



THE CULT OF BONBIBI: A FOLK PARADIGM IN DELTAIC SUNDARBANS

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ABSTRACT

The Sundarbans, the largest deltaic mangrove forest, lie along the coastal belt of the Bay of Bengal has been designated as a world Heritage site in 1987 and further as a Biosphere Reserve in 1989 by UNESCO. The rich biodiversity comprises large varieties of flora and fauna most famous of which are the Bengal tiger, estuarine crocodiles and Indian dog shark. The continuous historical record of the Sundarbans is available since the British East India Company took up the administration of the region in their hand in 1765 and decided to reclaim forest land in order to bring it under cultivation. The target of the British was to earn revenue. With this the human habitation started in the tract of Sundarbans. The whole of Indian Sundarbans falls within the state of West Bengal and is distributed in its two districts: North and South 24 Parganas. The Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve comprises altogether 102 islands intersected by innumerable waterways and estuaries. Of the total islands 54 are inhabited and under cultivation, others are under forest occupation. With the independence of India in 1947 and that of Bangladesh in 1971 there was large inflow of population to these islands, resulting in an unprecedented growth of population. The obvious impact of this trend was the excessive pressure on the economic resources. Land resources was limited. Other two resources were water (rivers) and forest. Forest resource attracted the most. Wood was the major forest product. Honey, though seasonal but gives a good return. The waterways inside the forests give a good harvest of fishes, oysters and crabs. Thus, forest was lucrative and could feed a large population.

The close interaction with the forest resulted into contact and conflict between man and wild life. The man-eating tiger in the forest posed a threat to life

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in the forest goes. Having no alternative economic avenues these helpless marginalized people found no other way but to risk their life in maintaining a bare living. What they looked for was an assurance of life, a hope for survival. The myth of Bonbibi provided them the courage to fight out the odds in the forest. Thus, the cult of Bonbibi emerged in the folk tradition of Sundarbans. The myth works as a pivot to their belief system and controls their cognition towards the ecosystem they live in. They looked at the forest through the lens of the myth.

The present discourse intends to highlight the cognition of this folk society towards their immediate environment of forest which forms an important resource of livelihood for them and how the myth of Bonbibi regulates their belief system around the forest through symbolism.

The discourse is based on the ethnographic study of the Gosaba Block of Sundarbans, situated at the farthest end on the eastern boundary, in close proximity to the forest area, separated by the rivers only and a large proportion of its population live on forest resource. Gosaba being isolated with its relative remoteness is less interfered by the outsiders and therefore retained most of its traditional beliefs and practices almost unchanged and also being cut off by the rivers from the cities is less privileged with economic avenues, thereby poverty is a prevailing fact here.

Key words: *Mangroves forest, magical practices, folk traditions, migration, social psyche.*

Introduction

The Sundarbans consist of a deltaic marsh formed by the confluence of the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers in the Bay of Bengal, containing the world's largest mangrove forest. It is situated between 21°30' and 22°45' north latitudes and 88°06' and 89°05' east longitudes, on the southernmost part of Bengal stretching over the territory of India and Bangladesh. The Indian territory of Sundarbans stretches between the River Hooghly on its west and the International border with Bangladesh on the east, much of which runs along the river channel of Harinbanga and Raimangal. The Dampier-Hodges Line forms its northern extent and the Bay of Bengal forms the natural boundary on its southern limit. The total stretch of the Indian Sundarbans is 9630 km² including the areas of human habitation that come under non-forest areas covering 5400 km² and comprising 19 administrative Blocks, all of which come under the districts of 24 Parganas (North and South) of West Bengal. In 1989 the whole area covering both forest and non-forest areas was designated as a Biosphere Reserve under the Man and Biosphere Programme (MAB), an ecological

programme launched by UNESCO (United Nations Educational and Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 1970. The aim of the Programme was to develop rational use of land, conservation of the resources of the biosphere and to improve the relationship between man and environment. Sundarbans is the largest tidal halophytic mangrove swamps in the world, the abode of the Royal Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*). The other ferocious wild creatures are the *Kumir* or estuarine crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) and *Kamot* or Indian dog shark (*Scoliodon laticaudus*). Sundarbans forest is one of the richest hotspots of biodiversity with a wide range of plant and animal species. Because of its large bio-diversity, the Sundarbans National Park was declared as a World Heritage Site in 1987 by UNESCO.

Against this ecological background the present discourse seeks to highlight the cognition and symbolism of forest in the folk tradition of Sundarbans and the cult of Bonbibi. She is a deity that protects people from the dangerous creatures of the forest, especially the man-eater tiger, imbued with the mystic character of Dakkhin Ray, the king of the

south (Dakkhin=south; Ray= king). The discussion would be delimited to the Gosaba Block, the farthest block on the east extremity of the boundary of Indian Sundarbans and adjacent to Reserve forests demarcated by rivers only. Therefore, the villagers get frequent exposure to the forest resources for their living. The discussion is based on extensive fieldwork in the area over a period of more than ten years and the data has been collected through ethnographic method of anthropology.

The history of human interference in Sundarbans started hundreds of years back with the advent of the British East India Company (EIC) after the Battle of Plassey against Siraj-ud-Daulah, the then Nawab of Bengal in June, 1757. In July the same year, the absolute rights over the whole area of 24 Parganas including the vast tracts of Sundarbans was handed over to East India Company through an agreement by Mir Jafar Ali Khan, who succeeded Siraj-ud-Daulah with the help of the British (De, 1994: 87). Following the Battle of Buxar, in 1765, the East India Company acquired the *Diwani* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa (Odisha) and immediately adopted the agenda of utilising the vast forest lands of Sundarban. The objective was to bring the forest lands under cultivation and to establish human settlements in order to enhance revenue. This resulted in the rapid decline of the Sundarbans forest. It started with the distribution of some plots of forest lands to the local *zamindars* (landlords) by Claude Russel in 1770 and the process continued until in 1783 Tillman Henckell, the Magistrate and Judge of Jessore (of undivided Bengal; now in Bangladesh) initiated the second step with definite plans to distribute forest lands in small plots, called *laat* (lot) to the peasants of the adjoining areas and districts who were supposed to clear up the jungle and to make the lands suitable for agriculture. Hunter (1998:47) wrote that about the year 1782 or 1783 Henckell established three *ganjas* or market depot where the producers might meet the traders, in Kachua, Chandkhali and Henckellganj (later corrupted as Hingalganj, now in Indian territory) in this inhospitable tract. It is recorded in the District Handbook of 24 Parganas (Choudhuri, 2001:195) that Tillman Henckell wrote to General Warren Hastings, the then Governor General of India in

December, 1783 about his definite and detailed plan for reclamation of vast tracts of the Sundarbans for human settlement and development of agriculture in a hitherto nonproductive region. In February 1784 Henckell's scheme (Plan) was approved by the Governor General and the large-scale reclamation of Sundarbans forest ensued. According to the statement of the then Commissioner of Sundarbans (Hunter, 1998: 46) between the years 1830 and 1872 altogether 493,907 acres or 771 square miles forest land was cleared and brought under cultivation. The Commissioner returned the total approximate area in 1873 under cultivation at 695,733 acres or 1087, 08 square miles. With this the vast forest land of Sundarbans entered into a new era of history where human and nature came into close contact and conflict. In 1828 the whole area of Sundarbans was declared as Government property. Thus, the EIC now had sole rights to reclaim the forest land, lease out the reclaimed land and develop agriculture.

It was of course not easy to clear up the mangrove forests and convert the forest land into agricultural land. A huge labour force was required and for the purpose the Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Bedia and other tribes from the Chotanagpur Plateau were brought to this area. These early settlers received lands from the lessees. They are identified under the generic term 'Adibasi' though among themselves each tribe maintains their separate ethnic identity. They cleared up the forests, constructed earthen embankments (*gher*) to protect the low-lying lands from saline river water and from the wild beasts and in doing so risked their lives from the man-eater Bengal tigers, snakes, crocodiles and other ferocious animals. From the account of W.W. Hunter (1998: 37-8) we find that the early settlers of 24 Parganas Sundarbans included the people from Orissa (now Odisha), Chotanagpur and Western Bengal. The Oriya people originally came as *Malangis* (salt manufacturers) and as woodcutters. Since the abolition of Government salt monopoly most of them switched over to agricultural occupation and settled down in different parts of the 24 Parganas as cultivators. A colony of them was located on Sagar Island. The other immigrants were the tribes of Chotanagpur and the hill districts of Western Bengal, who were brought for the purpose of

clearing jungle. Hunter (1998: 37-8) observed that, the main population of the Sundarbans was drawn from the adjoining Districts on the north and was gradually increasing.

The flow of human migration to this land continued unabated and shows an unprecedented growth in the area; the population increased from 1.16 million in 1951 to 3.76 million in 2001 (Chowdhury et al. 2016: 3-4). Presently out of total 102 islands in Indian Sundarbans, altogether 54 islands are under cultivation and have permanent human settlements.

The Gosaba Block shares the same process of historicity in regard to deforestation and populating the land under the control of the EIC. In 1903 Sir Daniel Mackinnon Hamilton, a Scottish businessman leased the two islands of Gosaba and Rangabelia from the British government to establish his *zamindari* with a vision to improve the living condition of the poverty-stricken people of British India, and to develop a healthy harmonious society of different castes and creeds. Later he extended his Estate by taking over another island on lease namely Satjelia (all three islands together now form the administrative Block of Gosaba). He made Bengal his second home. About Sir Hamilton, Raha and Saha (2004; 39) observed that he was a utilitarian in his approach and believed that economic development did not imply only economic growth but human resource development as well. The Gosaba Block was, therefore, popularly known as 'Hamilton's *Abad*' (Estate). Most remarkable contribution of Sir Hamilton in his Estate (present Gosaba Block) was introduction of co-operative system and '*Dharmagola*', the community granary. He dreamt of a model village at Gosaba. With the demise of Sir Hamilton in December, 1939 all his schemes faced a set back and after Independence the estate came under the State authority.

In the Gosaba Block apart from the tribal populations the early settlers included the immigrants from Jessore, Khulna and Bakharganj districts of erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and the district of Midnapore and adjacent areas of West Bengal. The immigrant *Rayats* (the subjects of zamindars) comprised mostly the people who were small and marginal peasants, share croppers

and landless agricultural labourers in their original homeland and came to Sundarbans in search of a decent livelihood. Land, rivers and forest form the primary economic resources for the people. Close proximity to the forest in the Gosaba Block opened up a new avenue of livelihood practices based on forest resources. Sundarbans forest is a great resource of wood, and other forest products like honey. The aquatic resources within the forest land are a good source of fishes, crabs and prawns.

The nature of land in Gosaba Block is basically low lying and marshy, locally called *bada*. Another important point of attention was that the river water here is saline which destroys crops and leave the land unfit for cultivation. Thus, to make the land suitable for human habitation and cultivation the reclaimed areas were first protected from the overflow of river water during high tide through erection of earthen embankments known as *gher*.

Due to limited land resources and irrigation facilities, fishing became a predominant occupational pursuit. Varieties of fishes were the initial attraction but later on the attention shifted to the collection of shrimp seedlings (*meen*) which had a high market demand. The uncontrolled collection of *meen* had a tremendous negative impact on the other fishes. While collecting prawn seeds other fish seedlings had been largely destroyed. This factor in association with a number of other environmental factors negatively affected the riverine resources in the habitational areas. In contrast, the forest resource was abundant and could accommodate a larger population for livelihood and was assured. Therefore, in a short period the mangrove forest attracted poor people with the promise of a better living. Forest is the rich resource of wood and honey and the narrow streams, rivulets, canals and watercourses inside the forest have plentiful supply of fish. In the solitude of the forest crabs are also available in plenty. Both fish and crab are available round the year. Honey though seasonal also provides a good source of earning. Wood was the most profitable forest product.

The forest however also poses a threat to life because of the man-eating Royal Bengal tiger and poisonous snakes on land and crocodile and *kamot* in water. But the growing poverty and hunger

pushed the migrants to gather forest resources. These desperate people tried to come to terms with the forest through their beliefs in supernatural entities and related practices that evolved as a result of their interaction and conflict with the wild creatures. The vastness of the forest, as well as the helpless submission to the wilds resulted in a sense of mysticism in the psyche of the people which in turn led to the creation of myths in the folk tradition. In course of development of the society in this difficult terrain and in its struggle for survival, these myths and tales gradually occupied the central place in the social psyche and presented a unique cultural tradition of Sundarbans.

The Cult of Bonbibi

The cult of Bonbibi is unique to the Sundarbans. She originated as a folk deity and is the most revered divinity for both Hindus and Muslims in the Sundarbans. However, it is observed that the cult is most dominant on the eastern bank of the River Matla, the area covering the entire Gosaba Block. The cult emerged out of a myth centering around the glorious victory of Bonbibi over the land of *Atharobhati* and *Badabon*, the nomenclature equated with the present day Sundarbans. The myth of Bonbibi plays a pivotal role and has great influence in regulating the behavioral practices of the people of the region, especially those who are dependent on the forest for their livelihood, whether directly or indirectly. For them Bonbibi is the saviour deity, protecting them from all evils in the forest. However, Bonbibi is never worshipped alone; she is always worshipped in association with other characters of the myth though she dominates them all. Considering her dominance, the area under Gosaba Block may be demarcated as 'Bonbibi cult zone' (Chakrabarty, 2007: 94-5). In the myth the other important characters are 'Dakshin Ray' - the main rival of Bonbibi, Shah Jangali - the twin brother and collaborator of Bonbibi and Barkhan Gazi - an independent landlord, who was on friendly terms with 'Dakshin Ray'. While Bonbibi is dominant on the eastern bank of the Matla river, 'Dakshin Ray' dominates the other side of the River i.e. its western bank, and this area may be called as "Dakshin Ray' cult zone' (Chakrabarty, 2007: 94-5). In the Bonbibi

cult zone 'Dakshin Ray' is the anti-hero but on the other side of the Matla River he is the revered King and protector of his subjects.

Bonbibi is often described by many scholars as the forest deity and quite often, the concept of *Bandevi* is imposed on her. But it is quite evident that Bonbibi and *Bandevi* are not one and the same. In Indian Sundarbans, particularly in Gosaba Block, the concept of *Bandevi* hardly exists. According to Soumen Banerjee, a resident of Pakhirala village (under Gosaba Block) *Bandevi* used to be worshipped in Khulna district by the forest goers. But he has never witnessed the worship of *Bandevi* in his village or in the surrounding villages. However, he submitted that she might be worshipped in some places under Basanti Police Station and in Hasnabad. He recalled that the image of *Bandevi* was very similar to that of a female goddess of the Hindu pantheon with four hands and three eyes (of which one eye is placed on the forehead in between two eye brows) and she is seated on a tiger. But in their (the villagers') cognition Bonbibi appears to be a normal human being in physical appearance (Chakrabarty, 2007: 113). *Bandevi* is the deity of Brahmancial tradition while Bonbibi as a folk deity hailed from Islamic tradition. *Bandevi* is worshipped alone but Bonbibi is always worshipped along with the associated characters. The importance of Bonbibi is established in relation to the cult of 'Dakshin Ray'. But *Bandevi* is not associated with any such cult figure. Observance of fast during the worship is a traditional ritualistic practice of Indian population. In case of Bonbibi this ritual fasting is called *roja* following the Islamic tradition but the term is never applied with regard to the worship of *Bandevi*. Ritual offerings to Bonbibi is called *hajot*, again a Islamic word. Most importantly Bonbibi is not a forest deity; forest is not her abode, it is the abode of 'Dakshin Ray'; Bonbibi conquered the territory; she is the symbol of hope for the human being; she is a saviour of human life in the forest, she ensures their safe return to their settlement. Another important point is that the myth never described any living creature as vehicle of Bonbibi; she is always accompanied by Shah Jangali. Earlier there was no icon for Bonbibi. She was represented in the form of a small earthen mound (*thān*) and she

existed in the narrative form in their oral tradition. Icon (*chhalan*) worship is a relatively recent phenomenon. In making the icons the artists take freedom of imagination and often imitate or are influenced by the icons of great tradition which, in fact, causes confusion for the scholars. In Gosaba and some other areas some icons of Bonbibi show similarity with the goddess of great tradition sitting on a tiger as her vehicle though a figure of a small boy representing Dukhe is placed on her lap, as identification of her motherly characteristics or to give the icon an easily identifiable marker in accordance with the myth. In some images Bonbibi is attired as a typical Musalman woman, in some she is clad in a *sarī* like deities of Hindu order; in some she is sitting on a tiger while in some she is in a cart. In one *chhalan* in the 'Jelepāra' hamlet in Satjelia Hatkhola 2 Bonbibi, holding Dukhe in her lap, is sitting in a cart drawn by a cock. Shah Jangali and Bar Khan Gazi are standing beside the cart. 'Dakshin Ray' in the form of a tiger is placed at a distance. The cock drawn cart of Jelepāra is perhaps a solitary example. Most common icons includes all the five characters, Bonbibi, Shah Jangali, Bar Khan Gazi, Ali Madap and 'Dakshin Ray', the last camouflaged as a tiger, standing on the ground and Bonbibi holding Dukhe in her lap. All these images speak of individual imagination of the icon makers and do not truly represent Bonbibi as narrated in the myth. Sometimes the concept of Bonbibi is explained by the scholars as syncretic, having roots in both Hinduism and Islam. The logic placed behind the theory is that Bonbibi is worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims. But an insight into this folk tradition reveals that in the worship of Bonbibi Islamic culture is dominant so far as prescribed by the oral tradition. No Hindu tradition has been noticed. *Roja* and *Hajot* are Arabic words and used by the people irrespective of faith. Thus, a Hindu woman observes *roja* along with her Muslim counterpart and both Hindus and Muslims offer *hajot* to Bonbibi and her associates. Bonbibi emerged out of the sheer necessity of the society to arouse courage for their daily struggles in life. Thus, the old traditions gradually faded out as they did not serve their purpose in the new habitat. For instance, the twin gods of Hari-Sannasi as well

as *Bandevi* finds no place in this forest society.

The oral tradition of Bonbibi has been transcribed as '(the glory of Bonbibi; Jahuranama= glory;). There are two versions of *Bonbibi Jahuranama*, one version was transcribed by Munshi Mohammad Khater, published in Bengali Calendar year 1287 on the 7th day of *Kartik* (Oct.-Nov.), and the other was by Mohammad Munshi, published on 12th day of *Falgun* (Feb.-March) in 1305 (Bengali calendar). Both the transcribers narrated the same story in their respective style of writings. According to this text the twin brother and sister, Bonbibi and Shah Jangali, were born to Berahim Faqir of Mecca and Gulal Bibi, the second wife of Berahim, destined on the wish of Allah, the Almighty, to propagate Islam in the land of *Atharobhati* (*atharo*=eighteen; *Bhati*= estate; i.e. the land of eighteen estates), the mythical land that has been equated with the land of *Badabon* (low lying marshy forest land), the local nomenclature of present day Sundarbans. A pregnant Gulal Bibi was abandoned by Berahim in the midst of the dense forest on the dictum of Phul Bibi, his first wife. Gulal Bibi was saved by the merciful Allah who sent the heavenly souls to help her in her distress and to help her delivered the twin babies. The latter were brought up safely amidst the forest by the heavenly souls. After seven years Berahim's guilty conscious brought him back to Gulal Bibi and the couple united again. But Bonbibi and Shah Jangali did not accompany their parents and stayed back with an intention to carry out their responsibility as assigned by Allah and started for Madina to gain the blessings of the Almighty. Immediately after successful completion of prayers the twins came to *Atharobhati* in Hindustan, their destination. The land was then under the control of a few feudal kings of whom 'Dakshin Ray' was the most prominent and dominant one holding the large forest tract of *Badabon* under his control. The wealth of the forest also belonged to him. He was born of the sage Dandabaksha, and his wife Narayani. The narration is silent about Dandabaksha and in the folk tradition also he has not been highlighted. But Narayani is an active character in the myth and in the 'Dakshin Ray' cult zone she is present in the folk life as a deity. Gopendranath Basu (1978: 82-3) observed that Narayani was once a prominent

deity in South 24 Parganas. He identified two places where Narayani is worshipped, one in Khari village, and the other is Digambarpur in the Patharpratima Block. Bonbibi crossed the River Ganges and arrived at the country of *Atharobhati* where she, at first, took Bhangar Shah in confidence and disclosed her mission of establishing a Islamic state in the region. Bhangar Shah, being impressed with Bonbibi, agreed to help her in her mission and briefed her about the local rulers of whom the main target of attack became 'Dakshin Ray', the wealthiest man who ruled over others. Bonbibi announced a war against 'Dakshin Ray'. 'Dakshin Ray' prepared his army but his mother Narayani restrained him from fighting against a woman warrior and herself came forward to face Bonbibi. Narayani fought with all her strength but being blessed with the divine power of Allah, Bonbibi won the battle. Narayani submitted to Bonbibi and gracefully proposed friendship. She established her kingdom in *Atharobhati* and on the request of Narayani she gave the charge of one *bhati* (estate) namely Kendokhali to 'Dakshin Ray'. She kept one *bhati*, namely Bhurkunda, under her direct possession and distributed the rest among other associates. While the story appeared to have ended at this point, it further moved on to another story in which Bonbibi has been established as a mother goddess, altogether a different image, in tune with the crisis of this marginalized population. The story line was built up based on the characters of Dukhe, a poor helpless village lad and Dhona, a wealthy honey trader, the privileged class of the society, although the central focus is laid on the benevolent image of Bonbibi through her charisma in favour of the downtrodden and helpless populace of this treacherous terrain. According to this second story, Dhona once decided to go to the forest for collection of honey. When he was about to set sail with his *sapta dinga* (seven dinghies/ vessels; symbolizing his wealthy state), he realized that he was in need of one more person in his team. He remembered Dukhe, the poor village youngster who lived with his old widowed mother and who earned his living by taking care of others' cattle. Dhona invited him to join the team. Dukhe's mother, being afraid of the man-eater tiger, restrained him from going to the forest. Dhona then convinced Dukhe by promising

him a lot of wealth that would be useful in his poverty-stricken life. He also promised to get him a marriage bride. Dukhe, being tempted with so many alluring promises agreed to accompany Dhona in his honey collection expedition. Dukhe's mother was uneasy and secretly advised him to pray to Bonbibi if any adverse situation arose in the forest. In the forest Dukhe could smell some conspiracy against him. He realized that he had been included in the party only to be offered as an offering to 'Dakshin Ray', the demon king of the forest. When the party reached Kendokhali, Dukhe was asked to collect fuel wood from the forest. He tried to resist but was forced to do so. As soon as he got down from the boat the party immediately left leaving him alone in the forest and Dukhe helplessly found himself in front of the man-eater tiger, a camouflage of the demon king. Just before he lost his consciousness, he could pray to Bonbibi for help. His prayer was heard at the seat of Bonbibi at Bhurkunda and in no time she along with Shah Jangali reached beside the poor boy as a saviour. Shah Jangali drove the tiger away and Bonbibi picked up the poor boy into her lap. She took him to Bhurkunda and revived him. Shah Jangali chased the demon king who took shelter with Barkhan Gazi, his friend. But Shah Jangali dragged both of them to the court of Bonbibi. Bonbibi instructed them to compensate Dukhe with wealth and cooperation in every respect. Both accepted the verdict. Meanwhile, Dhona being unaware about all these happenings informed Dukhe's mother about his death due to a tiger's attack. Dukhe's mother repented that Dukhe did not follow her advice in crisis, and had thus fallen prey to the tiger deity. In great trauma she lost her eyesight and fell seriously ill. The news reached Bonbibi at Bhurkunda and she immediately sent Dukhe back to his mother with Seko, the trusted crocodile as an escort. The mother and the son reunited. With the blessings of Bonbibi the old woman recovered her health and regained her eyesight. 'Dakshin Ray' and Barkhan Gazi compensated Dukhe with lots of wealth and a big palace in the village. Dukhe and his mother now had a good and prosperous life. Dhona being afraid of the curse of Bonbibi begged pardon from both Bonbibi as well as Dukhe and on the command of Bonbibi he gave his daughter in marriage with

Dukhe. With the blessings of Bonbibi, Dukhe lived happily.

The story of Bonbibi, thus, has two folds: in one, she is portrayed as a warrior blessed with supernatural or magical power and a prophet (*Pir*) of Islamic pantheon and in the other, she is the savior of the poor and helpless people who find no other option but to surrender before the power of the wealthy and privileged class of people as well as before all adversity to earn the bare necessities of life. In this story 'Dakshin Ray' is described as a demon king who appears in the disguise of a man-eating tiger, the king of the wild, the natural fauna of the region. The importance of a folk story or a myth lies in its embedded cultural and symbolic elements that can throw light on the obscure part of the folk history which has never been written. Folk stories and myths are the folk expression of the unwritten history of the societies that never came into the limelight of Power. The first part of the myth has elements of historical processes of invasion and power struggle between two religious' doctrines, one is the Brahmancial religion (represented by 'Dakshin Ray' and Narayani) and the other is the Islamic one (represented by Bonbibi and Shah Jangali). It is already mentioned that on the western bank of the river Matla 'Dakshin Ray' is the hero and a dutiful king where he is worshipped as Dakshineswar, the god of the south (Dakshin=south; Iswar=god, a word equivalent for the king). There is a temple of 'Dakshin Ray' known as Dakshineswar in Dhapdhapi under the Baruipur Police station in South 24 Parganas. The second part establishes Bonbibi as a benevolent deity, a supernatural power, to whom the less privileged section of population turn to, in their daily struggle of living in an unfriendly eco-system like the Sundarbans. An in-depth probe unveils the fact that in the social psyche the second part of the myth, the story of Dukhe, is pivotal and remains as a major driving force of the socio-religious beliefs and practices. Dukhe stands as symbol of hardship and helplessness. In this economically and territorially marginalized society, particularly in that of the forest goers Bonbibi, as a savior of Dukhe, occupies the central place in their emotional entity. Her identity as a conqueror has been overshadowed by her

motherly image as a saviour deity. An analysis of the myth and its relationship with the life of these poor marginalized people reveals the great importance of this myth as well as the cult of Bonbibi in this folk tradition. The people irrespective of caste and creed have to depend upon a forest infested with the man-eating tiger that continuously poses a threat to life. There are no alternative avenues of living available to them. Hence, they have no option but to submit to the situation, similar to that of Dukhe, the poor lad of the myth, a symbol of helpless entity before the poverty-stricken life. And here lies the success of the allegory of the myth. Each and every forest dweller identifies himself with Dukhe, the victim of poverty and social exploitation. Bonbibi appears to them as a saviour from the attack of 'Dakshin Ray', the malevolent deity. They believe that Bonbibi overpowers 'Dakshin Ray' as narrated in the oral tradition. This emotional attachment and attribution of the character of Dukhe on one's own self is the key to the success story of the cult of Bonbibi in this land. The characters of the myth are easily identifiable in real life. During an interaction with Ajhar Gazi, an old man and a veteran forest dweller, he broke into tears while narrating the story of Dukhe and Dhona Moule (*moule*= the honey collector). He was sitting in the courtyard of his small hut from where the dark contours of the forest on the other bank of the river were visible. Looking towards the forest he started narrating the story. After a while he unknowingly switched over to first person imposing the character of Dukhe on himself as if he was in a desperate situation. He completely lost himself in the depth of the story where he and Dukhe became identical. A similar situation was experienced with Haripada Mandal from Pakhirala village; he similarly became immersed in the story and identified himself with Dukhe. Due to acute poverty in life Haripada had to opt to go to the forest to gather resources when he was only ten years old. His poor widowed mother found it difficult to bring up her children with her meagre income. Haripada faced a tough time in the forest under the threat of life. He said that Bonbibi had appeared in his dream when he was young after Haripada had prayed to her to save his life. Bonbibi, had taken pity upon the child and had given him two secret

words to chant that supposedly keeps him safe in the forest. He believed that he was saved by Bonbibi. Similar to Ajhar Gazi Haripada also, in course of storytelling unknowingly submerged himself in the character of Dukhe, and the story instead of being a myth became the story of Haripada, i.e. Dukhe in reality. There were so many similar instances each of which showed the deep impact of the story upon their psyche and in this way the myth and symbols intermingled in their real life and acted as regulatory mechanism in their belief system. All their beliefs, rituals and magical practices revolve around the myth.

Bonbibi is worshipped in two ways: one is in an organized way of offering reverence which is open to all (i.e. public) and the other is through magical practices which is individualistic and secret (i.e. private). The former is practiced in the locality outside the forest and the latter is performed inside the forest. The boundary of the forest seems to act as the line of demarcation between these two ways of propitiation. There are a lot of sociological, anthropological and archaeological arguments on the characteristics of religion and magic, the way they are similar or dissimilar. In the present discourse the intention is to analyze and interpret the situation from people's perspective through ethnographic point of view.

In the public, the deity is worshipped through simple prayers by the forest goers in their own colloquial usages with offerings of locally produced sweetmeats (*batasa*) prepared with molasses and sugar and *shirni*, a special item of Islamic tradition, made of flour, milk, sweetmeats etc. The story of *Bonbibi Jahuranama*, popularly called '*Bonbibir punthi*' is recited by one of the worshippers and other participants listen to that with great reverence. Earlier it was predominantly a male's domain but nowadays women are equally participating and sometimes a woman is given the chance to read out the *punthi*. The reason is that in earlier days only men were supposed to go the forest but with increasing population pressure and pressing needs women are also going to the forest nowadays for earning a livelihood. They mostly go for crab hunting and collection of *meen* or prawn seeds, though exceptions are there where the women

join the family members in fishing expeditions. At present, women also form small teams to venture into the forest for crab hunting and often face the attacks by tigers. In recent years *meen* collection has been prohibited by the forest department keeping in view the negative impact on the growth of prawn population.

Traditionally Bonbibi is given *hajot* in *thān* (the altar). A total of five earthen mounds representing Bonbibi and her associates namely Shah Jangali, Bar Khan Gazi, Ali Madap and 'Dakshin Ray' were erected on a lowly built earthen platform. Offerings are made to all the characters including 'Dakshin Ray'. But nowadays icon (*chhalan*) is getting popularity everywhere in Sundarbans. Before any forest expedition worship of Bonbibi is a must. Besides, on the first day of the month of Magh (Jan.-Feb.) every year Bonbibi is worshipped compulsorily and it has taken a shape of a community festival nowadays.

The magical practice is restricted to the forest, and performed only during an expedition. Magical rites are performed by the specialist called *Gunin* or *Faqir* (also called *Baule*), who are believed to have miraculous power with the blessings of Bonbibi and can invoke the power in himself through chanting *mantra* (magical spells). *Mantras* are secret and pure and should not be uttered publicly. *Mantra* is exclusively the authority of men. The strength of *mantra* lies on the observance of purity in the behavior of both *Gunin* and the team members. *Mantra* are of different categories. Some *mantra* is acquired from a preceptor or *Guru*, the specialist teacher who are mostly *Pir* and *Faqir* from Islamic faith like Moblej Faqir, Ali Madap and is called *hukumer mantra*, some are received directly from Bonbibi in a dream and is called *paona mantra*, some may be acquired on individual interest from various sources and is called *guner mantra* (Chakrabarty, 2007: 113). Though acquired through various ways, all are believed to be equally effective in defense of 'Dakshin Ray' as all the *mantra* are sanctified with the blessings of the saviour deity. *Mantra* are in simple colloquial language where mercy of Bonbibi is sought to save them from the ferocity of 'Dakshin Ray' as she saved poor Dukhe. She may keep them as safe as a baby in the mother's womb. With

absolute faith on Bonbibi as well as on these magic spells and ritual performances they enter into this mangrove forest, the abode of man-eater, the Royal Bengal tiger, to earn the bare necessities of life. If they come back safely, it is the mercy of the deity, if not the blame falls on an individual for failing to maintain purity. This way the cult of Bonbibi endures as the central figure in this folk tradition.

Cognition and symbolism of forest in the folk tradition

This society living on the fringes of the forest, is intimately involved with mysticism with all its wilderness. In the cognition of the people, forest (*Badabon* in their usage) is the treasure land of 'Dakshin Ray', once the dominant king of *Atharobhati*, the erstwhile ruler of *Badaban*, who deserves reverence from the subjects of his lost kingdom. Thus, in the social psyche 'Dakshin Ray' is also recognized as a deity, a supernatural entity. They believe that it is he who protects the forest and its wealth from destruction in the disguise of a man-eating tiger. The forest is called as *mal* (the property), which though conquered by Bonbibi but continued to remain in the custody of 'Dakshin Ray'. The word *mal* might have been a corrupted form of *Mahal*, the estate or property or demarcated area /district. *Mom-madhu-khari-jari* (wax-honey-wood respectively) all are under the control of 'Dakshin Ray' and hence for utilizing these resources he is to be appeased through worship. Thus, along with Bonbibi, 'Dakshin Ray' is also paid reverence. Other characters worshipped in association with Bonbibi are Shah Jangali, Bar Khan Gazi and Ali Madap. The myth is silent about Ali Madap but in the local practice he occupies a place along with Bonbibi. He was perhaps a Faqir/Pir (Islamic mendicants/religious person) and some *hukumer mantras* are believed to have transcended from his school of preaching. In Pakhirala village there is a family altar dedicated to Ali Madap and he is worshiped at the familial level as a welfare deity especially for the children. An icon of Ali Madap (who resembles an Islamic saint) has been installed at the altar. It is a solitary case found in the area. The family by faith is Hindu.

The forest as '*mal*' symbolises a place of divinity and therefore its purity is to be maintained.

The villagers refrain from spitting, defecation and any other act which may hamper the sanctity of the land. As soon as they arrive in the forest, they first pay their reverence to '*mal*' by touching the ground and immediately worship Bonbibi. She symbolises life and hope for them, as a mother and as a saviour. Hence they pray to her to keep them safe. 'Dakshin Ray' symbolises death and hence they pray not to meet him ever. A *thān* with five earthen mounds is erected to pay reverence to the deity, her associates and 'Dakshin Ray'. A fowl is freed into the forest symbolising sacrifice to the deity. It is followed with loud expression of salute to Bonbibi as well as the Almighty, and called *dohai* in their local vocabulary. The Muslims raise the name of *Allah* and Hindus that of *Hari* as *dohai*. Entering the forest implies entering the world of magic. It is altogether mystical for them. Each expedition team is compulsorily accompanied by a recognised *gunin* who performs the magical rites inside the forest. Magic to them is the power that can transform an inauspicious into a favorable situation. Magic signifies man's response to inherent fear towards the unknown, unexplored and unexplained world symbolised by darkness. *Mantra* symbolises man's intention to change the uncontrollable into controllable. The *Gunin* bears the responsibility of safety of the whole team in the forest and hence he is the first man to get down from the boat leading the team into the forest and to occupy the tail end position while leaving the forest. The team depends on his magical performance for their safety. He has a number of magic spells in his repertoire to protect the team from the attack of 'Dakshin Ray'. The forest goes consciously avoid uttering the name of the man-eater beast (tiger; *bagh* in Bengali) in simple terms. They refer to the tiger in various respectable nomenclature such as 'Dakshin Ray', Bade Miyan (*bade*= great; *miyan*= Islamic word for a respectable person), Raymoni (the king) and so on. If any person falls prey to the tiger the people never speak about it directly; it is regarded as inauspicious for them to do so. They would report it as '*jangale porechhe*' i.e. fallen down in the forest (*jangal*=forest; *porechhe*= fell down). In case of any such incidence the team immediately leaves the forest and place a white flag on the spot to alert other teams. It is believed that simply by touching

the ground the *gunin* can foresee the presence or absence of the tiger in close vicinity, symbolically expressed as ‘*mal garam*’ (*garam*=hot) and ‘*mal naram*’ or ‘*mal thanda*’ (*naram*=soft, *thanda*=cold). The former symbolizes the presence of the tiger and the latter as absence of a tiger nearby. Accordingly, the *gunin* applies his power through magic verses. Phoni Gayan, a *gunin* by profession and a veteran forest goer from Dayapur village, believes that a *gunin* is required to be brave and mentally strong; he should keep himself alert about his surroundings and should have the ability to take quick decisions. He described one of the fearsome experiences he faced in the forest when a tiger suddenly appeared before his team. He took the front place guarding his team and started howling as loud as he could. His team members got the message and they also started shouting. The collective roar could overpower the roar of the tiger and it fled away. He took the decision to leave immediately and returned safely with the team. He honestly confessed that it was his immediate spontaneous reflex and could work that time. There is always a threat under such circumstances to take a suitable decision and that may or may not work. If it works credit goes to Bonbibi, if not the *gunin* takes the responsibility on himself. There were instances when a *gunin* was attacked by a tiger and lost his life. Phani Biswas, a regular visitor to the forest opined that besides the strength of *mantra* unity and courage of the team are the most important factors inside the forest land. There should be perfect synchronization of attitudes between the team and *gunin* as well as also between every member. The team keeps their faith on the experience, knowledge and the magical power of the *gunin* and in turn the *gunin* depends on the unity, bravery and courage of the team. Under no circumstances do the *gunin* or any team member try to escape leaving behind his co- members in trouble. Rather they take every risk to save the team mates and there lies the strength of this folk society amidst severe poverty and struggle for living. Moreover, the embedded faith on Bonbibi and on her benevolent role as a mother and a saviour works as a basic unifying force bestowing courage to face all odds in the forest. The myth of Bonbibi and ‘Dakshin Ray’ stands pivotal in the man-forest relationship

in the region. In the cognition of this folk society, the forest is understood not in simple terms of man-nature interaction but as a complex set of interaction between man, nature and the supernatural. The contact and conflict with the wild are seen and explained solely in the light of the myth. Thus, the forest is not simply a land of mangrove vegetation but the estate of Bonbibi, assigned with sanctity and hence the maintenance of its purity is their responsibility. The tiger is not simply a wild beast but the camouflage of ‘Dakshin Ray’, the defeated king of *Badabon*, the custodian of the wealth of forest, a deity. A crocodile is the trusted assistant of Bonbibi represented by the character of ‘Seko’ who escorted Dukhe safely to his mother. A good collection of honey, a good catch of fish, safe return from forest- all depends on the mercy of Bonbibi. If anything untoward should happen in the forest the responsibility is fixed on the person themselves; the blame is attributed to their own shortcomings - either in their ritual performances or in maintaining the purity of forest and any other shortfall from their part. Success is always credited to the saviour deity. Suhrid Sardar of Dulki village is confident about the strength of *mantra*. He believes that *mantra* fails only when the *gunin* fails to spell them out in the right order or his attention is diverted to some other things (Chakrabarty, 2007: 98). With all loyalty to Bonbibi he also believes that alertness and bravery and the team spirit work inside the forest.

Discussion

The unique folk tradition of Sundarbans formed out of the complex interaction between man, his livelihood practices and a typical ecosystem of the mangrove forest imbued with mysticism and inherent fear. The myth of Bonbibi, especially the story of Dukhe brings assurance in their fear borne life, a promise of a safe life against all odds. It was perhaps immediately accepted in the mental horizon of the new migrants and formed a distinct cultural set up. The exposure to the Sundarbans forest was obviously not new to the people even before the arrival of the East India Company for the Sundarbans forest was a great resource of timber, honey and fire wood. Besides, *golpata* (*Nipa fruticans*), a variety of palm species that naturally grows in the Sundarbans,

the forest was largely used for collecting thatching for the hutments. Hunter (1998: 24) reported that *golpata* used to be exported from Sundarbans forest to Calcutta (now Kolkata) in large quantity for this purpose. The worship of *Bandevi* in Khulna region by forest goers as stated by Soumen Banerjee of Pakhirala village supplements this observation. It is often expressed by the people of Gosaba block that Musalmans were reputed as veteran forest goers and wood cutters.

During the British period there was no restriction on wood cutting; no revenue was also collected from the woodcutters. Firewood was the principal article collected from the forest for trading. Hunter (1998: 21) reported that, "The woodcutters of the Sundarbans appear to have had all along a prescriptive right to fell the forest timber, and no Government revenue is realized from the forests." In 1866 the government leased the forest rights in the unappropriated lands of Sundarbans to the Port Canning Company but soon the lease was revoked on the ground that the Company's agent practiced oppression in realizing the fees from the public (Hunter: 1998: 21). Hunter described (1998: 22) that the woodcutters were predominantly from the lower order of Muhammadans (Muslims) followed by the Hindu castes like Pods (Paudra Kshatriyas), Bagdis, Kaoras, Tiors, Chandals (Namasudras), Kaibartas and Kapalis. He also stated that these castes were cultivators and fishermen and used to employ their spare time in woodcutting. So, they were occasional woodcutters. He also mentioned (1998: 31) that all the woodcutters were very superstitious and would not enter the forest without a *Faqir (Gunin)* who supposedly received power from worshipping the presiding deity of the forest and with that power he could overpower the tiger and other wild beasts. All these descriptions show the continuity of traditions in terms of beliefs and practices.

The worldview of this folk society is based on their cognition of forest which arose out of their contact and conflict with the wild animal as the forest was the important resource for their livelihood practices. The presence of the Royal Bengal tiger (meant a threat of life) is the key factor for implied mysticism of the forest and in this very perspective the myth of Bonbibi earned its importance. The

myth originated from Islamic tradition but the story equally influenced the Hindu populations who shared a similar crisis of life in this new habitat with their Muslim counterparts. The myth of Bonbibi gives them an assurance of life; the courage to fight against all odds in the forest and in doing so, they developed a strong sense of togetherness irrespective of caste and creed. The forest economy is based on team spirit. The identity of caste or creed does not come in between the team mates. The expedition team is called *sain* comprising both Hindus and Muslims with unquestionable trust on each other. They cook together, share their food and follow the same folk beliefs and practices centering around the cult of Bonbibi. There is an unuttered commitment among the *sain* members to help each other. The members of the *sain* may change in different expeditions but the trust and feelings remain unchanged and this fellow feeling and silent assurance of cooperation forms the basis of social cohesion in this secluded marginalised society.

The aquatic resources, whether within and outside the forest, are not free from danger because of the presence of crocodile and *kamot*. Those who engage themselves in collection of shrimp seedlings (*meen*) in the rivers are exposed to the attack of these two ferocious creatures. That is a severe threat to their life. Fishing, *meen* collection and crab catching within the reserve forest areas also carry high risk of tiger attack, apart from crocodile and *kamot* (shark). All these hardships and risk of life are believed to be mitigated through the blessings of the supernatural (here Bonbibi). The success story of the Bonbibi cult is that it has transformed a warrior to a Mother Goddess cult in the psyche of the forest folk of the Sundarbans. Thus, Bonbibi occupies a central place in this folk tradition as a faith and all their beliefs and practices have evolved around her cult.

The life of this folk society revolved around land, rivers and forest. Land resource was limited. With the uncontrolled influx of population land resources became insufficient. Water resource outside the forest was exploited to its full extent, rather it was over exploited owing to population pressure and unwise utilization due to over collection of shrimp seedlings which badly damaged the other fish population, and resulted in

shortfall of supply of fishes. But the presence of the man-eater tiger protected the forest from over exploitation. Later, the Government's conservation policy restricted the use of forest resource to a large extent. Restriction on woodcutting and on shrimp seedling collection further controlled the exploitation of forest resources. But the immediate impact of such restrictions is the increasing pressure on crab catching and fishing inside the forest areas. Nowadays women also enter into the forest area for crab hunt and are, therefore, prone to tiger attack. Most of the attacks go unreported as most of the entries are officially unrecorded. Thus, these helpless people keep their full trust on Bonbibi as a saviour and on their teammates for immediate help. Keeping trust on the ritual practices and on the magical power of the *Gunin* these poor people fight back the tiger with full vigour either bare handed or with a *Hental* (*phoenix paludosa*; a wild date tree, very small, average diameter 4 inches;) stick. Sometimes man wins, sometimes the tiger. If the man wins credit goes to Bonbibi. If not, responsibility is fixed on the poor fellow.

The unique ecosystem of Sundarbans as a habitat brought forests and its wild life close to this folk society which they found hard to cope up with on one hand and lucrative on the other. Forest stands at the center of their conscious. It is *mal* - the sacred land, the estate of Bonbibi, and the abode of 'Dakshin Ray', who is the custodian of its treasure. He protects the treasure in the guise of a man-eating tiger, a threat to life. He submits only before Bonbibi, the owner of *Atharobati*. Bonbibi symbolises hope and life. All these beliefs, centering round the myth and accompanied with rituals, religious and magical rites and the harsh reality of struggle for survival intermingled into the matrix of their culture and formed a distinct cultural tradition and world view that is deeply embedded in the social psyche of this folk society cutting across the boundary of castes and creeds.

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