

Bio and Research Summary

Megnaa Mehta is a PhD candidate at the Department of Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is an environmental anthropologist working at the intersection of political ecology and global conservation. Her research is based out of long-term ethnographic fieldwork with crab collectors, fishermen and honey collectors living in the Sundarbans forests of West Bengal, India. The region is one of the world's most unique ecosystems, and is home to a large population of Bengal tigers as well as 4.5 million people. Moving away from the binary of nature versus humans, her research proposes new paradigms for conservation that put vernacular forms of forest governance in conversation with contemporary global conservation discourses. In doing so, her work argues for the inseparability of ethics, politics and economics in relationship to one's surrounding ecology.

Her PhD thesis centres around a moral code referred to as *jongoler niyam*, literally 'rules of the jungle', followed by the fishing community whose livelihoods depend on the forests. This moral code is derived from religious beliefs around the forest goddess Bonbibi who preaches specific conduct centred around an ethic of restraint where one should take no more than one needs. Her research proposes that these 'rules of the jungle' are an alternative form of vernacular forest governance.

First, she contrasts the prevailing political paradigms that seek to represent or control the fishing community, namely the conservationists and rights-based camps, with the 'rules of the jungle'. Her work explores how the 'rules of the jungle' are antithetical to the surveillance, fines and fear enshrined in the State's conservation laws, but simultaneously also eschew the idea of universal entitlement advanced by forest rights activists. The 'rules of the jungle' have been largely ignored, in both language and imagination, by the prevailing political movements, which instead relegate them to a depoliticized sphere of religion and ritual.

She contends that these beliefs, if understood holistically, propose an alternative politics that hinge on governing the self. By extension, these beliefs provide a model for organizing social relations and protecting the environmental commons. By exploring the different political visions that forests allow for, Mehta argue for anthropology's potential to contribute to new bases for political organization latent in peoples' everyday moralities.

Her PhD thesis engages with the literature on political ecology and biodiversity conservation by alloying it with the anthropological corpus on ordinary ethics, paying keen attention to local cosmologies. She highlights the divergent ethical notions that exist simultaneously in one seemingly homogenous village and how they overlay onto prevailing relations of power. Her attempt is to contribute to conversations in legal, political and environmental anthropology, attempting to locate the political not in universals but in vernacular thought and practice embedded to certain potent landscapes.