

CENTER FOR EXPERIMENTAL ETHNOGRAPHY  
GRADUATE STUDENT SUMMER RESEARCH GRANT APPLICATION SUMMER 2022

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In spring 2022, author Amitav Ghosh and his collaborator, musician Ali Sethi, both fellows at CEE, worked closely with a group of University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) undergraduates and postgraduates to stage Ghosh's book, *Jungle-Nama*. In the course '*Performing Parables: Ragas and Sagas of the Sundarbans*' that they co-taught with Prof. Brooke O'Harra, students were invited to play with both the text and the form of the story. From writing the script to embodying the characters in the story, students brought the legend of *Bon Bibi*, the guardian spirit of the Sundarbans, venerated by both Hindus and Muslims, to Philadelphia.

As a part of the documentary crew who were recording this process of turning Ghosh's adaptation to a theatrical production, what stood out to me was the act (and sense) of play in this process with Ghosh and Sethi invoking the hybridity of the story and language as an invitation to 'play with' and 'make the story their own'. The adapted text that came from elsewhere was opened-up to play. This invitation to play was seemingly natural to the context of the story, to the diverse set of people in the class, and to the moment in time (as we moved to more in-person interactions), it however also decontextualized the story of Bon Bibi - this legend, a folktale for some of us at UPenn is a way of life, belief, and faith for some communities. Play is joyous and yet political. Questions around who (all) get/s to play and whose texts can be played are important for retellings and adaptations – The next phase of filming for this documentary involves research on the place and social context of the origins of Bon Bibi and how this text is 'played with' by communities in their everyday lives. This research will be juxtaposed with how this text travelled across multiple borders and contexts and was 'taken up' by another community.

This is not the first time that Bon Bibi's legend has been enacted. In the Sundarbans, every year during the winter months, travelling jatra (plays enacting historical and mythological stories) companies enact the stories of Bon Bibi. Performed with as much joy and ownership of the story as it was on UPenn's stage at the Prince Theatre, these plays staged at village fairs are however rooted in faith and belief and cultural contexts. Bon Bibi is called upon by her followers for protection from the forest, and she in turn guides them on the ways of the forest. This summer (2022) I plan to travel to Kolkata and Sundarbans, to meet with artists who enact the story annually to understand how they have come to the texts and how they make it their own. Just as with the performance at UPenn, I will be focusing on the performers' process of creating the enactment, the elements of play and the influence of the current sociocultural, economic, and political environment in India on their practices. I am currently working on building connections with the communities in Sundarbans. This summer, I will be interviewing these artists and since I don't speak Bengali, I will be accompanied by a translator. It was the illustration made by Salman Toor in *Jungle Nama* that opened the possibility of looking at other visual representations of the legend of Bon Bibi. I will also be interviewing and meeting with artists based in Kolkata and Sundarbans whose works I have come across in my online search to bring in this visual aspect of play.

While praying is a solitary activity, play is a social object. From artists who enact the story at fairs or visually represent it in their art (e.g., Kalighat paintings) to local right-wing

[politicians who choose to disturb the cross-communal affiliation of Bon Bibi](#) (e.g. the move to change Bon Bibi to Bondebi, with debi indexing a Hindu goddess), they all influence how this legend moves, evolves, and continues to be meaningful for people. Over the course of the year, I will be researching how different communities come to ‘play with’ the story of Bon Bibi. (680 words)