

Piya (Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*)

Inspired

Character Piya Roy was born in Seattle, where the only Bengali she heard was when her parents argued with each other. She is small and wiry and mockingly called the 'little East Indian girl' among fellow graduate students in Marine Biology. She describes herself as 'unambitious' and spends hours looking for dolphins only because she 'loved the sharpness of the binoculars.' All this belies the fact that she has the determination of a bulldozer to achieve her goal of understanding the behaviour of different types of river dolphins. She may be vulnerable, in the rural and unfamiliar setting of the Sundarbans, but she has backbone. Although at first she flounders in her attempt to work among people in an isolated fishing village, her instinctual kindness and fairness win her friends. She draws the admiration and physical attraction of Kanai, with whom she shares intellectual interests and class backgrounds, but in the end, she rejects his offer to form a long-term relationship, preferring instead to plough a lone furrow as a marine biologist.

Activities Piya is a scientist, who spends hours and hours standing in a boat, training binoculars over the water to find dolphins. She makes measurements, records and analyses them. When not on one of her many riverine expeditions, she makes friends with Kanai's aunt and then attempts and fails to do the same with Fokir's wife. She and Kanai do talk at length sometimes, but she does not encourage his advances.

Illustrative moments

Brave Piya's first encounter with Fokir, the local fisherman, illustrates her courage. She has hired a (corrupt) guide to take her on the river. When they see Fokir's little boat, the guide demands that Fokir pay a fine for fishing in off-limits water. Piya realises that this is unfair and challenges the guard, who is holding a gun. 'She stabbed finger at the gun. "What's that for?" she cried. The guard ignored her and she raised her voice. "Put that gun away". Again he ignored her and pointed the gun at Fokir...she rushed at him and lunged at his arm, trying to push the gun away...he thrust out his elbow and caught her in the collarbone and sent her reeling back.' This response from a small woman with no friends or support is courageous and earns the respect of Fokir. The author explains that she was in part motivated by self-interest: she didn't want it said that she had interfered with a local fisherman because that would make it difficult to work with others in the area. However, it is clear that she acted also out of instinct, to protect a vulnerable person from a powerful one.

Inspired Piya has worked on dolphin populations elsewhere in Asia, but in the Sundarbans, guided by Fokir, she makes an astonishing discovery that will propel her to the top of her profession. She is not so concerned with fame as with the experience of discovery. 'She had always admired those field biologists who had found monumental subjects to work on—such as Jane Goddall in the mountains of Kenya—but she had never imagined that something similar might come her way...and yet, here it was...when things appeared to be going wrong. She recalled that the most miracles had quotidian origins, like Newton and the apple, and now she could see that an idea floated into your mind and you knew in an instant that this was an errand that would detain you for the rest of your life.' This is the essence of Piya's character, with its references to other scientists and the excitement of ideas.