

# THE HUNGRY TIDE

Amitav Ghosh

*The Hungry Tide* (2004)

## Story

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh tells the story of two main characters. Piya is a young, American-born woman of Indian heritage who is a marine biologist. Kanai is a Bengali man who runs a translation business in New Delhi. They meet on a train going to the Sundarbans, the coastal region of Bengal, which is full of menace and beauty. Piya is studying the behaviour of river dolphins and enlists the help of an illiterate fisherman, Fokir. Kanai has returned to this wild, isolated delta region at the request of his aunt in order to read a manuscript left to him by his dead uncle. The aunt runs a hospital and an NGO dedicated to the uplift of local people, but the uncle brought her there because he was fleeing arrest in Calcutta for his leftist activities in the 1970s. Piya and Fokir draw close, despite the absence of a shared language, while Kanai learns about this uncle through the manuscript, which describes a little-known massacre of settlers in the region in 1979. We also meet several minor characters: Fokir's son, his wife and his mother, plus Horen, another fisherman. But most of the action follows Piya and Fokir as they navigate the dangerous tidal flows of the delta. She is determined to understand how a local type of dolphin has adapted to these unique ecological conditions, and he guides her in and out of dangerous encounters with crocodiles and tigers. Their long journeys make Fokir's wife jealous of Piya, but later the two women come to understand each other. Kanai, who is falling in love with Piya, joins them on an expedition, during which he gains even greater admiration for Piya, her work, her intelligence and her bravery. Kanai himself is also tested, left alone on a tiger-infested island, and learns about himself. In the stormy conclusion, Fokir dies while sheltering Piya from danger. Kanai proposes to Piya, but she tells him that she prefers to remain single, and single-minded in her dedication to her science. Kanai returns to New Delhi. Piya raises funds for more research and takes up residence with the aunt in the Sundarbans.

## Themes

Science and tradition A central theme in this book is the possibility of a compatibility between modern science and traditional knowledge. Piya has all sorts of equipment for measuring her exact geographical position and the depth of the water, but without Fokir's local knowledge she would not have made her exciting discoveries. Even without speaking to her, Fokir realises what she wants and guides her to the exact places where she needs to be. 'It was surprising enough that their jobs had not proved to be utterly incompatible—considering that one task required the input of geostationary satellites, while the other depended on bits of shark-bone and broken tile [Fokir's fishing line]. But that it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously—people who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another's heads--seemed almost miraculous....They were both amazed by the seamless intertwining of their pleasures and purposes.'

Syncretism A related theme is the syncretic mixture of languages and cultures in the setting of the Sundarbans. In this isolated backwater, Hindu and Muslim traditions have melded together to produce a folk culture and religion that defies definition. The best example is the legend of Bon Bibi, the goddess who rules over the forests and waters of the region. Her story is told at great length in the book and described in an all-night performance by an itinerant theatre group. The story of this 'Hindu' goddess begins in Medina, the holy city of Islam, and contains Islamic elements such as fakirs and sheikhs. Ghosh, ever alive to linguistic quirks, also points out the Arabic, Persian and Turkish words that have found their way into this narrative performed for an Indian, largely Bengali-speaking, population.

Rapport The tender and non-verbal rapport that develops between Piya and Fokir is the heart of the book. It is, of course, another kind of mixing, of comingling and fusing of opposites, that runs throughout the whole story. Their relationship begins in confusion, when Piya attempts to pay him for

something he doesn't feel he deserves payment. It moves on to intense, but non-sexual, physicality, when he rescues her from certain death, dragging her from the water and pumping mud from her chest. He provides for her bodily needs—bathing, toilet, food—without asking or explaining. She shows him respect (born in Seattle, she has not absorbed the caste hierarchy) and treats him like an equal. This novel meanders in many directions, but it comes together in the final sentences (after Fokir has died while protecting her from a storm). 'She recalled the promises she had made to him in the silence of her heart...she remembered how she had tried to find the words [while he was dying] to remind him of how richly he was loved, and, once again, he had seemed to understand her, even without words.'

## Characters

**Piya** Piya is the central character of this ambitious and sprawling novel. She is the classic insider-outsider, born abroad but choosing to work in India. She speaks little Bengali but is determined to succeed in her research on river dolphins, which she has previously studied in Burma and Thailand. Although warm and sensitive, she has a ruthless dedication to her work that does not countenance a life partner, which means that she rejects Kanai's offer of a lasting relationship.

**Kanai** Kanai, somewhat older than Piya at 42, is a Bengali who lives in New Delhi, where he runs a very successful business providing translation services to foreigners. His unrealised dream was to follow his uncle and translate great works of fiction into Bengali. He is a literary person who knows six languages. He is self-centred but learns some humility in his experiences with Piya and Fokir in the demanding environment of the delta.

**Fokir** Fokir is a local fisherman of unknown age, but probably in his late 20s. He is illiterate and poor, his body thin and almost skeletal. He is not servile, however, not to Piya, who hires him and his boat for her research, or to anyone. He is a good father, but a less good husband. He is Piya's invaluable guide and, in the end, dies while protecting her in a storm.

**Sundarbans** As with R K Narayan, Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner, Ghosh has made the setting a character in this novel. The non-fictional Sundarbans is depicted with qualities—turbulent, dangerous, sensuous, mysterious—that play a major role in the human characters' lives. Although barely fifty miles from the cosmopolitan centre of Calcutta, it is a world apart.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

### PIYA (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.

## **KANAI** (Self-centred)

**Character** Kanai Dutt is a 43-year-old Bengali man living in New Delhi, where he runs a lucrative business providing translation services to companies, government agencies and individuals. He is wealthy and has inherited his uncle’s love of literature, especially for literary translations. His ambition is to be a famous translator of western literature into Bengali but has found that he could only make a living providing services to others. He is highly intelligent, speaks and reads six languages, and highly self-centred. ‘He is over-confident and buoyed by a well-grounded belief in his ability to prevail,’ but all that is challenged when he brings his elite, urban mentality to the wild jungles and islands of the Sundarbans. He undergoes a minor transformation, in part by reading a manuscript left to him by his deceased uncle, in part through his friendship with Piya, the marine biologist, and in part through a confrontation with himself on an island full of man-eating tigers.

**Activities** During the novel, Kanai lives with his aunt in a large house in an isolated village in the Sundarbans. He spends most of his time reading a manuscript left to him by his uncle and other books of poetry and literature. At the end, he accompanies Piya on a research expedition.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Self-centred** The self-regarding element of Kanai’s character is illustrated in a scene at the beginning of novel. He meets Piya, who is travelling in the same train to the Sundarbans. When he comments on the fact that she is an American, she asks how he guessed, and he answers, ‘I didn’t guess. I knew.’ She asks if it was her accent, and he says, ‘Yes. I’m very rarely wrong about accents.’ The encounter goes from bad to worse, when the jolting train spills his coffee on his shirt and he blames Piya, when it was, in fact, his fault. He goes on to explain practically everything she already knows about their destination in the Sundarbans. Despite this self-centredness, however, Kanai comes off as a sincere and harmless, rather than insidious and deceitful.

**Fast** This, now out-of-date, term is applied to Kanai by his aunt when speaking to Piya one evening. She means that he will take advantage of a woman sexually if she isn’t on her toes. She says, ‘Kanai’s problem is that he’s too clever for his own good...he’s one of those men who likes to think of himself as being irresistible to the other sex...it’s dangerous in the jungle, and not just because of the animals.’ Again, while this is not an admirable trait, in Kanai it is not venal either. He does make advances toward Piya, but they are verbal and non-threatening, which makes Kanai all the more believable.

**Self-discovery** Kanai’s moment of self-discovery occurs on an island, where he is within metres of a tiger. Although hundreds of people are killed by tigers every year, the local people believe that anyone with a ‘pure heart’ will not be harmed. When someone asks Kanai if would like to be tested, he says, ‘I think I’m a good man. I think my intentions are good.’ Left alone on an island, he sees a tiger: ‘It was immense, of a size greater than he could have imagined...his terror was such that he could not move a muscle...he kept his eyes fixed on the animal, the tip of its twitching tail...then he ran and fell down in the mud, waiting for the blow that would snap his neck.’ When he is rescued, the others assure him that there was no tiger, but he insists that he saw one about to kill him. It is at this point that we realise that the local culture has changed him, from an educated urban elite who dismissed all the tiger legends of the area to a man shaking with fear.

## **FOKIR** (Protective)

**Character** Fokir is a local fisherman, poor, uneducated and without hope for the future, except perhaps in the shape of his young son, who accompanies him in his boat. Fokir proves to be an honest person and a person of great dignity and personal strength. He interacts with Piya on equal terms, and he shows a chivalrous concern for her privacy when they are alone on the river together. He neglects his wife but only, we believe, in order to catch the fish that he must sell to provide for their family. Like Piya, he is a loner, who prefers to be out on the water, watching the tides and the skies. He is a true friend to Piya, rescuing her from drowning and then saving her from the force of a fierce storm, for which he pays with his own life.

### **Activities**

Fokir is a fisherman, who goes out in his boat every day, often accompanied by his son. He spends long hours paddling to special spots and then waiting for fish to bite. He also makes complicated fishing lines, using fragments of bone and ceramic tile. Then he must repair his fragile boat and fishing lines. This leaves little time for leisure, but when the occasion arises, a ceremony, for example, he likes to take a drink and to sing.

### **Illustrative moments**

Honest Fokir's sincerity and honesty are illustrated during his initial encounter with Piya. She is partially responsible for him being forced to pay a hefty fine/bribe to a forest official, and she attempts to reimburse his loss and humiliation. While sitting in the boat, she takes out a thick wad of currency notes and counts them out, with Fokir looking on in amazement at such a large sum of money and without any idea that some of it was for him. She gives him a small amount, 'no more than she might have paid for a few sandwiches and a coffee,' but he 'examined them in disbelief, holding them at a distance from his face.' He then takes a single note and returns the rest to her, making a gesture that said the note was for his loss. His pride prevents him from taking a penny more than he felt he deserved. His honesty, in the wake of the forest official's greed, is striking. Poverty can degrade and turn ordinary people into petty criminals, but some people, perhaps the majority, have a stronger set of values than the city folk who often look down at them as inferiors.

Protective The very last scene of the book is dramatic and tragic. Fokir and Piya are caught up in a fierce windstorm on an exposed riverbank. They take shelter while planks of wood and large tree branches are hurled at them by the wind. Placing his body in front of her, to break the force of the wind and prevent the flying objects from hitting her, he digs in his heels and tries to resist the elements. Piya then tries to put herself in front of him, but his grip on her is too strong and she cannot move. 'Their bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him...she could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed on her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one.' Fokir dies from the force of the flying objects, and Piya survives. Fokir gave his life sheltering a young woman with whom he could not speak and whom he did not understand. But she was kind and gentle, and he loved her in his own way, which was to protect her from the danger of the Sundarbans.