

Myths in the Sundarbans

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Abstract

There is a wealth of religious and ecological knowledge housed in Bengal's interrelated historical spiritual framework, which points to a complicated theological syncretism. A deep bond between people and their natural surroundings has always been a central theme in religious thought and practice. Amitava Ghosh has depicted some famous myths of the Sundarbans, such as Dakhsin Rai Puja in the Hungry Tide, Bonobibi Puja in the Jungle Nama, and Manasha Puja in the Gun Island.

Keywords: religion, culture, legends, nature.

INTRODUCTION

According to Rai et al and Bose et al, the physical environment, cultural values, conceptions, and rituals are spatially dispersed and continue to interact, evolve, and integrate with the traditions of other communities. Over the course of several centuries, the religious sensibilities of the people of India have been intimately connected to the rural culture and woods of the country. The approach is recorded in ancient writings. Over the course of several of those works, the mangrove plant is used as a key religious image. A variety of perspectives, particularly those impacted by religion and caste, can be seen reflected in the many mangrove belts that can be found in India. According to Datta et al, people of many religions have used mangrove trees as a symbol of their existence, the way they sustain themselves, and their culture. Hindus have a long-standing custom of paying respect to several mangrove species in a number of mangrove zones across India. As a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation, people in certain rural areas have the notion that if they submerge themselves in a pond that is surrounded by mangrove trees, they will be able to recover from any disease. There are a significant number of Muslims in Gujarat who consider the mangrove forest to be a divine entity and make it their mission to save it from any and all sorts of destruction. As symbols of the Islamic faith, mangrove trees that are decked with green cloths or flags are considered to be beautiful. According to Bose et al, anthropologists have reached the conclusion that the indigenous society that lives in the vicinity of the Sundarbans mangrove forest has a strong belief in the divine essence of all natural entities and the totemic significance of these phenomena.

TRADITIONAL CULTURES AND MYTH AS REFLECTED IN THE FAMOUS NOVEL- THE HUNGRY TIDE, JUNGLE NAMA, AND GUN ISLAND

Ghosh's storytelling adopts an exotic perspective; numerous works of fiction and nonfiction are infused with the enduring remnants of colonialism. His profound interest in humanity extends well beyond the confines of human civilization's history.

He is revered in the concealed narratives of humanity and other realms, encompassing fauna and creatures on Earth. It may be linked to the scientific narrative of The Calcutta Chromosome (1995) or the Bonbibi myth from The Hungry Tides (2004). Ghosh seeks to highlight the old civilizations of modern humanity to enlighten individuals regarding the rudimentary culture of coexistence. The motif aims not only to provoke the reader but also to heighten their awareness of the significance of these ideals and to motivate them to engage both intellectually and physically in their preservation. His endeavor is to guide society onto a trajectory conducive to the universe's sustained existence. Consequently, the fictional realm of Ghosh underscores the environmental issues pertaining to ecological challenges. The narratives of Bonbibi are documented in several writings referred to as the 'BanbibirKeramati' or the 'BanbibirJahuranama.' Subsequently, a Muslim author named Munshi Mohammed Khater from Govindapur composed it, and it was published toward the close of the nineteenth century. Khater states in his foreword that the mythology is not his invention; he only rendered it into rhyme at the behest of the populace. The author employed a linguistic style characteristic to Muslim religious writing, incorporating parts of Urdu and Arabic. The Sundarbans is an extensive mangrove ecosystem located in Bangladesh and West Bengal. This region contains allusions to the mythology of 'Bonbibi.' In Ghosh's narrative, a large-eyed female character clad in a sari is designated as the 'Bonbibi' or 'Bandevi.' He transforms into the literary figure "Lady of the Forest," embodying the maternal essence of the Sundarbans, akin to the African Yoruba tradition. Bengal is a densely populated state inhabited by Hindus and Muslims, alongside a significant population of wildlife thriving in its woods. Their coexistence is symbolized by the Goddess Bonbibi, revered by both communities in the deep Sundarbans jungle. Furthermore, the term 'bibi' is typically employed as a surname by Muslim women; it serves as a distinctive appellation for the goddess in the Sundarbans. Ghosh emphasizes how displaced communities must confront the antagonistic forces of the natural environment and indifferent governments that overlook human survival efforts in the pursuit of greater ecological objectives. By depicting the Sundarbans as an ecologically sensitive area, he emphasizes that addressing global ecological issues necessitates a thorough examination of the human and cultural factors interwoven with natural ecosystems. Amitav Ghosh's book offers readers a unique perspective on the weird and exotic as a symbol of harmonious cohabitation among all species on Earth.

DAKKHIN RAI PUJA

Dakshin Rai, the deity of tigers, is an important folk figure in the Sundarbans. Comprehensive analyses of the Dakshin Rai stories are present in punthi literature, notably in Raimangal, authored by Krishna Ram Das in 1686 (Sarkar, 2010). This location features two distinctly different types of the deity Dakshin Rai. In prevalent Bonbibi legend, Dakshin Rai manifests as a tiger-demon in the 'down' islands, whereas in several 'up' regions, he is regarded as a god-like entity and a protector for his followers. He may be a landlord, a sovereign over extensive regions of the Sundarbans, a valiant hunter safeguarding local people from tigers, or the military leader of Mukut Rai, a formidable local monarch (Basu, 1966; Choudhury, 2010). Another myth claims that Dakshin Rai was the progeny of Shiva, and that the head of Ganesha, when detached from his body, descended in the southern (or dakshin)

direction to become a god known as Lord DakkhinRai, occasionally referred to as Dakknineswar (Basu, 1966). His distinctive temple is located in Dhaphapi, approximately 10 kilometers from Baruipur in the South 24 Parganas district. Dhaphapi was initially a component of the forested regions of the Sundarbans. Previously, in the lack of an idol, woodcutters (bauli) would pray before a rock symbolizing the deity. A rock fragment positioned before the current idol is still venerated today. The current deity of Baba Dakkhineswar, or DakkhinRai, is a late addition, and the temple was constructed in 1909. The distinctive idol represents a hunter, a white deity shown as a tall, robust human figure wielding a gun. During one of my visits to Dhaphapi, the proprietor of the photography studio adjacent to the temple conveyed his personal perspective. His mother was employed in the temple for an extended period. At one point, she was severely ill and required surgery. The family was powerless, yet nonetheless succeeded in reaching the hospital by 'the mercy of God.' He was convinced that Lord DakkhinRai had come to heal the sick woman. Numerous tales and anecdotes are prevalent in Dhaphapi and its surroundings, rendering Rai a deity residing in the hearts of all. The puja at Dhaphapi temple during CharakSankranti draws a substantial crowd. Additionally, in mid-January (PousSankranti and on the 1st of Magh according to the Bengali calendar), the puja of DakkhinRai is conducted on a grand scale. The 'Jatal Puja' on the 1st of Magh is regarded as a commemoration of his birthday. From January to mid-July (the month of Asharh), DakkhinRai's temple is visited by devotees (Choudhury, 2010). DakkhinRai, a folk deity, is honored through rites conducted by a Brahmin priest. In the lack of any 'original' mantra for him, his mythology has been developed over the years around Shiva and Ganesha. Consequently, priests established specific mantras and procedures for Shiv puja that are widely practiced.

BONBIBI PUJA

Over time, Bonbibi has become the emblem of the Sundarbans' indigenous deity and is deeply embedded in the rituals and lives of the inhabitants, particularly on the 'down' islands. Bonbibi signifies the 'Lady of the Forest.' She is venerated as the guardian of the forest and all its inhabitants. Inhabitants of settlements adjacent to the Bidya River and its tributaries frequently visit the forest. The majority of settlements in the Gosaba block of the South 24 Parganas district are divided from the forest by either a broad river or several narrower tributaries. The interaction between the settlement, river, and forest is the genius loci of the Sundarbans. Bonbibi's presence in several locations exemplifies this coexistence. The Bonbibi mythology originated with the Muslims. The interaction with Sufi saints facilitated religious conversations, leading to the proliferation of the Bonbibi legend. Various iterations of Bonbibi Jhurnama were composed throughout the final two decades of the 19th century, signifying the increasing popularity of Bonbibi during that period. The immigration of Bengali Muslims from East Pakistan during and after the partition is thought to have enhanced the importance of this cult in recent years, gradually supplanting DakkhinRai east of Matla (Bera et al. 2010). Her mythological narrative comprises two components. The initial section delineates how Bonbibi, accompanied by her brother Shah Jangli, both divinely sent, journeyed from Mecca to the Sundarbans, engaged in combat with the tiger demon DakkhinRai, and liberated the populace. The second section extols her act of rescuing an unfortunate kid from the grasp of DakkhinRai, who subsequently vowed to refrain from harming any follower of Bonbibi. 'Bonbibi-r Upakhyan' (the Story of Bonbibi) is a widely recognized folk performance among locals, derived from the latter segment of Bonbibi's mythology,

typically enacted by a collective of farmers, boatmen, fisherman, honey gatherers, woodcutters, and others. These players genuinely believe that disseminating the magnificence of Bonbibi is their means of appeasing the goddess, who, in return, would safeguard them. The Bonbibi idol alters its appearance in several locations. In predominantly Muslim regions, her divinity resembles an aristocratic Muslim woman, whereas in Hindu regions, she takes on the appearance of a conventional Hindu goddess. Puja occurs at many scales: in individual households, in groups prior to forest excursions, and within communities that typically share similar occupations. The annual worship of Bonbibi typically aligns with significant celebratory days in the Hindu calendar, such as MakarSankranti for both Hindus and Muslims, and BasantPanchami for tribal communities (Bera et al. 2010). Bonbibi rites represent a syncretic heritage distinct from traditional Puranic practices. Any individual may pray to the goddess in a manner deemed suitable. Devotees recite vernacular poetry rather than in Sanskrit or any other 'sacred' language. Although Muslims do not engage in idol worship, they do pray to Bonbibi in their own manner before entering the forest. The survival instinct, one would argue, transcends conventional religious practices. Small Bonbibi temples are located along the woodland's periphery; locals tie red flags to beg the goddess's protection while entering the area.

MANASA PUJA AS REFLECTED IN THE GUN ISLAND

Goddess Manasa Devi represents the unity of all life within nature across her various expressions. Her power manifests in water and stone, in tombs and caves, in animals, birds, snakes, fish, hills, trees, and flowers. Ghosh posits a comprehensive understanding of the purity and mystery inherent in all aspects of the earth (Bera et al. 2010; Khoche, 2021). According to Bose et al (2024), the Goddess gradually withdrew into the depths of forests or to the summits of mountains. Currently, her existence is confined to beliefs and narratives. Isolation from nature and the earth leads to anarchic outcomes for humans. This is evident in contemporary society. The cycles persistently continue, and the Goddess, as elucidated in Gun Island, emerges from the forests and mountains to prompt us to reflect upon and reconnect with our fundamental human roots. In the novel Gun Island, the Goddess Manasa Devi represents the protective, authoritative, and nurturing essence of nature. Her capacity for rejuvenation and reconstruction revitalizes the earth, even in the face of systemic and total destruction (Anjana and Ansari, 2024). Her essence and presence in the text are both universal and enduring. Gun Island transitions from Brooklyn and Kolkata to Venice. Ghosh revisits the themes of migration and climate change, analyzing them through verbal narratives, contemporary histories, and migration, while engaging with both traditional and modern myths. Ghosh's narrative, comprising multiple interwoven stories, begins at a temple located in the Sundarbans of West Bengal (Biswas, 2019; Khoche, 2021). The temple, attributed to the Gun Merchant as a tribute to Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes, enhances the narrative's intricate prose. The legend surrounding the temple is a narrative that the protagonist, Deen, aims to reveal. During a visit to the temple situated within the expansive Sundarbans, Deen encounters the king cobra, the guardian of the temple. Motivated by ego and fear, Tipu attempts to conquer the king cobra and is subsequently bitten (Khoche, 2021). This initiates a sequence of unusual and remarkable journeys that blur the distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, as well as the known and the unknown, leading the central character across various geographies and temporal dimensions. The symbolic interplay of topographical locations is evident in Los Angeles, the Sundarbans, Venice, and New York. Each of these served as an entry point for

pathfinders who established extensive kingdoms based on the resources extracted from vulnerable nations. The enslaved individuals from conquered territories were transported across oceans to unfamiliar regions to serve oppressive masters. The central characters of the novel are immigrants of a different nature, seeking to escape the poverty of their origins and traversing borders in search of new residences.

Writers have used the traditional wealth of literature, culture, folklore, myth, rituals and stories to craft their stories to drive home the necessity to cherish the planet and its inhabitants. Through their works of fiction and non-fiction, writers like Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Anita Nair, Arundati Roy, Vandana Shiva, plot the course of demolition for the earth, if dominance and reckless demolition of the planet continues. Amitav Ghosh, master storyteller and a devoted environmentalist makes masterful use of folklore to drive home his ecological interests. Ghosh sharply brings out the folk tale of environmental deprivation by man and its severe consequences through the myth of his *bandukkisaudagar* and *Manasa Devi*, the Goddess of snakes in the *Gun Island*.

CONCLUSION

Whether it be the incorporation or appropriation of symbols from one religion to another, or the act of icon-making in order to disseminate religious fervor, all of these things highlight the connection between narrative, ritual, and religion. *Mangalkavya*, *Johurnama*, and *Panchali* are three varieties of textual storytelling that are particularly well-known. These narratives, indeed, establish the culture of festivals in the Sundarbans on a framework that is pluralist in thought and hybrid in form. Existence necessitates the coexistence of residents who adhere to different religious beliefs. Every single one of them is required to rely on one another as they travel to the forest together, and this kind of interpersonal connection transcends religious boundaries. People who work in occupations where there is a possibility of losing their own lives are more likely to engage in common rituals. One may say that this particular form of religion is more contextual than canonical in its ethos, and more vernacular than classical in its articulation. Festivals in the Sundarbans are also responsible for the emergence of alternative power narratives. The subalterns are responsible for the majority of the local celebrations. According to McLane (2002), the celebration of *gajan* is considered to be "egalitarian" because it is conducted by common people in rural societies. During the festival, the society is brought into equality, and those who are weak are given power. There is also a *Dakkhin Rai puja* in *Dhaphdapi*, which is observed by the same kinds of people, and the rites that are performed there are extensions of those that are performed in *Shiv Gajan*. Cults of *Bonbibibi*, *MaaManasa*, *MaaSitala*, and other similar deities emphasize the power of female goddesses and are influenced by the goddesses of the *Shakti* tradition. All of these things bring to light the narrative of the "weak" gaining power, and as a result, alternate discourses of power arise as a result of new social, religious, and cultural interactions. As a conclusion, I would like to point out that the Sundarbans festivals culture perfectly justifies one of the most inclusive phrases that I have seen written on the walls of the *Dhakeswari* temple in *Dhaka*, *Bangladesh*. The literal translation of this message would be: "Religion is for individuals, festival is for all."

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