it, "So when a problem was there, I came here. When I came here, a new problem was there. It was an excellent situation." Yet the politics of recognition in the forest carry dangers for those captured as well, and meeting someone you know in the mangroves is fraught with the risk of violence. One day, we asked a fisherman with whom we were discussing dakati if he knew a surrendered dakat who lived in a village adjacent to his own. He paused a minute, then solemnly replied, "I know him well, but if I saw him in the forest, I would not know him for any money." In other words, acknowledging that he knew and could identify his captor might expose him to more, and possibly lethal, violence. Such comments suggest that in moments of capture, recognition may produce as much terror as relief.

The dakati system thus involves a complex set of relations of capture, frontier, and territory. This reality clashes with how the mangroves are often imagined: as a space apart, a zone isolated from mainland lives. As with all frontiers, the Sundarbans does not exist in isolation (Ogden 2011). The various forms of capture that are interlaced throughout the delta demonstrate an entangled relationship between the forest interior and the communities that surround it. The Sundarbans are an edge space where imagination and materiality are fundamentally intertwined and multiple forms of rule overlap to produce a frontier terrain fraught with risk. This interplay is nowhere more dramatically apparent than in the relationship between forest management and dakati.

Wedged between dakati and the law

"You will have to pay in whatever way you can. If you cannot pay them [dakat groups], they will not give you a chance to

go.” We are sitting on a beach talking to a young man named Hassan as he re-tars the hull of a fishing boat.

They beat you mercilessly. They will hold you for four, five, six days, however long it takes [to receive the ransom]. During this time, if anything happens, if they face trouble with law enforcement teams, then you are finished. All will die. Suppose they face a RAB [Rapid Action Battalion] team. How will they [RAB] know who [on the dakat boat] has been captured and who has not? They don't know we are fishermen. When they start shooting, mainly it is the fishermen who die.

Hassan goes on to recount his own capture in sparse details. He tells us that while he was out fishing on a boat with three other fishermen, they were accosted by a dakat boat and forced into a smaller canal. There, Hassan was removed from the boat and held for six days. His captors demanded 50,000 taka, but through pleading, he bargained them down to 12,000 taka, an amount that the dakats then demanded from his family via bKash. While his family pulled together the funds, he worked for the dakat group, cooking, rowing the boat, whatever they demanded. When his family finally sent the money, he was put on another fishing boat, replacing another fisherman whom the dakats had taken for ransom, and sent home.

Dakat groups are constantly on the move. Their ability to move freely and their knowledge of the watery terrain allow them to avoid regular confrontations with law enforcement. Yet these confrontations do happen. The dakati system has persisted with little, or at best periodic, intervention from local law enforcement and politicians in post-colonial Bangladesh. It might be thought of as a paradigmatic example of Itty Abraham and Willem van Schendel's distinction between the illegal and illicit (the legally and socially maligned activity) and the illegal but licit (illegal but socially tolerated activity; Abraham and van Schendel 2005). With the emergence of new temporalities and anxieties over the mangroves' climatic vulnerability, however, dakats have reemerged to challenge not only legal but also political orders. In other words, dakats pose a new anthropogenic threat to both those *within* the mangroves and the mangroves themselves. Their free rein in the mangroves challenges imperatives and funding streams from international organizations and NGOs. Over the past five years, there have been increasingly regular reports in Bangladeshi media enumerating the deaths of dakats in encounters with RAB and other law enforcement groups. Often, the bodies of those killed are paraded as evidence that the Bangladesh government has reasserted its territorial power and monopoly on predation under the forest canopy. As Hassan's commentary suggests, these killings can often be indiscriminate. Who is to say whether those killed are captors or captives?

Yet, as Hassan narrates, there is a more intimate relationship between regulation and dakati in the mangroves. He tells us,

We have two problems. One is dakats. One is the Forest Department. Even if we catch fish by net [that is, legally], Forest Department officials tell us that we have captured them by poison [that is, illegally]. They will not believe what we tell them. Whatever they say is right, whatever we say is a lie. If they want to send us to the prison cell, they can, they have power. So we have two fears: dakats and forest officials.

In other words, for fishermen in the Sundarbans, capture by forest officials can be just as disastrous as capture by dakats.

Hassan's observations highlight one of the dynamics of increased dakati in the contemporary moment. New technologies such as bKash—widely available in Bangladesh since 2011—provide a means of payment that radically reduces dakat groups' risk of exposure. They now rely on digital money transfers and a steady circulation of boats through their territories rather than on setting up ransom-prisoner exchanges—moments when dakat groups are particularly vulnerable to interception by law enforcement. Such electronic banking technologies also reduce friction for criminal networks, which use them with impunity. While such technologies purport to offer security and transparency, as well as speed and convenience, fishermen are increasingly unwilling and unable to call on law enforcement for protection, since they believe that doing so is as likely to expose them to additional capture and exploitation by the police. This itself is linked to the profusion of new policies directed at the Sundarbans that reduce the number of legal fishing permits and place stringent limits on fishing practices—further criminalizing fishing livelihoods and exposing fishermen to new risks of capture not only by dakats but also by police and forest officials.

Fishermen in the Sundarbans have long operated on the margins of law in the forest. Yet the profusion of new attempts to preserve the Sundarbans for the future heritage of the region and the globe has further undermined their capacity to seek assistance from those who regulate the forest. On the one hand, these new policies often necessitate that fishermen break the law to make a living (Ahmed et al. 2019). Fishermen are often quite clear about the relationship between these policies and illegal activities in the Sundarbans. As one told me, “Without [government] fishing permits, what will we do? Will we and our families starve? So if we cannot get a permit, we will use other techniques.” Such techniques include everything from simply working in the Sundarbans without permits to poison fishing—in which fishermen dam small canals with fishing nets, flood them with pesticides, and collect the bodies of fish as the



Figure 3. Impounded fishing boats at the Forest Department Office, Joymonir, Bangladesh, 2016. (Jason Cons) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

tide goes out. In other words, new restrictions on fishermen's livelihoods have ripple effects along a multispecies scale of capture, reconfiguring relationships and strategies of predation and signaling ways that monopolies on predation, state or otherwise, are always partial and incomplete. On the other hand, these new policies have made it difficult for apprehended fishermen to prove their innocence. They are assumed guilty of violating forest policy, which can be difficult to disprove. This leads to the confiscation of valuable assets, such as boats, and to imprisonment, onerous fines, and blacklisting, which makes it impossible to obtain permits to legally work the mangroves in the future (see Figure 3). Fishermen further argue that this also increases the threat of forest officials who demand bribes and subject them to other forms of extortion. New laws and enforcement measures have, then, contributed doubly to increasing precarity for individuals and communities who live ad-

jacent to, and who rely on, the Sundarbans for survival. Such policies have criminalized fishermen and undermined people's ability to seek help from law enforcement (since everyone is at risk of being accused of violating forest law).

New forest policies, prompted by international and national concerns about the preservation of the Sundarbans in the face of climate change, appear to tighten a viselike grip on fishermen caught between forest officials and other law enforcement institutions on the one hand, and dakats on the other. The articulation between these two forms of capture is seen as overt by many fishermen, such as Mahir, an elderly man who spent his career working the mangroves. When I asked him if forest officials and dakats were connected, he said, "Of course. They have a good connection with each other. They [the forest officials] arrest poor fishermen and confiscate their goods. If they want to get at more powerful fishermen, like me, they will call the dakats

and tell them to take me.” Forest officials, not surprisingly, deny such connections. One expressed his disgust at the leniency of law enforcement, telling me that all dakats should simply be shot. Whether or not such forms of collusion exist between dakats and forest officials, Mahir’s comment highlights a central fact of life for fishermen in the contemporary Sundarbans: the distinction between law and dakati is ambiguous, and navigating it is becoming increasingly fraught with the risk of capture.

Capture and surrender

If international pressure around conservation and climate has dovetailed with political imperatives to tackle the challenge of dakati, not all approaches to addressing this challenge have involved paramilitary force. The 2014 Surrender program—organized in part through the advocacy efforts of a journalist named Mohsin ul-Hakim¹²—attempts to tackle the question of securing the mangroves by peacefully bringing the most notorious dakats out of the forest and back into their home communities. Dakats go through this in exchange for a significant cash settlement—upwards of one lakh taka—and provisional amnesty. The program sends a clear signal to the international community that Bangladesh is taking the question of protecting the Sundarbans seriously. The program has attracted, if not international fanfare, significant press coverage (BBC News 2017; Schwartzstein 2018). But just as importantly, it provides a way for the ruling Awami League (AL) party to signal its success at maintaining law and order—a question that arose with marked urgency in the context of the 2014 national elections, before and after which the AL suppressed opposition parties while a wave of extremist attacks swept the country.

Consequently, the Surrender program is a highly mediated affair that involves a public ritual in which dakat groups surrender themselves and their firearms to the home minister as members of law enforcement, journalists, and television crews look on. The Surrender program thus stages a performance of submission to state power (Sayer 1994), complete with an elaborate process of handing over firearms to police officials and government representatives standing behind garlanded tables and elaborate displays of captured weapons. The intent and meaning of the performance is clear—the act of surrender brings dakats back into the fold of subservience to government. Here, too, the dynamic of capture is apparent. Surrendered dakats described to me in detail the anxieties of the decision, the elaborate process of negotiating the terms of surrender with RAB, the fear that they might be killed by law enforcement rather than allowed to complete the ritual surrender, and the ongoing worry that the government would change its mind and decide to prosecute their crimes. Surrender and

release are as saturated with risk and terror as the act of capture itself.

The Surrender program has been presented as a highly successful government initiative. As of 2018, it had led to the surrender of 274 people composing 29 dakat groups, leading Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to declare the Sundarbans “pirate free” (*Dhaka Tribune* 2018). Many fishermen I spoke with in January 2020 suggested that dakati had decreased as a result of the Surrender program. The realities of surrender are, however, more complicated. Long after Hasina’s declaration, Bangladeshi papers continue to report encounters between RAB and dakat groups, and fishermen continue to be abducted in the mangroves. Some of these remaining groups may be suspicious of the government’s intentions. Yet some surrendered dakats suggest a more troubling outcome of the program. The allure of the cash settlement and amnesty, I was told, has encouraged some new dakat groups to form, and it has provoked them to increase the violence and frequency of kidnapping so that they can acquire the notoriety necessary to become eligible for surrender. The Surrender program, then, appears to highlight a moral hazard of capture—paradoxically necessitating an escalation of violence to secure amnesty from prosecution.¹³

Climates of capture

In this article, I have extended discussions on hunting and predation as key tropes of the contemporary by analyzing the ecology of capture in the Sundarbans. Focusing on dakati provides a suggestive vantage point from which to rethink predation and its relationship both to long-standing political economies and contemporary anxieties over a climate-affected future. Capture offers a useful analytic entrée into predatory dynamics in frontier space. Capture deepens our attention to the shifting dynamics of territory, seizure, and control, dynamics that are often particularly densely layered in frontier space. Capture, and the ecology thereof, help us see the entanglements among processes that superficially appear distinct.

In the frontier space of the Sundarbans—where distinctions between different forms of territorial rule can be as muddy as distinctions between different forms of matter—the overt and covert articulations between threats of capture are particularly marked. The emergence of, or shifts in, one mode of predation create new configurations of opportunity in a range of others. New regimes of conservation fueled by global anxieties about a warming world overlap with new priorities of law and order to unsettle and remake the territorial basis of dakati. Small-scale land grabbing and property disputes on the forest fringe force people to escape to and be captured by dakati groups. Policies that attempt to configure space to clarify who has the right to prey on whom or what (and, as importantly, how) are moments

when exploitation and opportunity are renegotiated and reentrenched—as fishermen turn to fishing with poison to navigate new conservation measures that keep them from legally fishing in the forest, they simultaneously become more vulnerable to predation by state agents. Thinking these processes through the lens of capture allows us to see them as at once articulating with each other and as part of a broader ecology. From *dakats* to forest officials to fishermen to resources within the mangroves, in the climate frontier of the Sundarbans, it appears to be capture all the way down.

Such dynamics are by no means unique to conservation projects or interventions seeking to manage climate change. But considering dakati in the Sundarbans opens ways to rethink how such programs become enmeshed with complex dynamics of capturing territory, rents, and resources. We might do well to understand climate interventions at once as forms of capture in their own right and as layered on top of old patterns and forms of capture. Not surprisingly, such new projects change, but rarely erase, long-standing ways of organizing and managing territory and space. To rethink the resultant terrain through the lens of capture places a different burden on ethnographic engagements with spaces like the Sundarbans. Capture orients attention toward the relationships between disparate forms of constraint, exploitation, and opportunity. As an analytic, it foregrounds how attempts to save and care for the most vulnerable spaces and beings of our world may entail new forms of capture. Exploring these dynamics opens a way of seeing frontier landscapes as alive with and assembled through a densely layered web of predatory and territorial practices.

Notes

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1. I use pseudonyms for all nonpublic figures in this article. Place names have not been changed.

2. People in the delta use the term *dakat* more or less interchangeably with the terms *jaaladosho* (water bandit) and *bonodosho* (forest bandit). For purposes of simplicity and because it is the most commonly used term, I use *dakat* in this article.

3. Much of the debate over banditry in colonial South Asia has hinged on the political relationship between *dacoits* and anti-state/anti-colonial resistance. See especially Ranajit Guha’s (1983) critique of Eric Hobsbawm’s (2000) characterization of social banditry as a “prepolitical” form of protest. For a summary discussion, see Wagner 2007.

4. I draw on fieldwork with fishermen and former dakats in the Sundarbans region from 2016 to 2020. These conversations concern issues that skirt legality. Retired dakats are willing to discuss the social life of dakati and the practices of kidnapping and ransom. They are more guarded about other criminal activities, the sexual violence that can accompany capture, and their movement across the India-Bangladesh border.

5. In much historical and anthropological research, piracy is often posed as a question of challenging or producing sovereign power (e.g., Benton 2005; Dawdy 2011; Heller-Roazen 2009) or as articulating subject positions within or against the state—posing pirates as Hobsbawmian social bandits (crime as a protest against state power), as paragons of capitalist and neoliberal logics (Dawdy and Bonni 2012), or as figures inherent to globalization and the circulation of capital (e.g., Dua 2019b; Heyman 1999; Warren 2003).

6. Tigers are perhaps the most enigmatic predators of the Sundarbans. As such, their preservation and their occasional attacks on humans are an important part of both the realities and the lore of living and working in the mangroves (Jalais 2010).

7. The literature documenting capture and conservation in political ecology is huge and growing. For key examples in South Asia, see Saberwal and Rangarajan 2003; Sivaramakrishnan 1999.

8. For a nuanced discussion of the colonial debate over hereditary criminal castes, see Singh 1998.

9. For a somewhat rosy account of this history, see the memoir by Ziauddin Ahmed (2017), popularly known as Major Zia.

10. SMART stands for “Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool.” SMART Teams combine technology with more conventional forms of policing to rapidly respond to threats to wildlife and conservation efforts. As the program’s mission statement has it, “An immediate priority for protecting the Sundarbans and its wildlife is to move from the current reactive law enforcement approach to prevention of illegal activities” (GLZ 2017, 1). These teams have been operating in the Sundarbans since 2016.

11. For a discussion of the gendered politics of work inside the Sundarbans, see Jalais 2010.

12. “যে ভাবে দস্যুমুক্ত হলো সুন্দরবন | Pirates free Sundarbans | Mohsin-ul Hakim,” YouTube video, 23:05, posted by Mohsin Ul Hakim, December 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2tcwwAPC9o>.

13. Such quandaries, as Fiona Terry (2002) has argued, are common dynamics of humanitarian interventions in conflict zones.

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