



"My intention was for word and image to have parity. So the book would have to be a collaboration"

—AMITAV GHOSH

of the solitary read into a collaborative and community-based experience. Extracts from an interview with Ghosh on his new book and gaze:

**Shahnaz Siganporia: What is it about the Sundarbans that keeps you coming back as an author?**

**Amitav Ghosh:** The Sundarbans has an environment that makes it vividly apparent that the earth is a living being. Just as the boundaries between land and water are very fluid in the Sundarbans, so too are the lines between different groups of people. And no matter their caste or religion, they respect the legend of 'The Lady of the Forest', Bon Bibi. Bon Bibi is seen as a goddess-like figure and in printed versions, she is presented as a female pir, the daughter of a Muslim fakir. Whether the story belongs to one faith or another is impossible to decide, nor is it important. Across the Sundarbans, West Bengal or Bangladesh, whether Hindu, Muslim or Christian, the great majority of forest dwellers are devotees of Bon Bibi.

**SS: You seem to tell timeless tales that are still urgently relevant.**

**AG:** The legend of Bon Bibi is about the importance of balancing the needs of humans with non-humans. These stories are telling the contemporary world something that it has lost sight of, at great cost to itself. Think of all the stories that convey messages like 'Be ambitious', 'There are no limits' or 'Just do it'. In contrast, there are very few that urge people to seek contentment in what they already have, and to accept that without staying within certain limits all beings cannot co-exist on our small planet. *Jungle Nama* is exactly such a story.

**SS: There is an integral interweaving of images and text in *Jungle Nama*. How did this happen?**

**AG:** In *The Great Derangement*, I wrote that to respond to the challenges posed by our various planetary crises, writers need to experiment with new and different forms.

The old forms (the conventional novel) are simply unable to deal with these challenges. 'Serious' literature has become too strictly focused on words. This is a fairly new development—think of palm-leaf manuscripts, or the exquisite illuminated Bhagavad Puranas of Rajasthan or Persian texts like the Shahnameh, with their profusion of miniatures. In Europe too, important texts were usually illuminated.

**SS: You make a clear distinction between illuminated and illustrated. How does that impact your storytelling?**

**AG:** The word 'illuminated' suggests that the pictorial elements are throwing their own light on the text. The word 'illustrated' suggests that the pictures are subordinate to the words. My intention was for word and image to have parity. So the book would have to be a collaboration. One of the most profound problems with contemporary literature is that it has become completely focused on the individual. Not only are literary works produced by writers working alone, but the intended reader is also reading in silence. I wanted to create a collaborative work.

**SS: And you collaborated with Salman Toor to create an illuminated text, and a collective 'read' through the audio narration with music by Ali Sethi.**

**AG:** I met Salman through his childhood friend, the writer and singer Ali Sethi. Both became a part of a wider extended family—you could say *gharana*—that includes my wife and children, and Mira Nair and her family. Salman has remarkable compositional intelligence and a deep knowledge of the history of painting. We had discussions on the phone and, within hours, he would produce these astonishing images. Ali is a musician of extraordinary talent, trained in Hindustani classical music, and is at home with Western and World music. The audio is enchanting. I consider myself fortunate having been able to work with these amazingly gifted young collaborators. ■

## Between the lines

Author **Amitav Ghosh's** *Jungle Nama* delves into the wisdom of The Sundarbans and the syncretism of Bengali folk culture—even as he collaborates to create a community-based literary experience, finds **Shahnaz Siganporia**

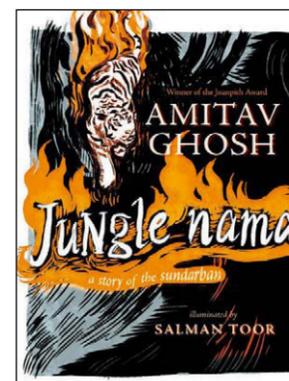
Photographed by **ARATI KUMAR-RAO**

**S**ometime last year, as the lockdowns were phasing in and out, Amitav Ghosh, like the rest of us, spent a lot more time at home and in his kitchen. One of the many 'foodstagram' from his kitchen in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, tells you how to make a Bengali-

style fish, Kalia (usually prepared with the locally found Bengali catla or rohu), with Pacific rockfish, adding a tongue-in-cheek, "The key to survival in the new era is adaptability," into his caption. Be it on the plate or page, Ghosh is consistent in his ability to adapt not just to suit but to often mould the

zeitgeist. If in *The Great Derangement* (2016) he outlined a manifesto of sorts of why writers need to change the way they write in thought, content and form to suit the changing needs of the Anthropocene, then his latest, *Jungle Nama* (HarperCollins India), a free-adaptation in verse of the legend of Bon Bibi, part of folk mythology from The Sundarbans, Ghosh does exactly that.

He takes a fantastical folk tale and reminds us why it is timeless. He then collaborates with a younger generation of artists—Salman Toor, who recently exhibited his first museum solo at The Whitney, New York, and Ali Sethi of Coke Studio fame, known for his 'multicultural non-binary' musicality—to free the narrative form



**MUST READ**  
Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* is published by HarperCollins India and is out this month

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