

The Cult Bonbibi of Sundarban Delta

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Abstract

The Sundarban is the world's largest coastal wetland, at the union of the Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers in the Bay of Bengal which is renowned for its rich bio diversity and so it provides a wide range of valuable forest products to its habitants. Moreover, the Sundarbans are surrounded by rivers, rivulets, and creeks, pushing the islanders of the Sundarbans to pursue nature based economy. Moreover it is the melting pot of various cultures giving rise to a heterogenous culture. The oral tradition of Sundarban is rich with myths and folk stories. Their interaction and relation with the nature are explained in the light of these various myths. It is the crisis of survival that brings together people under a common canopy of belief system. As their economy is mainly ecology specially forest-based economy, so the lives of the people are full of uncertainty, danger, life risk, anxiety and fear as this kind of interaction gives rise to man-animal conflicting situation. To reduce their anxiety and fear, they have devoted themselves to various Gods and Goddesses, pirs and darbeshes. Among all the great traditional religious faiths, the entire religion of the area revolves around the little tradition, territorial saviour Goddess Bonbibi who is the predominant cult figure in this Sundarban delta.

This present paper has sought to understand how the myth and belief of Bonbibi is playing a vital role in their subsistence and survival in this inimical environment. The ubiquitous presence and belief of Bonbibi is also deeply rooted in their cognitive level.

Keywords: Bonbibi, Syncretism, Bonbibi Johurnama, Myth of Bonbibi,

1. Introduction

The Sundarbans is an intricate web of tidal waterways, seawater, rivers, creeks, and mudflats, formed by the gradual deposition of alluvial silt, at the union of the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers in the Bay of Bengal. Sundarbans means 'beautiful forest'. The name may be derived from the term meaning 'forest of sundari trees', which refers to the large mangrove tree that produces valuable fuel. The Sundarbans is the largest Mangrove Forest in the world with its unique eco-system and rich bio diversity. It is the world's largest delta consists of 10,200 sq. km. of Mangrove Forest, of which 62 per cent lies in Bangladesh and the remaining 38 per cent in India [1]. The Indian Sundarbans consists of 106 deltaic islands with a network of innumerable rivers, rivulets, creeks, water channels and canals characterized by a variety of fishing aquaculture activities, such as coastal capture fisheries, brackish water aquaculture and several freshwater aquaculture variants (Muhibbullah et al., 2005) [2].

Sundarban, or the low tide country, or bhatir desh, is such a world which has created its own histories, culture and beliefs. It has been a melting pot not only of various cultures, but it also has assimilated the physicality of their land (desh) into their cultural identity. Keeping in mind the distinctive and unique features of Sundarban delta region and also knowing the preliminary idea of culture and society of the

people inhabiting there, it is quite clear that from the very beginning religion has been playing an important role in the daily life of the inhabitants. It is hardly a surprise that the oral tradition of Sundarban is rich with myths and folk stories. These myths and folk stories are common throughout the expanse of Sundarban, and various rituals and events take place to keep this tradition alive. The myths are the encapsulated forms of their past. Their interaction and relation with the forest are explained in the light of these various myths. It is the crisis of survival that brings together people under a common canopy of belief system.

As their economy is mainly ecology especially forest-based economy, so the lives of the people are depending on the forest and the aquatic resources for their subsistence which is full of uncertainty, danger, life risk, anxiety and fear. To reduce their anxiety and fear, they have devoted themselves to various Gods and Goddesses, pirs and darbeshes. Among all the great traditional religious faiths, the entire religion of the area revolves around the little tradition, territorial saviour Goddess Bonbibi who is the predominant cult figure in this Sundarban delta. As Jalais (2008) opines “for the islanders, Bonbibi goes against the distinctions of caste, class and religion. This is the reason why those who work in the forest as fishers and crab collectors stress the fact that they have to consider all jatis – whether Brahmin or Malo, rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim, or even human or animal – ‘equal’. Tigers and humans ‘share the same food’, they explain, because they both depend on the forest – tigers eat fish and crabs like the villagers, and like them, tigers are greedy for wood. These facts not only make tigers equal to humans but it also ‘ties’ them to humans” [3].

2. About the cult- Bonbibi

The Bonbibi is the most dominating cult of Sundarban delta. The cult of Bonbibi has been borrowed from the twin faiths of Hinduism and Islam and it reflects in their every aspect of life. Hence she is a living example of syncreticism in Sundarbans delta region. Bonbibi is conceived here as a little traditional belief centering rounds the forest and tiger. From the time immemorial as is seen in Hindu tradition, Gods and Goddesses are represented in three forms, like in the form of vessels (ghata), in the form of paintings (pata), and in the form of images (murti). The cult of Bonbibi is worshipped in the form of ghata and murti by the islanders either on daily basis or annually.

As the name implies, Bonbibi has an impact of Muslim community where Bibi is an Urdu term meaning dignified, aristocrat lady and Bon [actually according to dictionary, Muslims used to call their sister as Bun or Baheen] is meaning sister. Again in Bengali terminology Bon means forest or it can be said that Bonbibi is the noble, dignified, respectable lady of forest. The Bonbibi cult does not represent any religious affiliation of a particular group. It celebrates the intimate bond that nature shares with man in Sundarban. Since this area demonstrates nature based economy, the ritual practices interweave these concerns into their structures. Everybody living in the forested area of Sundarban worships Bonbibi considering her as the ‘Sylvan Goddess of the Forest’. She is the sole protector of all the inhabitants depending on forest for their mere sustenance. People, irrespective of their caste and creed worship her with their full faith and reverence considering her as the only undisputed saviour Goddess standing firmly against the malevolent tiger cult God Dakshin Rai from the remote past. The devotees of Bonbibi are mainly the jungle goers, local inhabitants of the area of whom there comes bauleyy (wood cutter), mauley (honey and wax collector) and jele (fisherman). Before starting the journey into the deep, dense forest and the creeks of Sundarban, all the bauleyy, mauley and jele belonging to Hindu, Muslim,

Christian faiths including the tribal devote themselves, pay offerings and propitiate Bonbibi for her blessings to overcome danger.

As Chowdhury (1972) has stated, Bonbibi, the Sylvan Goddess of Sundarban area, is very much similar to Bona Deo of the Romans - the Goddess of fecundity and fertility [4]. It has also been reported by him that the cult of Bonbibi is the cult of Dravidian or Austro-Mongoloid Sylvan Goddess. Moreover, among the Hindus, especially among the disciple of Anukul Thakur, they prefer to call Bonbibi as Bondevi¹- thus a kind of hinduization is taking place at present. Bonbibi is represented by an icon seating on the back of a tiger with Dukhe (a small child, literally means sadness) in her lap or sometime standing beside her left feet. In most of the places, the idols of Bonbibi are accompanied by her brother Shahjangali, Gazi Saheb, and Dakshin Rai who is in the form of a tiger. In some places, instead of seating on a tiger, she seats on a deer or fowl. May the reason be cited from Bonbibi Johurnama² where it states that Bonbibi was nourished by the milk of deer during her infancy. Bonbibi is also represented by a stone slab or by a pot vessel.

The face, dress and ornaments of Bonbibi are quite similar to that of Hindu Goddess like Lakshmi or Saraswati wearing a sari and traditional ornaments. The feet of Bonbibi is decorated by red coloured 'alta' as it is commonly seen among Hindu women folk from the remote past. But, it should be mentioned here that during this study it has been noticed that a very few idols of Bonbibi wear shoe of typical Muslim type. But now all the idols are shoeless which indicates the impact of Hinduization, as most of the idol makers of this region belong to Hindu background; whereas her brother Shahjangali stands beside Bonbibi with a club (gada) in his hand with which he drives away the tiger and his attire suggests an Islamic influence. The icon of Dakshin Rai varies from place to place. Sometimes he is in the form of a tiger, in some other places he is half tiger and half a man standing beside Bonbibi on the other side of Shahjangali. Gazibaba, by his attire, name and beard seems to be a Muslim saint standing in the set beside Dakshin Rai.

3. Myth of Bonbibi

The story of Bonbibi is elucidated in Bonbibi Johurnama [5], Dukhe Kahini and Dhana Manar Pala. It runs as follows -

Once upon a time there used to live a fakir, named Berahim (literally means cruel, heartless as can be seen from the character) with his wife Fulbibi in Mecca city. As they were childless, one day they went to Madina and prayed their heart's desire. Going there, Berahim came to know from Hajarat Nabiji that if he could marry for the second time, he would be blessed with two children of either sex. Knowing this Fulbibibi put one condition, that is, after the impregnancy of his second wife Berahim would have to desert her into the forest to live in exile. Thereafter, Berahim got married with Shah Jalil's daughter Gulalbibi in Mecca. At the time of Gulalbibi's ten months of pregnancy, Berahim took her into the forest with sorrow to desert her as he had committed to her first wife Fulbibi. Berahim was helpless and he decided not to tell Gulalbibi the truth. He told her that as there was nobody, neither her mother-in-law

¹ This is a recent phenomenon of transforming the term 'Bibi' into 'Devi'. It seems to be a process of Hinduization since Hindus are also a part and parcel of propitiating the cult of Bonbibi. It is apparent that many Hindus do not like to use the term 'Bibi' to denote their saviour Goddess. Hence, the term 'Devi' is being accepted by some Hindus. However, the term 'Bibi' as a suffix of Bonbibi stands ubiquitously in Sundarban as the most powerful saviour Goddess.

² It is a Bengali chronicle, depicting the life of Bonbibi, scribed by Ahmed Nuruddin. Unlike other chronicles in Bengali the Johurnama is read out from back to front as is done in case of Muslim scriptures, justifying that scribing the episode of Bonbibi was positively patronized by Muslim thinkers.

nor her sister-in-law to look after her, he would take Gulalbibi to her father's home. On the way Gulalbibi became sick and tired and she slept under a tree. Taking that chance Berahim deserted her wife Gulalbibi alone in that forest and set out for home. Awakening from sleep Gulalbibi could not see anybody and she started crying, lamenting and got fainted. After spending ten days into the forest Gulalbibi begot twin children of either sex Bonbibi and Shahjangali. Thereafter leaving Bonbibi alone into the forest, Gulalbibi went elsewhere into the forest taking her son in her lap. Bonbibi was brought up by four fairies with motherly affection and survived with the milk of wild deer. On the other hand Shahjangali started growing up with his mother and they had their food from the forest. After spending seven years in this way Berahim for conscience's sake and guilty consciousness any more and started searching for his wife Gulalbibi into the forest to take them back home. But by the order of God (Khuda or Allaha), Bonbibi and Shahjangali refused to go with their parents and they decided to stay together and to set out for badabon (Bada means low-lying marshy land in Jessore-Khulna Districts and Bon means forest). With the passage of time the siblings grew up into the forest enjoying all the resources (food and drink) available there.

In their adulthood both of them set out from the Madina and crossing the river Ganga they reached to the eastern part of Hindustan. There Bhangor Shah informed Bonbibi that it was the city of atharo bhati (land of eighteen low tides) of which Dakshin Rai is the emperor. He is the tyrant son of demon (rakshasa) Dandarakshasa and Narayani. Being aware about the situation from Shah Bhangor, Bonbibi along with his brother Shahjangali set out to keep in possession that forest. Thereafter they started praying (ajan) to get the blessings of the almighty God into the forest. Hearing their call Raimoni (Dakshin Rai) became very much afraid and sent his messenger to get the information that besides Barakhan Gazi who were the valiant in to the forest who were they and from where they came. Getting the answers Dakshin Rai became very angry and he prepared himself with all paraphernalia to go for a war with the intruders. Having heard that news Raimoni's mother came early and she made her son understand that it looks odd for Raimoni to fight against a female. Thereafter preventing her son from going to the war, she herself set out to fight with Bonbibi. But after fighting the whole day Narayani could not defeat Bonbibi and finding no other means she held Bonbibi's feet and requested her to save her life. Then Narayani established a friendship (soi patano) with Bonbibi and made her the lord of atharobhati (land of eighteen low tides). Roaming one after another bhati, Bonbibi came to Bhurkunda and along with honey and wax she created here badabon. Bonbibi gave only Kendokhali island and sea shore to Dakshin Rai. This way Bonbibi divided the atarobhati and established her rule over it.

During the month of Chaitra (March-April), the forested area of Sundarban stuffs with honey and people use to go to collect this honey during mahal. Like the other people of this region, Dhonai (might have been named after dhan means wealth) and Monai mauley, two brothers who used to belong to Barijhati, were planning to go in search of honey. Deciding this Dhonai told Monai to prepare a seven sailing ship (sapta dinga) for the said purpose. Monai tried to make Dhonai understand not to go for collecting honey citing many reasons as fear of tiger in the forest, their good economic condition, and so on but it was a vain endeavour. After arranging sapta dinga and man power, they noticed one more person was required. Dhonai, therefore, went to his poor, fatherless, sad cousin Dukhe's home. Dhonai made him understand that only he would be there in the boat as caretaker and cook and in return he would get a lot of money also. Hearing about the plan Dukhe's mother forbade him to go there and told him about the danger and life risk of tiger and many more things in the forest. But Dukhe (literally means sadness) was not interested to his mother's speeches. He was determined to go with his uncle Dhonai to earn money.

When Dukhe was leaving home, his mother told him that Goddess Bonbibi, one kind hearted mother, is there into the forest and only she can save his life in any danger. They all set out in search of honey and wax but after roaming about all here and there into the forest they could not get any trace of honey and wax. On the other hand, Dakshin Rai became very angry finding that nobody from Dhonai's group gave him any offerings, human sacrifice and hence he disappeared all the honey and wax from the forest. Longing for honey, Dhonai and his companions roamed about from here to there into the forest but they did not get any trace of honey and wax. Feeling very sad they remained foodless and they assumed it was surely pretence of any God. At that very night when Dhonai was sleeping, Dakshin Rai appeared into his dream and informed him that he was the son of great demon Dandarakhshasa and Narayani. He is the creator of all the honey and wax of the forest. If Dhonai can give a human sacrifice as votive offering, Dakshin Rai will give him honey and wax full of seven canoes. Dakshin Rai also gave a condition that if Dhonai cannot give Dukhe as an offer in sacrifice he will feed all Dhonai's companions to the crocodiles. Finally, Dakshin Rai made a deal with Dhonai to offer Dukhe to Kendokhali island so that they could have plenty of honey and wax and he disappeared.

As Dukhe was in consciousness, he came to know everything about the conspiracy and he remembered his mother's instruction and immediately he prayed thrice in the name of Bonbibi, the rescuer of danger in the midst of forest. On the other hand, kind hearted mother Bonbibi came to see everything and she told her brother Shahjangali that she is the mother of atharobhati and hence, if anybody prays to her, immediately she will be there to rescue him or her. After few minutes, taking a deceptive figure mother Bonbibi appeared to Dukhe and she asked him to tell the reason of his prayer. Knowing everything mother Bonbibi, with compassion and affection took him in her lap and also informed him to utter the name of mother Bonbibi when Dhonai would offer Dukhe to Dakshin Rai in Kendokhali. Just at that time mother Bonbibi would reach there and she would rescue Dukhe from the paw of Raimoni. After informing the entire things to Dukhe mother Bonbibi dispersed.

After that night, taking the sapta dinga, Dhonai set out for Kendokhali. There he collected plenty of honey and wax and at last leaving Dukhe alone to the beach of Kendokhali, Dhonai again set out for his country. Then seeing Raimoni in the form of tiger Dukhe started uttering the name of mother Bonbibi and got fainted. Listening Dukhe's call Goddess Bonbibi who was in Bhurkunda then, reached there to save Dukhe with her brother Shahjangali immediately. Here, seeing Dukhe alone in the beach of Kendokhali, Raimoni in the form of tiger rushed to Dukhe. Meanwhile Bonbibi reached therein Kendokhali and took Dukhe in her arms and ordered her brother Shahjangali to give Raimoni and his companions a good lesson. Raimoni could not manage to bring that war under his control against Shahjangali even though his all companions like crocodiles, demons, etc., were with him. Lastly to save his own life he reached to Gazi Saheb to whom he informed all the incidents that happened with him. After knowing everything Gazi Saheb told Raimoni that his actual collision was with the bhati's Goddess Bonbibi with whom his mother Narayani had established a friendship when her mother was defeated in war by Goddess Bonbibi. By that time during their discussion Shahjangali reached there chasing Raimoni. Being afraid of Shahjangali, Raimoni requested Gazi Saheb to do something and then Gazibaba mediated between Raimoni and Shahjangali. All of them went to Bonbibi where Gazi Saheb reconciled Bonbibi with great effort. According to the order of Bonbibi, Dakshin Rai by making friendship with Dukhe compensated him with wealth.

Meanwhile, Dhonai mauley after returning from forest informed Dukhe's mother that her only son has fall on prey under tiger's paw. With that shocking news Dukhe's mother became blind and deaf out of

extreme shock. This in turn reeled the seat of kind hearted mother Bonbibi into the forest and she immediately sent Dukhe back to his mother within a very short time with her pet crocodile Seko. Again with the grace of Goddess Bonbibi Dukhe's mother got her eyesight back and got cured of deafness. After recovery, Dukhe's mother advised him to give hajot to Bonbibi by begging alms from seven villages and also to propagate the name and fame of Bonbibi. Dukhe did so. Later with the blessings of Bonbibi Dukhe became a rich man and Chaudhury (local landlord) of that area. Seeing all these and remembering the past incidences Dhonai got afraid and begged mercy to Goddess Bonbibi. Then according to the order of Bonbibi Dhonai gave his daughter to Dukhe. On the day of their wedding Dukhe remembered the name of Bonbibi and Bonbibi appeared in the disguise of a white mosquito and blessed the couple. Thereafter, Dukhe lived happily.

The myth of Bonbibi tells us the relationship between the forest and human dependency on it for their need. This need of human beings is endless and this human greed creates an imbalance and also calls upon a danger until the limits are placed by them only. In this regard, Ghosh (2005) says that 'for Bonbibi's devotees, the parables translate into a belief that the forest must never be entered except in circumstances of demonstrable need. In other words, to go into the forest, while there is still food in the larder is to invite one's own death' [6]. If one looks into the core issues associated with legend, one finds that the legend is essentially a story of class struggle where a woman, deserted daughter of a commoner, frees the society from a tyrannical ruler [7, 8]. These parallel stories of colonial struggle and the identification of class are necessary. The woman is in a position of multiple marginalizations; she is marginalized in the society because of her class, her position in her family and also because of her sex. Bonbibi stands as a typical post-colonial feminist figure. Her elevation to the status of a Goddess is a sort of emancipation. This myth of Bonbibi is very much popular among the people of Sundarban delta. Along with Bonbibi, the names of Shahjangali, Gazi Saheb, Dakshin Rai and Dukhe get popularity and an identity also. They together with Bonbibi are worshipped and appeased. At the studied area in most of the household, than (altar) of Bonbibi is a very common phenomenon here. Than of Bonbibi is an earthen made hut thatched with straw. Except annual worship, daily offerings are made to the deity in this than by the head of the family or by his wife blowing the conch shell. Along with the icons of Bonbibi, Dukhe, Shahjangali and Dakshin Rai, the icon of chhalan (icon of Bonbibi in miniature form give in vow) is also found here which is offered by the local inhabitants in the fulfillment of manat (desire). In front of the icons, five earthen mounds are prepared in the name of Goddess Bonbibi and his four associates presiding in the than. In case of any sickness, accident, problems the inhabitants use this soil of than with full faith and reverence that acts like magic.

Over the century the islanders have accepted Bonbibi as the principle cult which claims to be the central part of their economy and culture. They could have been in a process of absorption by the Hindu Gods but Bonbibi is so prominent here that traditional Hinduism (Shiv, Durga, Kali, etc.) could not penetrate here so deeply. All the inhabitants of Sundarban area propitiate Bonbibi in three different dates in a year according to their traditions. In the studied area, the inhabitants of Jele para of Dakshin para, Pakhiralay, worship Bonbibi in Poush Sankranti (middle of January). It is the oldest puja in whole Pakhiralay village. On the other hand, Hindus and Muslims worship her on the very next day of Poush Sankranti, which is in the first day of Magh (January), while the tribal of Dayapur village worship Bonbibi in Basanta Panchami (month of February, on the day of Saraswati Puja). All these three dates are maintained through Bengali calendar. During the puja (worship) recitation of Bonbibi Johurnama in the

form of panchali³ is compulsory. It is found in Urdu literature and it is read out from back to front side. Previously, Muslim persons, depending on forest and riverine products, were there to read this panchali seating in front of the idol. But in course of time, some of them have passed away, some became too aged to read it out. Now a day, along with few Muslim souls, Hindu people from lower caste group and mostly from medium age read this panchali at various places including household level. Mainly, the local people preferred to call those persons who have good tonal quality, good pronunciation and can read the panchali with full faith, feel and emotion. In this area caste does not play any role to become a priest or in other words, any person from any caste or community background can act as a priest.

Though the forest of Sundarban is infested by tigers and alligators, it is the sole source of livelihood of the islanders. This fact coupled with their fear, anxiety, and high life risk forced them to depend intensely on the forest spirits, Goddess Bonbibi. They are confident of their safety solely depending upon this supernatural and superhuman agency. According to Sur (2006), the space between the river and the forest symbolize the boundary between the world full of magic and religion [9]. As in this region several hundred people are annually killed by the predators, no local people without appeasing Bonbibi ventures in to the forest. Thus, those, who enter into the forest (jungle) for forest products or those who fish in khanri or creeks, require the blessings of Bonbibi for their safe return and successful expedition. That is the reason the forest goers devote themselves to the undisputed sole protector saviour Goddess Bonbibi. The blessing of Bonbibi is earned by the observance of certain rules which have been derived from the parables contained in the legend. Kind hearted mother Bonbibi (Dayar Maa Bonbibi) by her supernatural power protects the life of the people of this area from all kinds of unusual incidents. Irrespective of caste, creed and religious affiliations the devotees pray to the Guardian of the forest Bonbibi saying that ‘mother we are going to your kingdom for our livelihood or mere sustenance, kindly protect us. Please keep vigil for our safe return so that we do not fall prey under your tiger’s paw. We have no other alternative other than to enter your kingdom. Please keep us alive and protect us and thereby save our family and children and also save our wives’ fortune. Only you can protect us’ [10].

The emergence of Bonbibi can also be seen as a part of syncretism as Bera (2005) has attempted to establish it. He stated that the interesting part of the legend of Bonbibi is that today Bonbibi is ‘worshipped’ as a Hindu deity by a Muslim priest wearing a long loincloth (lungi) [11]. During the worship the priest seats face the west and the idol facing the east and offers hajot instead of prasad. Moreover, the very term ‘worship’ of an idol does not fit in the normative pattern of Islamic mode of religious sacrament. Although these rituals are Hindu in form, they begin always with the Muslim invocation ‘Bismillah’ [6]. Again the beards of the male idols (Shahjangali, Gazi Baba) associated with the image of Bonbibi also suggest the impact of Islamic thought over this concept. The acceptance of a Muslim girl, daughter of a Muslim parenthood, as a Hindu deity comes under the purview of the process of syncretism that took birth under the canopies of acculturation and assimilation. During this study, the present authoress came to see a remarkable change regarding the acceptance and belief of Bonbibi, i.e., this savior Goddess is not only limited to the forest goers now but also has taken a position in the household level of the inhabitants in order to get rid of serious diseases, issue, family welfare, etc. The economic deity Bonbibi of the forest is gradually transforming it’s importance and achieving a position in the villagers’ household.

³ It is the Bengali verse of religious text celebrating by propagating and narrating the glory of a deity and often set to music. It is read out in a melodious manner.

The devotees offer hajot (offerings made to Bonbibi) to the deity that comprises of molasses cake (batasa), parched rice (khoi), puffed rice (chinre), fruits, vermillion, etc. While entering the forest the hajot which is offered to Bonbibi, is simple; at the time of returning they build a hut thatched with leaves and sometimes with straw on the river bank near forest side in the name of Bonbibi with the help of dry branches of trees which are easily available in the forested area and then worship her. But after returning from the forest the worship is performed gloriously and in a united way where they offer hajot, read panchali. Lastly, all of the participants give dohai (praying in the name of the deities). One of them mainly the priest says ‘Allaha Allaha’ in the name of Bonbibi, the holy mother Fathema bibi, Fulbibbi, Gulalibi, Shahjangali, Gazibaba and Ali Madat. And also say ‘Hari Hari’ in the name of Dakshin Rai and other Hindu deities.’ This fact also suggests that the impact of twin faiths – Hindu and Islam which are tightly interwoven with the concept of Bonbibi. Everybody accompanies him in chorus repeating the same. The worship of Bonbibi is followed by the offering of a fowl. Actually the fowl is set free into the forest in the name of the deity. On every Friday during mahal (honey-collection) the members of the expedition spend a whole day in fasting. In the evening they offer hajot in the boat, read Bonbibi Johurnama and seeing a star in the sky they take food. On Friday, mauley are restricted according to Bonbibi’s order not to get down to the forested land for any reason because on that very day she along with her brother goes to Bhurkunde (place of Bonbibi) [12].

The existence of Bonbibi Johurnama is very much important in this area and is considered as a sacred panchali or punthi. On the day of worshipping, the priest reads it from the back to front side. It is a long story of Bonbibi in Bengali script version and having a particular rhythm. The Bonbibi Johurnama was first written by Banayuddin in the year 1877. Later, in the year 1287 B.S., i.e. 1880, Marhum Munshi Muhammad Khater composed the same. Now, except these two authors, there are various punthis that are available in the local market of different writers.

The concept of forest (jungle) to the inhabitants of Sundarban is associated with the supernatural power and magical beliefs, practices and superstitions. Forest plays an important role in their livelihood and life too. The fear of tiger attack is not only present into the forest but also in the human habitable areas as because quite often the man eater tiger comes across the forest to the habitable area mainly in search of prey and sweet water causing danger to the lives of the peoples living therein. This type of frequent encroachment to the villages by tiger creates a terror among the villagers. Such straying often causes harm to the islanders in terms of loss of their domestic animals, destruction of crops, etc.

Except the incidences of man-animal conflict that are taking place inside the forest and in the habitable areas, there are other cases of terror too related to the tigers that persist in the mind of the islanders threatening their survival and safety and all these in turn create a terrific, intolerable fear, insecurity and mental toll on them. Out of these psychological, mental and survival pressures, the islanders have no other way to appease the cult of Bonbibi for their survival and safety by immediately reducing their fear and anxiety.

In this situation the lives of the people are full of danger, uncertainty and hazards which bring them all under a common canopy irrespective of their caste, creed and religious affiliations. Here comes the existence of Bonbibi as the most undisputed saviour Goddess of Sundarban forested area. The parallel cult of Bonbibi is Dakshin Rai, the male figurine of non-forest area standing against Bonbibi. Both of them have formed a mythical background which is embedded in the belief system of the local inhabitants as is reflected in their symbolized rituals. This myth plays an important role in their understanding of the forest. Forest is not only just the means of their subsistence but also it is considered

as the complex set of interaction between man-nature and supernatural world. The myth of Bonbibi and Dakshin Rai holds the central part here. To them, Dakshin Rai is not only the beast in the form of a tiger but also he is the defeated king of atharobhati by the saviour Goddess Bonbibi. Bonbibi is the owner of the forest, the blessed soul of God who needs to be appeased for safe journey to the forest and good yield. A boat, which is the sole means of their convenience, is not only a wooden structure but also it is the dwelling place of Kasthadevi, etc. Those, who depend on the forest and riverine products (mainly the mauley, jele, and bauleyy) directly for their sustenance, are locally known as jungle kara lok (forest goers) and when they go to the deep dense forest, they are called jungol korte gachhe.

The concept of supernatural power in the midst of the forest works in two different ways: one from the religious aspect through symbolic rituals and another from the magical aspect that is performed through magical rites. These two parts are inseparable, interdependent, and indispensable aspect in the life of the inhabitants of this area. Forest is full of magic and that is why the blessing of Bonbibi is very much essential in the midst of the forest. In the deep, dense forest magical rites are performed at the individual level by a bauley or gunin (sorcerer) who can alter unusual things into good by the virtue of his magical power and mantras (magical spell).

The term bauleyy is an occupational category who works as woodcutters in the forested region of Sundarban. Again the same term bauleyy (spelling different) is used to mean a sorcerer or such a knowledgeable person who can smell the danger prior into the jungle by virtue of his courage, bravery and mantras (magical spell). By means of his powerful mantras he can convert bad or evil into good and can protect others from any kind of danger in the midst of forest. Each team is compulsorily accompanied by a bauleyy or gunin during any kind of forest expedition. He is the first person to get down from the boat and the last person while getting into the boat by leaving the forest. The responsibility and safety of his team lie on him only. A bauleyy is believed to have the ability to overpower the howling tiger and driving away the beast he can save lives of the expedition party. A bauleyy occupies a high status among the forest-goers and also in his society having extra ordinary qualities in him. He only acts as a medium between the reality and the world full of magic.

A bauleyy can be of two types: hukumer bauley and guner bauley. The hukumer bauleys are mainly from Muslim community. They are the disciples of Mablez Fakir, Ali Madat, and so on. They work in a definite way by exerting hukum mantras or order to the tiger into the deep forest. There is a person in Purba Pakhiralay, named Bonomali Mondal (82 years, Male) who is a bauley and he follows Ali Madat's hukum. Again some others are the followers of Mablez Fakir. On the other hand, guner bauley belongs to any caste group having one or more gurus as the source of their mantras. It is the experience and knowledge of a bauley on which all the teammates depend while the bauley depends on the unity and courage of his team. There are some instances where a bauley falls prey under the tiger's paw and the mantras of a gunin fail to work. The people of this area including the bauley believe that a bauley has to lead a sacred life. According to their belief, such incidences may happen due to some shortcomings in bauley's part: may his attention is diverted to some other things, or he could not spell out the mantras properly or even due to his sin (pap) and deeds (karmafal) or some other reasons. Recently, the need for a professional bauley is gradually decreasing and any of the teammates having the sense of mantras is performing the magical rites into the forest for the sake of the team.

4. Conclusion

Every aspect of Sundarban is unique in comparison to other areas. In this area, multiethnic communities

with their pluralistic religious faiths live together under a common canopy exploiting a common ecological setting, having common hazards in their day-to-day life. As the aids of modern civilization are far away from their reach, they are compelled to keep faith on natural forces depending on various Gods and Goddesses, belonging to both Hindu and Muslim communities. There are mother Manasa, Chandi, Sitala, Panchanan Thakur, Andha Muni, Kalu Rai, Badar Saheb, Ali Madat, Gazi Saheb, Manik Pir, and so on. Some of them are worshipped for survival strategy, while the others are appeased to ward off evil spirits and diseases like pox, cholera, etc. But among them, Bonbibi is the most powerful, undisputed, predominating saviour Goddess of this region. All the inhabitants of this area, irrespective of their caste, creed and religious affiliations worship this deity with their full faith and reverence. According to their belief, Bonbibi is the sole protector of all the islanders from the harsh, inimical environment including all misfortunes that the people face in their daily life for struggle for existence, subsistence and also in case of serious diseases, childlessness. Sylvan Goddess Bonbibi being the sole protector of this lower part of Sundarban together with her myth lies at the cognitive dimension of the people.

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