



## The Coast Bouleverses at Kolkata

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Hinterlands, once a relatively fixed geographic category designating lands functioning as supply areas with transport networks behind a port or a city, are becoming increasingly unstable. As land reclaims the sea for developmental purposes, and as legal strategies transform coastal waters into “land-like, developable components of state territory” (Bremner 2014), the coast recedes and the hinterland shrinks, becoming amphibious with one foot on water and the other on land. Increasingly part of the metro mainland, the hinterland undergoes a process of bouleversement. In the process, as the hinterland moves closer to cities and ports, it transforms from the unknown space of outsider perception into an active *place* where people are seen to create their own identities and histories.

*Hinterland* is not just a spatial category; it is also a perspective. In the wider sweep of human history, it is perhaps important to keep in mind that relations between the city or port and its hinterland were/are anything but natural and unchanging. They have always been complex, and beyond the production of commodities they once depended at least as much on shared networks of trust, on what Gordon (2018) terms the “moral” hinterland.

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*Hinterland* is thus a slippery concept. From the earliest German use in the mid-nineteenth century, there has been a good deal of messiness about it. In spite of the differences of definition among geographers, *hinterland* was conceived of primarily in terms of an economic relationship between a port/metropolis and the “land behind.” This definition is now changing, but there does seem to be something fundamental (in the sense that one cannot exist without the other) in the relation of the city or port to the hinterland apart from rural-urban dichotomies (such as greater or less stratification, greater or lesser literacy) or in the studies of migration or urbanization (Gordon 2018).

As flows from the city or port to the hinterland become anti-flows whereby the hinterland becomes part of the city, the hinterland morphs from a predominantly economic space into new spatial and ideological configurations. Nowhere is the anti-flow more visible than in the case of India’s Kolkata (the erstwhile British Calcutta), once a port-city on the Hugly river and now a metro with some 15 million plus people who, increasingly involved in land-based activities, have turned their back to the sea. Because today’s cartographic and juridical instruments see the sea as land, the upper coast (comprising the northern portions of the Sundarban mangrove forest) is now an adjunct to Kolkata. Since 1970, the various municipalities which made up the northern part of the Sundarban were brought under the control of the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority for developmental work. Since then, the extractive economic functions of the hinterland have retreated, and the lands closest to Kolkata have become sites of gated residential communities with newly assertive territorialities.

Kolkata port is incidental to this new conurbation; Kolkata is no longer a port-city but a city with a port. Since independence in 1947, Kolkata port’s importance has decreased because of reduction in the size of the port-hinterland, economic stagnation in eastern India, and increased siltation in the river. In the fiscal year of 2013/2014, the port handled 41.386 million metric tons of cargo—significantly less than the 53.143 million metric tons of cargo it handled in 2005/2006. In 2018/2019 the port registered a growth of only 10.14% in traffic, handling 63.763 million tons of traffic against 57.891 in 2017/2018. In contrast, during 2016/2017, Bangladesh’s Chittagong port had handled 73.1 million metric tons of cargo. Chittagong port’s official website shows that its

annual cargo tonnage was 100 M in 2019/2020 and its annual container volume was 3.097 M TEUs in 2020/2021.<sup>1</sup>

### SEEING KOLKATA'S HINTERLAND

The Sundarban islands that once housed several port-towns now form Kolkata's hinterland. The Sundarban is a mangrove-forested area at the confluence of the Padma, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, spanning the coastline from Baleswar River in Bangladesh's Khulna division to the Hughly river in India's West Bengal. Classical Sanskrit texts were aware of the opposition between the settled agricultural community (*grama*) and the alien sphere of the jungle (*aranya*) with its people who were constantly moving in search of arable land, but in fact, the two spheres complemented each other in several ways. The jungle's inhabitants looked to the settled areas as a source of agricultural produce, young cattle, and other riches, and as a source of employment, mainly as soldiers, servants, and transporters. On the other hand, the *grama* needed the *aranya* for grazing ground; as a source of new land, manpower, and forest products; as a link between settled areas; and, finally, as a refuge from external invasion. *Grاما* and *aranya* were always in complementary opposition to each other, but scholars tend to highlight only the sedentary characteristics of South Asian society. They focus on the traditional agrarian nuclei of the subcontinent, mainly along the fertile alluvial river plains, and stress the expansion of agriculture through states and temples. As a result, South Asia is perceived as an almost exclusively sedentary domain (Gommans 1998), but the Sundarban overturns this vision of a predominant sedentary culture. It comprises both closed and open mangrove forests, land used for agricultural purposes, mudflats, and barren land, and is intersected by multiple tidal streams and channels that fragment it into numerous small islands.

There have been four lines or axes along which this coast-port-hinterland has been studied. One axis, visible from the last decades of the eighteenth century, concentrated on the hinterland's unique hydrology and geo-morphological features that contributed to a unique riverine economy and culture (Rennell 1781; Mukherjee 1938; Majumdar 1941; Bagchi 1944; Mukherjee 2015; Mukherjee 2017). Another saw the area in

<sup>1</sup>TEU is a twenty-foot equivalent unit shipping container whose internal dimensions measure about 20 feet long, 8 feet wide, and 8 feet tall. It can hold between 9 and 11 pallets.

terms of historical geography (Blochmann 1873; Bhattasali 1935), while yet another, exemplified by district gazetteers and travel accounts, attempted reconstruction of its social history (Bouchon and Thomaz 1988). The last strand, focusing on natural calamities, appeared in this century, when historians came to see these impacting human life. They had neglected calamities earlier, dismissing them as mere “accidental facts” and had argued instead for the human factor as the sole actor of history. However, unlike historians, cultural geographers, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists had long been engaged with understanding fluvial disasters and theorizing and debating them (Baviskar 2007).

However, whereas former cartographic practices drew lines between land and sea as a way of defining territory, current hinterland “amphibious sites” throw into question the categories, scales, and properties usually attributed to spatial practices. The Bangladesh-India conflict over New Moore Island, for instance, shows how international law transforms coastal waters into land-like, developable components of state territory. Although rising sea levels saw the island disappearing in 2010, engaging with such places requires thinking outside territorial and disciplinary boxes, reimagining boundaries and scales through more relational, multi-scalar, interconnected ones (Bremner 2014).

This chapter will show how elements of deterritorialization go hand in hand with processes of reterritorialization, and so it may be useful to speak of regimes of territoriality (Conrad 2016): changing relationships between metro and periphery, between population and infrastructure, between territory and global order. It will chart a reterritorialization by highlighting the distinction between the “up” and “down” islands of the Sundarban, one that reinforces their status as near- and far-hinterlands, and which will prevail until better connectivity and effective disaster management appear.

## THE OLD HINTERLAND

Earlier, ports were seen to be separate from political centers which were located in the far interior. Attempts to integrate the coast with the inland cities had limited impact on the coast. Conquest of a port-city or even a port-town was usually driven by strategic military and political concerns rather than by commercial ones. In Bengal, the joint expansion of Islam and the Islamic Sultanate focused on agrarian settlements in the interior, rather than on the port-towns; these settlements formed the hinterlands of

port-towns, supplying them with rice, grain, oil seeds, and cottons for trade. The coast and the ports, peopled by migrant merchants and sojourning communities, were largely autonomous.

Ma Huan's *Ying-yai sheng-lan* (The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores, 1433) noted Chittagong's overseas networks and its fluvial hinterland ("Sonargawan" in Fra Mauro's world map [1450], an important river port prior to Dacca's emergence) thus:

travelling by sea from the country of Su-men-ta-la [Sumatra] ... the [Nicobars] are sighted, (whence) going north-westward for twenty *li* one arrives at Chih-ti-chiang [Chittagong]. (Here) one changes to a small boat, and after going five hundred odd *li*, one comes to So-na-erh-chiang [Sonargaon], whence one reaches the capital. It has walls and suburbs; the king's palace, and the large and small palaces of the nobility and temples, are all in the city. They are Musulmans. (Rockhill 1915, 436–437)

Around 1436, Fei Xin's *Hsing-ch'a-sheng-lan* (The Overall Survey of the Star Raft) saw Sonargaon not only as a hinterland to Chittagong, Bengal's only seaport, but also as the southeast's political center and maritime city, with its own hinterland surrounding it in turn. Pandua, in the interior northwest (in present West Bengal), was the provincial capital:

This country has a sea-port on a bay called Ch'a-ti-chiang; here certain duties are collected. ... After going sixteen stages (we) reached So-na-erh-chiang which is a walled place with tanks, streets, bazaars, and which carries on a business in all kinds of goods. (Here) servants of the King met (us) with elephants and horses. Going thence twenty stages (we) came to Pan-tu-wa [Pandua] which is the place of residence of the ruler. (Rockhill 1915, 441)

The coast, its ports, their hinterlands, and the cities of interior Bengal were thus quite separate entities. Each was a hub with distinct spokes, but as urban centers they were small when compared to the capital cities of the interior.

This spatial organization came under attack from the fifteenth century onward through massive riverine shifts. As villages disappeared and towns decayed, successive shifts facilitated British Calcutta's emergence. English traveler Ralph Fitch's sketch (ca. 1585) shows the Ganga and Meghna joining at Sripur, a local political center and port-town located south of Sonargaon. But 200 years later, East India Company surveyor James Rennell's maps (made between 1764 and 1772) show this confluence

shifting south to Dakhin Shahbazpur (Bhola Island). The Ganga's southward stretch from Jafarganj to Dakhin Shahbazpur is known as Kirtinasha (the Great Destroyer), an eloquent testimony to the power of the raging river. Bakla port-town was destroyed by a cyclone and storm-wave in 1584. Between 1811 and 1867, Sagor Island at the Hughly's mouth (for Sagor's importance, see later) was swept by six major cyclones; those of 1833 and 1864 took thousands of lives. The Ichamati, down which French jeweler-traveler Jean-Baptiste Tavernier journeyed in 1666 from Jafarganj to Dhaka, now contains hardly any water during the dry season.

Pandua, mentioned earlier, vanished, to be replaced by Gaur as capital on the interfluvium between the Kalindri and Bhagirathi (the upper portion of the Hughly) rivers. The Gaur that we know of was the second city of Gaur, and Saptagrama, the Portuguese Porto Pequeno, was its port. This second city of Gaur was damaged in the 1505 earthquake, and that earthquake again affected river courses. Earlier, the Bhagirathi had flowed east of Gaur, but in the second city of Gaur the river lay to its west. Gaur was so devastated by floods that it was finally abandoned in 1575; the last straw was a plague outbreak. The capital shifted to upland Tanda, but fluvial instability there generated a subsequent west-to-east migration, and upland Bengal's unstable physical morphology overturned port-capital-hinterland relations.

Around this time, there was substantial out-migration to Southeast Asia. Bengalis were present at Southeast Asian courts as servants, slaves, administrators, and eunuchs, often working as goldsmiths and cabinet makers. Tun Bandan, a warrior from Bengal, the Melaka sultan's close aide, died during the Portuguese conquest of the port-city in 1511. Tun Majlis, of Bengali or Turkish origin, then came to serve under Sultan Mahmud and followed him to Bintan after defeat by the Portuguese. He returned to Melaka in 1512 to reinstate the sultan but failed, reappearing nine years later in Gaur (Perret 2011).

Until the eighteenth century, the west-to-east fluvial shifts flooded the area running from Hughly to Sonargaon, creating swamps and marshlands. The shifts introduced new rivers into the landscape, bringing the southeastern hinterland closer to western Bengal: the Garai-Madhumati, Bhairab, Mathabhanga, Arialkhan, and Bangladesh's present-day Padma-Meghna river system, which connected the Hughly and Meghna-Brahmaputra channels. The hinterland expanded as the linkage enabled Hughly port to directly access southeastern goods through the new riverine networks. Noting history's conjuncture with ecology, Richard Eaton

(1993) observes that the shifts linked southeast Bengal with north India by the combined Ganga-Padma system at the very moment of Bengal's political integration with the Mughal Empire in 1575. Economic integration swiftly followed geographic and political integration, for direct river communication with north India dramatically reduced transport costs for southeast products, notably textiles such as fine muslins and grain, from the frontier to the imperial capital complex of Delhi-Agra.

### BRITISH PORT-HINTERLAND AXIS: FIRST MOMENT

Padma's linkage with the Hughly channel (on which British Calcutta appeared in 1690) enabled rapid development of Calcutta port, even as the southeast's older port-towns decayed. Along with Bombay and Madras, two other port-cities also established and ruled by the English East India Company, the port-city of Calcutta was much more than a new urban center: it had an urban core, a near-hinterland, and a far-hinterland. Their different material constitutions, involving expanded transport networks (the hinterland progressively grew between 1894 and 1940 from the initial textiles- and rice-provisioning space to a further 900 km by incorporating coal, tea, and jute, and thereafter to 1050 km by drawing in manganese and iron ore), meant that each hinterland—the near and the far—contained their own distinct economic and political dynamics.

Not a fairground or emporium in the way that other Indian ports still were, Calcutta was qualitatively different from a Mughal city or a commercial center in the interior such as Agra. It represented an occupationally specialized site with an overwhelming interest in commissioning textile production. As the Mughal Empire began to crumble in the eighteenth century, the well-defended company towns of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras became safe havens for Indian merchants and artisans. These three ports redefined the relationship between geography and commerce. With the exception of Calcutta, and perhaps of Portuguese Goa, many ports were located on sites that did not rely on river-borne trade to access the interior; they were not even located on rivers of any significance. Even Calcutta, which *was* situated on a river, did not greatly rely on this river in conducting its main business. Instead, these ports looked toward the ocean, attracting migratory merchants, artisans, skilled workers, and capital, along with goods, from the interior. For the first time in Indian history, as we noted, the ports were not dependent on the hinterlands, but the hinterlands came to the ports (Roy 2012).

## BRITISH PORT-HINTERLAND AXIS: SECOND MOMENT

The city that was Calcutta lay in a region that was once part of the Sundarban. Alexander Hamilton (2013 [1727], 7) emphasized Calcutta's marine character, noting that its founder Job Charnock could not have chosen

a more unhealthful Place on all the River; for three Miles to the North-eastward, is a Salt-water Lake that overflows in *September* and *October*, and then prodigious Numbers of Filth resort thither, but in *November* and *December* when the Floods are dissipated, those Filthes are left dry, and with their Putrefaction affect the Air with thick stinking Vapours, which the North-east Winds bring with them to Fort *William*, that they cause a yearly Mortality.

Throughout the nineteenth century, property law and hydraulic technologies reorganized this mobile landscape by soaking ecologies into a propertied geography in the search for firm, dry land. Even as British legal and engineering technologies of fixing created a collective amnesia about this distinctive maritime landscape, human intervention continued to manage and transform Calcutta into a concrete space (Bhattacharyya 2019, 1, 5).

At the same time, the British were searching for other outlets to the sea for trade. To offset the recurrent problem of silting, Calcutta port needed satellite ports to export hinterland products such as salt, rice, and timber. In 1853, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce drew the government's attention to navigational difficulties in the badly-silted Hughly river, noting that it was impractical and near-impossible for vessels to berth there. The British-driven development of Canning on the Matla river in the Sundarban, close to Calcutta, became the answer. It is notable that *matla* is a corruption of the Bangla word *matal* (drunkard), attesting to the river's unpredictable course. Port Canning as a primary port and the development of Sagar Island as secondary or feeder port were intended to have far-reaching consequences for hinterland populations in terms of creating a larger market for hinterland products and services.

After the 1857 rebellion, as the idea of a second port gained momentum, plans to modernize Calcutta port were sidelined. Sagar had already been surveyed in 1813–1814, and the central portion cleared of jungle. Cultivation was now started by private individuals—not by the government—and ultimately the Sagar island Society was formed with a capital of



Rs. 250,000. Although initially the society made progress with salt panning and rice cultivation, reaping lucrative returns, in later years a cyclone struck, and the project was abandoned. Port Canning too was not a success. There was an influx of ships at Canning between 1865 and 1868, but a decline thereafter. After 1870 not one ocean-going vessel arrived at Canning. Even the mills stopped, until the time they could be leased out. In 1869, in an effort at revival, Port Canning was declared a free port, but as it saw no shipping it was ultimately abandoned. The Bengal Chamber of Commerce washed its hands of its management, accepted that fears regarding navigational conditions on the Hughly were greatly exaggerated and, by enlisting engineering works on the Hughly, turned its attention to Calcutta port once more (Bhattacharyya 2017a).

Between 1870 and 1877, Calcutta became a premier port. The total number of ships calling at the port increased from 931 to 1171, while the shipping tonnage rose by more than 70% (Mukherjee 1968). Calcutta's foreland expanded exponentially. It connected, through commercial and financial networks, to other port-cities that the British Empire traded with: Shanghai, Hong Kong, London, Tokyo, Paris, New York, and Bangkok. Murals depicting these eight cities, along with their most prominent landmarks, adorn the ceiling of the old HSBC building that existed from 1923 until 1955 on Shanghai's famous Bund. Partly destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, the building presently houses Shanghai's Pudong Development Bank and tourists are welcome to view the murals, as I did in 2006. They showcase the once-immense reach of Calcutta port-city, which would erode after 1947.

## FROM PORT TO RAILWAYS

The opening of a railway line connecting Canning to Calcutta was also discussed when proposing the development of Port Canning. Debates rose as to whether a rail-line or canal was to be constructed; ultimately the decision favored a railroad. At this point, the East India Railway entered the scene, promoting its case for cheap rice transport to Calcutta.

With the extension of railways there, the Port Canning venture generated a major lifeline for the Sundarban. In a first, Calcutta was connected to the hinterland's outer periphery, and the British could, in theory at least, exercise power over the unconnected and disparate far-hinterland space. The Southeastern line linked Calcutta to Port Canning in 1863 and to Diamond Harbour in 1883, bringing the coast even closer to Calcutta.

Rail carriage was seen to be feasible for a large portion of paddy for the rice mills, which had to be brought from Dacca (then part of Bengal, since 1947 in East Pakistan and, after 1971, in Bangladesh), as the quantities required by the mills could not be brought in by country boats. The rail could further assist in carrying rice for local consumption, and this rail carriage would also be credited as rail earnings. The empty trucks that went from Calcutta to Canning would carry the forest products from Canning to Calcutta, and boats coming for the rice cargo could load the general cargo for a very moderate rate (Bhattacharyya 2017a).

Post-independence in 1947, the railway network expanded but, as it was now in East Pakistan, the Dacca connect was cut off in the 1960s. The hinterland took on a new life by turning toward metro Kolkata. As a vehicle for begetting histories of remembrance and forgetting, it became an active agent in the creation of Kolkata's urban space. Kolkata's creation and life-cycle was a history of forgetting the hinterland as people moved there from Dacca in successive waves of immigration after 1947 (partition) and in 1971 (after the creation of Bangladesh). This forgetting, we must remember, had been central to the creation of property for the extraction of value from the marshes in the British period; and now, the refugee settlements appearing all around Kolkata continued this practice. The city's outlying areas had already been organized into municipalities from 1869, but from 1970 onward, large parts of the Sundarban were made part of Calcutta, commencing with the Calcutta area code of "700." As a result, land prices shot up exponentially.

### FROM SPACE TO PLACE: ECOLOGY, RELIGION, AND POLITICS IN THE HINTERLAND

Presently, the urbanization process is seen to be accelerating. What started with two trains running daily to and from Calcutta has increased to over twenty at present, connecting the dense forests of the Sundarban and Kolkata. There is substantial migration from neighboring districts and other Indian states into those parts of the hinterland that enjoy transport connects with Kolkata. Canning, for example, is now a bustling market town supplying Kolkata with rice and fish.

As geography and ecology triumph over the economy, as the ports fade away and railways appear in their stead, the impact of this developmental shift is visible in the hinterland's changing lifestyles and mores. The

comparatively stable economic and environmental conditions produced through greater access to Kolkata generate a partiality to list islands in order of preference—the last being the ones farthest south and directly opposite the forest, where hunter-gatherers collecting honey and other forest products still exist. So, the hinterland is now divided into the “down” (far) and “up” (near) islands of the Sundarban. The “up” islands are those closest to Kolkata which have seen the most development through NGO initiatives and government schemes. These are now transforming into logistics nodes along the highways and bridges connecting them to Kolkata. They mix residential with logistics spaces, such that day-to-day life in the near-hinterland is shaped by the infrastructure of the global economy in a way not directly experienced in the central city. These terms “up” and “down,” initially used in the English language, are now part of local speech. Islanders use these terms to navigate a geography comprising far more than their natural geography—such as areas nearest or farthest from Kolkata, the location of one’s homestead and economic activity, the type of economic activity one engages in, marriage alliances, and lifestyle choices.

At present, the hinterland stands at the juncture of an amalgamated cultural space shaped by traditional beliefs that are battered from the outside. This is leading it toward a life-path away from the dense forests. Both in the “down” and “up” islands, apart from people “who do the forest” (such as the honey and beeswax collectors, wood cutters, and somewhat surprisingly also fisherfolk and prawn seed cultivators), there are landlords, salaried and working people, as well as the self-employed. The percentage of the self-employed is far higher in the “up” than in the “down” islands. Landowners comprising the better educated and service holders aspiring to a gentlemanly (*bhadralok*) status blend traditional mores with their semi-urban lifestyle to create a niche of their own. This rurbanization has created a binary between the “developed” and “less-developed” in a once-homogeneous region. One’s place in this binary is determined by attributes such as location, assets, total asset value, principal economic activity, types of transportation available, and even the types of deities appropriated for worship and the festivals one chooses to participate in (Bhattacharyya 2017a).

Social difference, expressed through deities and festivals, is also indicative of changing notions of territoriality in the hinterlands. Initially, the deities worshiped were divided into four categories: forest deities, deities offering protection from natural disasters, those giving protection from

diseases, and those protecting people from external attacks (Bhattacharyya 2017b). An amalgam of Hindu and Muslim beliefs and practices, they expressed the idea of a peaceful co-existence and the mutual sustenance of non-humans and humans in the same space. It was an economic agreement—the equitable sharing of the economic resources of the forest between humans and animals—that met religious sentiments.

This religious syncretism based on equitable sharing is now under attack. As hinterland people move to the metro, their chief forest deity, Bon Bibi—(*bon* means forest in Bangla and the term *bibi* betrays her Islamic origins, although there seems to be a long-standing belief among locals that the region’s Islamization changed Bon Devi and Bon Durga into Bon Bibi)—is morphed into the mainstream Hindu goddess Durga, whose worship is celebrated with elaborate pageantry every autumn in eastern India and Bangladesh. Thus, two parallel worlds exist in the Sundarban: one where Bon Bibi—far from being the product of a universal religion like Islam—is actually the result of a localized form of that universal religion. And another world also exists where the same deity is merged with Hindu worship as a mainstream deity like Durga, and sometimes Kali, and dominated largely by that faith’s religious practice, thereby moving Bon Bibi away from her principal roots. We see Bon Bibi worship taking a different turn altogether, especially in the “up” islands, where her affiliation is closer to Hindu deities and rituals associated with Hinduism, and so she is redefined as Bonmata (forest mother). In the islands nearer the densely forested coast—that is, “down” islands—ritualization of worship is still at an indeterminate stage, and the old Bon Bibi continues to rule over a syncretic milieu (Bhattacharyya 2017b).

### THE FLAILING FAR-HINTERLAND

Global history usually privileges motion over place and favors stories that *move* over tales of those who get *left behind*. This is particularly true of the “land behind.” As in Neel’s (2018) “dark” Middle America heartland, decades of failing extractive industries—salt-mining and timber logging come to mind—shrinking tax revenue, defunding state services, and creating public service gaps have kept Kolkata’s far-hinterland a cyclone-battered zone. The destitution was particularly visible after Cyclone Bhola struck West Bengal and East Pakistan on 11 November 1970 and took an estimated 500,000 lives. At that time, the Awami League party was confronting the Pakistan military junta that ruled East Pakistan, and

ineffective relief measures post-Bhola exacerbated an already tense political situation. During the election of December 1970–January 1971, the AL gained a landslide victory. But continuing unrest with Pakistan triggered the Bangladesh Liberation War, led to a mass genocide, and concluded with the creation of the independent country of Bangladesh on 26 March 1971. The combined processes of disaster mismanagement, repeated genocides, and the Liberation War triggered a refugee exodus into West Bengal the likes of which had not been seen since the Partition of 1947.

The forlorn condition of the “down” islands was visible again after Cyclone Aila struck the Indian Sundarban on 25 May 2009. Due to improved early warning systems and effective evacuation, less people died than at the time of Bhola, but the damage was still intense. In West Bengal, more than 100,000 people were left homeless. A storm surge breached over a 100 river embankments and at least 350,000 people were affected. Later reports indicated that upward of 2.3 million were displaced by the storm as 175,000 homes were destroyed and 270,000 were damaged. The region, which housed 265 of the endangered Bengal tigers, was inundated with 6.1 m (20 ft) of water. Dozens of tigers are feared to have drowned in Aila’s storm surge, along with deer and crocodiles.

On 20 May 2020 Cyclone Amphan made landfall near Bakkhali in the West Bengal Sundarban with winds of 155 km/h (95 mph). Much fewer people died than in 2009, but the government estimated that the storm caused at least US \$13.5 billion worth of damage and directly affected 70% of the population. Its effects were deemed worse than those of COVID-19, which was then raging. Links were severed as a storm surge of 5 m (16 ft) inundated a wide stretch of the coast. Floods extended 15 km (9.3 mi) inland. Embankments were overtaken. Bridges linking islands to the mainland were swept away. As the far-hinterland’s economy sinks into obscurity, and as embankments collapse time and again, its people will live as they have always done, with ever-present danger.

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