

# Vernacular Tradition, Dalits and Connected Social History in the Littoral Bay of Bengal

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## Abstract

The Bengal delta has been a recipient of Islamic influences since medieval times through trade, commerce and cultural exchanges with Southeast and West Asia via the Bay of Bengal–Indian Ocean trade route. This aspect of Bengal's cultural history and engagement with different religious traditions has gained attention in recent times through works done on subaltern literature, cultural history and global history. The vernacular tradition of littoral Bengal presents a strong frontrunner for this. *Jatra* (theatre), *pala* (lyrical play), scroll painting of *pir*, *gazi*, *fakir* and poetic discourse locally known as *tarja* demonstrate the diverse forms of vernacular philosophy in the littoral Bay of Bengal. In this article, I will engage with *Bonbibis Johurnama*, an Islamic text<sup>1</sup> which illustrates the struggle of the protagonist *Dukhe* who is protected by *Bonbibi* (forest goddess) from the man-eating tiger, personified as *Dakhin Ray*, the Hindu god. The article will explore the cosmic and mundane aspects of marginalized seafaring communities who depend on the delta's backwaters and the mangrove forest for livelihood. *Bonbibi* is venerated as the ultimate protector in this amorphous landscape, interspersed by land and water. The vernacular history of the region exposes the serendipity and the mundane everyday activities of Dalit fisherman who venture into the forests and backwaters to collect honey and wax. Through vernacular text – *punthi* literature – I will show how the ritual practices are shared and how this shapes the religious syncreticism that creates solidarity between Dalit Hindu and Muslim foresters and fishers in the delta. These syncretic and heterodox religious practices are part of the vernacular literary tradition that illustrates how the littoral villages have lived together. The maritime trade and cultural acquaintances with the wider littoral world has been an obvious influence on the creation of liminal religiosity.

## Keywords

Littoral, Bay of Bengal, Sundarban, Social History, Dalit

Popular narratives of the Sundarbans

Dakhin Ray

There stands the marve of sylvan glory

The abundance of Wax, bee-hives and Sundari

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Along with plethora of Garan, Bani  
 There comes signal from the confluence  
 Here lies the vast expense of Sylvan verdure  
 In between the creeks and canals  
 There are mud and marsh  
 The pride of South, the power omnipotent  
 Dakshin Roy is at the Centre. (Translated by Tushar K. Niyogi 1996 from Satnarayan Bhattacharjee ed., Raimangal, Sahitya Sabha, Bardhaman, 1956 (1363).

*Bonbibi*

Birds chirp in the forest and the tidal waters rush through the creeks  
 Come along boys, come here to cut the reed  
 Let us move forward in the name of the mother  
 Follow us with spades, shovels and axes in hand  
 The son of Banababi sits inside the forest all by himself  
 Come, boys, come inside the forest. (Translated by Sutapa Sarkar 2010 from Marthum Munshi Khater, Banabibi *Johurnama*, Gaugia Library, Calcutta, reprinted in 1987, p. 35)

## Introduction

The article proposes to explore the vernacular philosophy of the Sundarban delta by examining how the local religious practices are embedded in the popular tradition that drew inspiration from both Islam and Hinduism and presents a syncretic and often heterodox worldview of Dalit societies inhabiting liminal spaces—interspersed amid land and water. The Bengal delta, unlike the rest of the Indian subcontinent (through at the margins of state formation), was connected to South and Southeast Asia across the Indian Ocean world through mercantile trade, the circulation of commodities and Muslim missionaries who came to colonise the region from twelfth century onwards. The influence of Buddhism and Christianity, though insignificant in the islands, has also found a place through local initiatives taken by Scottish philanthropists like Sir Danial Mackinnon Hamilton, who established the Baptist Church in Gosaba and religious communes. Also, the migration of Rakhine and Mog bandits to Patwakhali and Chittagong in East Bengal during the eighteenth century from Arakan state in Burma further added to the heterodox worldviews and the role of mobility through the sea as a means of communication in the delta. Michael Pearson, a prominent maritime and world historian, writes in his essay on littoral societies that it had ‘polyfocal contact zones’ through tidal creeks and major estuaries that join the sea (2006, pp. 140–141). This is true of the Sundarbans: they have had a global connection established by fisher-folk, boatmen, sail-makers, sailors, seafarers, pirates and shipbuilders, who were constantly traveling within the wider littoral world around them (Mukherjee, 2010).

The article will explore the vernacular tradition of littoral Bengal – a performative form of the vernacular literature where we see the incarnation of Bonobibi, or the forest goddess. She has a significant influence on the lives of fisherman and forest-goers in the delta. There are many other genres of popular literature and art that have evolved in Bengal (e.g., *jatra*, *pala*, scroll painting and *torja*). These local traditions play a significant role in explaining the syncretic religious tradition of Lower Bengal, where both Sufism and the Bhakti movement have entrenched in the ordinary life of the people through popular *jatra* performances and the vanishing tradition of *putul nach* (doll-puppet performances) and *potochitra* (scroll painting) created by *patuas* (marginalised lower-caste performers and artists) of Medenipur who have dual religious and cultural identity as both Muslims and Hindus.

The article will focus on *Bonbibi Johurnama*, a sixteenth-century text and map the social geography of Islam and Hinduism which has seen growing interest among scholars promoting the global and intellectual history in South Asia. The vernacular literary tradition of lower Bengal can also be an interesting part of the 'environmental humanities project' proposed by many humanities scholars across the globe. The nature–culture dichotomy presented by 'scientific experts' and 'conservation ecologists' can be probed from the standpoint of popular philosophy that focuses around humans' relationship with non-humans, not in binary terms of conflict and encroachment of habitat but as co-habitats, where restrained access for valuable forest resources and control over human greed and passion maintains the ethics of conservation and keeps humans from peril. The custom of worshipping *Bonbibi*'s before entering the forest thus serves many purposes: it provides not only psychological strength to Dalit forest goers and fishers but more centrally moral and ethnic persuasion for care and restraint among Dalit and Muslim communities inhabiting the delta.

## Entry to the Field: The Lowland

To begin with, I will describe my entry to the field. One summer day in the month of March 2016, I boarded the Canning local train from Sealdah station. Roughly two hours later, after making virtually every stop on the line, I arrived at Canning, a bustling town and entry point to the Sundarbans. On my way, I witnessed paddy fields, man-made sweet water ponds and rivulets that dotted the down country landscape with eye-catching mud-walled thatch houses. It took centuries for humans to settle these lands which were once covered by mangrove swamps and inhabited by tigers and snakes. The hawkers inside the train were requesting fellow commuters to buy tidbits in the jam-packed coach. I was lucky to find a seat alongside the window, where I could breathe fresh air. In between, some people squeezed in to sell chocolates and savouries while some carried *thanda* (iced soda water), *badam bhaja* (salted peanuts) and *chana bhaja* (fried lentils). Once I reached Canning, a small frontier town of South 24 Parganas, I pushed myself in an overcrowded bus as I deboarded from the train for Godkhali, my final on-road journey. It took over an hour to reach Godkhali, from where I crossed over to Gosaba island in a packed country boat locally known as a *bhotboti*. On my arrival, I was received by Supobitro Pradhan, who was waiting for me in Gosaba *ghat*. He was a man in his fifties. I got his reference from Mukundu da of Dayapur village, whom I should introduce later. Soon we arrived at his house as evening set in, riding on a bicycle van quite unique and different from a *rikshaw* – a local innovation of the Sundarbans. He promised to introduce me to the *bawle* (tiger charmers) and the retired school master, Sujit Sur, who has been working on *Bonbibi* for many years and has been a source of inspiration for villagers in Gosaba.

Next day we decided to visit Sujit Sur's home. He is popularly known as mastar babu. During his spare time, he does *daktari* (practices medicine) by treats people with homeopathic medicine, as there is great demand for such services in the delta, where hospitals are ill-equipped with medical facilities, and doctors rarely visit village health clinics on weekdays. As we approached his house, which is located beyond the Gosaba school, he could not recognise us at first sight and his face showed an expression, *tumra ka*, 'who are you people? Supobitro poses and utters 'mastar babu' don't you recognise me? I am Supobitro, the printing press owner.' Sujit Sur giggles and rubs his glasses with a loin cloth and exclaims 'what brings you to this old man's doorstep after such a long time?'. Supobitro then introduced me and explains to *master babu* the purpose of our visit. After some persuasion, *master babu* agrees to share his experience and writings on *Bonbibi*, but he also cautions that to solicit his views, one must have patience and make regular visits, as he was old and his speech needs rest from time to time. I later discovered

that he needs to be satisfied with a cup of tea and thinly grounded areca nut folded in a *pan* (fresh battlenut leaf) to continue his conversation. In rural Bengal, old people use this as a source of pastime and intemperance. In the coming days, as I took time off while visiting my respondents in different parts of Gosaba Bock, I spent hours' recording *Sujit babus* in-depth understanding and perception of the region's, popular history, social life and marriage customs which intertwine with the social life of Hindus and Muslims in the delta. During our discussion, he made a critical intervention that helped my understanding of *Bonbibi*'s popular philosophy meaningfully, and I could situate my thoughts within the historical frame of his reference of territory and control exercised by numerous local deities and their places of worship (*than*). According to Sujit Sur, there is a popular version of the popular history that is today performed to entertain guests and outsiders who visit the islands as tourists and are at once thrilled by the narrative of Dukhe's dramatic rescue from the hands of Dakhin Ray. It serves the purpose of popular entertainment well. But there is another, possibly more important, part of this folklore which connects it to the wider socio-cultural and intellectual history of the region that rallies back to what Shanjay Subramanyams proposes as the 'connected history' of the Indian Ocean world. These connected histories will help us understand how influences from vernacular deity worship (regional gods and goddesses such as *Sitala*—worshipped for smallpox by Dalit households) and Islam networked the transregional history of the Bengal delta.

According to Sujit Sur, the original inhabitants of Sundarbans were mostly pagan believers (they were commonly referred to as *chandals* or untouchables) by the higher-born Brahmins, Poundro and Kathriyas. With the occupation of the region by Muslim prophets in the twelfth century, the region started to have sedentary forms of occupation as forests were cleared for paddy cultivation at a consistent pace. The original inhabitants of the region were semi-nomadic and were considered out-caste. The popular narrative on the other hand developed spread far and wide in and around the sixteenth century, when Bengali poets and writers start writing about the glory of local saints (*fakirs*) who came to proselytise to the local population through expansion of the rice frontier. The *Bonbibi Joharnama* was drafted during that period. It is sung like a poem (*panchali*) and the dramatic form are enacted in open air playhouse by local performance groups. Shama Prasad Baidya introduced me to his performance where he parlayed the role of *Dhona* in the Sundarban Tiger Lodge amphitheatre- a modern set up for a *pala* performance with musicians in the background singing the songs as the play progressed. With the growth of tourism in the Sundarbans, these recitals bring petty cash to poor village farmers who work in the tourist lodge as helpers, guards and cooks. There pressing financial hardship accompanied by uncertainties of monsoon and periodic cyclones has forced them to popularise *pala* performance as an avenue for entertaining guest who visit Sundarbans to see tiger.

## The Cult of *Bonbibi*

The worship of *Bonbibi*, the lady of the forest, has been in practice since time immemorial. However, in the written colonial sources there is no mention of *Bonbibi* as highlighted by Sujit Sur during our conversation in Gosaba which is certainly correct. Rather the mystical charms of the *pirs*, *fakirs* and pioneering first settlers (*gazi*) such as Khan Jahan and Badar Gazi Khan among others comes up scantily in colonial accounts and treaties of officials who surveyed and administered these areas (Hunter, 1875). The origin of *Bonbibi* remains mystical and can only be traced back to Mecca and Madina through the text *Bonbibi Joharnama*. The narratives follow a pattern in these stories linked to the tradition of punishment and reward where mortals are made to become devotees and followers of particulate

terrestrial deity. This trend can also be seen in the older forms of popular religious narratives such as the *Mangan Kavya*, which were composed during the period preceding the spread of Islam among the delta settlements. According to Tirthankar Roy, these poems were composed from oral tradition of the earlier period during the late sixteenth to eighteenth century by Bengali intellectuals and writers under the patronage of local kings such as the Gaur kingdom. Therefore, they do reflect the society of that time. The popular history of *Bonbibi* was also 'localised' by the Gazi Pir who were patron saints of the delta following the tradition of *kavya* that adopted a worship-reward metaphor in their ballads. In the delta seaboard, as I will show in the following paragraphs, the global became a part of the local, and outsiders joined in the competition for assets. Reflecting on this scenario, Roy (2012) notes that the East Bengal ballads are full of tales about fragility and fortune.

According to Sutapa Sarkar (2010), *Bonbibi* was perhaps known as Banachandi before the arrival of the Sufi fakirs and patron prophets, who reincarnated her as a forest goddess. There are at least two stories associated with *Bonbibi Joharnama* composed by the poet Munshi Bayanuddin during 1877–1888 and, later, by Mohammed Munsi Sahaba and Mohammed Khater.

The authorship of these texts remain, contested and cannot be fully verified, as they were written by people who left little autobiographical traces in the archives. The *Bonbibi* poetry illuminates the folkloristic origins of the deity through the mystical blessings of the prophet that give rise to *Bonbibi*'s charisma in the forest landscape of the Sundarban delta. This narrative can also be interpreted as how Islam was accepted in the delta, not in the conformist sense, through patronage of the Mughal emperors, but through peasantization and the expansion of the agrarian frontier in lower Bengal (Eaton, 1990, 1993). *Bonbibi*'s rise in the delta can be credited to the spread of Islam, which was domesticated by the forest-going and peasant communities who were outside the caste system and worshipped multiple local deities such as Dakhin Rai, Narayani and Bishalakki for the real-world purposes of remaining safe from tigers, snakes, crocodiles and unforeseen calamities. This is familiar from an earlier tradition of *kavya* writing mastered in *Monasa Mangal* and *Rai Mangal*, scripted before the appearance of the Turkish holy fakirs in the region.

## The Vernacular Narrative

In the first narrative, the origins of *Bonbibi* and her purpose of residing in the forest of Sundarban can be traced. *Bonbibi* along with his brother Shah Jangoli were sent by the Prophet from Mecca to settle in the Bengal delta. The popular narrative proceeds with the imaginary Behram Fakir who lived in Mecca and was married to Phulbibi, a wife who was unable to conceive. Saddened by this, Phulbibi insists that Behram should visit Medina for holy prayers so that God may bless them with a child. The husband follows his wife's advice and prays to the Prophet. The Prophet becomes engrossed by his plea and after much consultation of holy scripture, suggests that he will have two children only if he remarries another woman. Behram shares this dilemma with his wife after returning back to Mecca. The wife gets awestruck by Allah's foretelling but grants him permission to have a second wife, with the condition that he must fulfil one wish of hers whenever she asks for it. Beharam aggresses to her condition and marries again this time to Gulalbibi, and she soon falls pregnant. As the news spreads to Phulbibi, she gets back to her husband to keep his wish and Gulalbibi is banished from his life. Gulalbibi and her two children's *Bonbibi* and Saha Jangali, are left in the forest. Gulalbibi on Allah's command leaves *Bonbibi* to her destiny, where she is left at the mercy of the forest animals. Later they were united, but this was short-lived. Saha Jongali continues to reside in the forest with his sister, as they took up the mission of protecting people from the tiger.

They soon made prayers at the grave of Mohammed on the instruction of Fatima to be merciful. After performing a series of prayers, they proceeded to the forest over which they would reign. At that time, the Sundarbans were ruled by Dakhin Ray. Dakhin Ray symbolises the tiger and oppressor. Soon, Bonobibi gave the *azan* for battle, with Dakhin Ray. At this point, when Dakhin Ray was getting ready for the battle, Narayani (his mother) intervened and declared that only a woman could fight another woman and so she armed herself to face her rival. In the battle that ensued, Narayani was finally defeated and an agreement was warranted to protect the territory of Dakhin Ray who accepted the supremacy of *Bonbibi*.

The story of Dukhe forms the other part of the popular tale through which the power and idol worship of *Bonbibi* is founded in the Sundarbans. The popular narrative centres around Dukhe, the protagonist, who grazes other people's cattle and lives with his mother, who is a widow. They eke out a poor livelihood. Dhona who is his uncle, is a rich merchant who sails the river and trades in honey. One day Dhona comes to his place and lures Dukhe to join his expedition for honey collection. At first, Dukhe's mother cries in fear of the painful separation from her only son, but she reluctantly agrees to the proposal. As they enter the creeks of Kedhokhali, Dhona is left in the boat and the honey collectors go out in search for bee hives. At this moment, Dakhin Ray tricks the honey gatherers and they return back to the boat empty-handed. The despondent Dhona comes and sleeps at his boat, with his men disappointed of the failed journey into the forest. Dakhin Ray appears in his dream and orders Dhona to leave Dukhe in return for seven boatloads of honey. After a slight hesitation, the boatman agrees to make the sacrifice. His boat returns with piles of honey and wax.

Soon, Dakhin Ray appears before Dukhe in the body of a tiger. Dukhe cries out to *Bonbibi* for help, who appears immediately to rescue him. Dakhin Ray is ordered to leave Dukhe. On the call of Bonobibi, Sah Jangali joins the scene and drives Dakhin Ray away to Gazi Pir, who agrees to mediate. On the entreaty of Ghazi, *Bonbibi* forgives Dakhin Ray who promises not to harm any human hereafter. Dukhe was finally sent back to join his mother with enough wealth such that he no longer had to graze others' herds.

The scene of Dukhe was again performed as a popular drama by Achinta Mridha during my second visit to Dayapur village in another tourist lodge. These popular dramatic performances have become an alternative form of livelihood for people like Achinta, who cannot meet their family needs just by tilling the land, rendered infertile through the use of fertilizers and recurrent cyclones and tidal bores that have salinized their soil. The collection of minor forest products is also restricted by the forest guards and rangers, who protect the tiger reserve from trespassers. This has further heightened the incidences of piracy and smuggling in the delta, as the demand for tiger skin from neighbouring China entices petty forest-goers to take to such misadventure. The stories of *Bonbibi* and Dukhe embodies a moral overtone of the harmony that exist between humans and non-humans inside the forest and the injunctions to enter the forest with an open heart and selflessness.

Dhona presents himself as the immoral soul who leaves the forest. Dukhe on the other hand emerges as the clear-hearted person who believes in *Bonbibi*. The protagonist of the popular is also a reflection of thousands of precarious lives in the Sundarban delta. The popular story of *Bonbibi*, as Jalias (2010) presents in her work, produces 'Islamic egalitarianism' in the delta, where there are no *jatis* or caste divisions. The territorial control of *Bonbibi* ends where human settlement begins, as they are marked by hierarchies and different morals and ethos of the peasantry.

To the people living in the cities and upcountry, the popular tradition of the Sundarban presents a fantasy of sorts, as phantom figures brave the journey deep in the jungle and risk their lives for a little honey and wax. With increasing restrictions set by the Forest Department and the issue of boat licence to regulate foresters' trip to the jungle, the activity is slowly becoming profligate and barely supports

their livelihood. But for fishers and foresters, this has been their occupation since birth, which they cannot relinquish, as they know no other way to make a living. The *Bonbibi*'s tenets are followed by foresters and the *bawla*, who guide them inside the forest (tiger charmers maintain a disciplined lifestyle to keep them free of corruption when they venture into the forest with teams of forest-goers, woodcutters and honey gatherers gatherers). However, these days such *bawla* are hard to find, as all villagers are connected to the city and the aspirations of materialistic life.

### ***The bawla and Tiger***

The *bawla* whom I met during fieldwork came from both a Muslim and Dalit Hindu family. However, the original *bawla* were Muslim men who used to recite *totka* (charms) in Arabic and mostly passed on this tradition orally to the next generation. They used these *totka* to heal wounds, control weather phenomena and prevent forest-goers from being killed by the tiger. The forest charmers have to follow intense rules not to gamble or work on Islamic holidays. They are also forbidden to consume crab meat. They even cannot lend money at exorbitant rates of interest to villagers. Within the village, they live quite ordinary and often anonymous lives. It is difficult to find a *bawla* of the older generation. I was lucky to interview the poet Mukunda Gayne's uncle, who worked as a *bawla* for many years and then retired because of failing health. He confronted a tiger on multiple occasions and, by sheer luck and brave fighting on other occasions, protected himself from being killed. He showed me the tiger wounds on his body. His spells worked in the beginning, but over the years, these have been corrupted by human greed to extract more from the forest. He remarked that often foresters indulge in malpractices for petty cash and often find themselves in fatal disasters, ending their lives.

The job of the *bawla* in the forest is crucial for the forester's safety. He is the person who enters the forest first and checks the soil by bending on his back while reciting the names of five *pirs* (namely Ali Madhavm, Moklesh Fakir, Jalal Fakir, Mongolesh Shah and Moniruddin Fakir) and *Bonbibi*. One of my interlocutors, Khitish Bishal, is a resident of Canning and a frequent visitor to the jungle. He is a trained fine arts painter and has developed portraits of *fakirs* that are kept in his home-based museum collection (Matla Ancholik Sangrayshala). He has combined the tenets of popular art and modern Bengal Art to give meaning to these paintings by showcasing the Hindu Muslim heterodox identity of the *fakirs* as narrated in the *kavya* style poems and *potto chitros*. During the long interviews with my interlocutor, Sujit Sur, in Gosaba, he disclosed that these *fakirs* have great practical influence over the minds of the *bawla* and *gunins*, who accompany foresters in their campaigns. *Bonbibi* remain the ultimate protector but the *pirs* serve to avert particular dangers in the field. By feeling the soil and the pug marks of the tiger expert *gunins* can explain the position of the animals in the forest. Therefore, it is of utmost important to follow his command while in the forest.

The *bawla* maintain a close relationship with the forest, and hence, they understand the symbiotic relationship of non-humans in the forest. They also act as the ears of the forest-goers, who alert them to danger. They also possess intuitive powers that allow them to sense risk by tunnelling their hand in the soil. Alongside these, the *bawla* also maintain certain taboos that are gender-neutral. Women who are on their menstrual cycle do not participate in the worship of *Bonbibi*, nor are they allowed to touch the boat while on a voyage. Similarly, foresters cannot carry any cooked food inside the forest, as the forest land is considered pure (*pobitro mati*). Even human litter or urine makes them unholy and invites danger. The tiger charmers also have to strike a balance between the needs of non-humans and humans. As Jalias notes in her ethnography “the act of submission – before the tiger by the *bawla* by for forgiveness – is also explained as having to let tigers know that intruders are ‘beggars’ who need to be fed because they have nothing left to eat back home” (Jalias, 2010, p. 77).

The bawla perform a variety of charms on the tiger. According to Sujit Sur, the *gunins* purport to regulate the venture of the tiger through a variety of ways. *Chalani* is the most common way to drive the tiger away from the place where people are at work in the jungle. *Jvalani* is another way: the body of the tiger will start burning, the beast will feel itching – he will feel uneasy and not want to stay there. Finally, *khilani* is a charm that, when uttered, the tiger will not be able to open his mouth, for his jaws will be seized with cramps. The bawla possess a verbal repertoire which he utters for his intended victim. However, entry to the forest is restricted at night and on full moon days, when the animal is out hunting and any appearance of humans disturbs them.

The distinction between the forest and village lies in the harmony and equality that fellow men and women are supposed to share inside the forest and with non-humans, as designed by *Bonbibi*'s guiding principles. Therefore, *Bonbibi*'s shrine, also known as *than* (place), is never built inside the village. These are exclusive spaces along the roads or beside forests where people worship the deities before venturing into the forest. Inside the village, family disputes, boundary disputes and squabbles with relatives often attract litigation, fights and court cases. This is quite uncommon among forest-dependent communities who have limited landholdings and live by the river. During my stay in the villages in Gosaba, I witnessed several arguments and boundary disputes between families and households. One of my interlocutors was the poet Shaktipodo Nath. He lives in Gosaba market and shares a longstanding boundary dispute with his neighbour from his forefathers' time. One day, it turned into an embroiling exchange of vices when he was demarcating his fence that had fallen off. The surrounding villagers had to intervene to calm both parties down. This is commonly unheard of in the villages and the surrounding forest, where disputes of this nature are amicable settled with mutual co-operation.

In Gosaba, one of the major settlements in the delta, the Hamilton zamindari was established in the 1930s by reclaiming forest, and new settlers (from many parts of Bengal, Orissa and present day Jharkhand) came in to occupy land at a free rate, as Hamilton proposed to outlaw moneylenders and intermediaries who broke the backs of landless peasants. This co-operative movement, though noble in conception, did not last long, as the free men of Gosaba again became tied down to the managers of the estate, who acted as the new zamindars when Hamilton left the island for Scotland. Soon, litigation began to crop up thick and fast and, over a period of few decades, the Hamilton estate office was piled up with court cases that nearly ran the zamindari into a state of bankruptcy. These struggles for land and property never take place in the neighbouring forest, where foresters are not allowed to hoard land beyond their minimum basic needs. Whenever there is a need to stay inside the forest, people live with fear of the tigers and wild animals who become active at night. Mukunda Gayne shared his memory of spending a night in the deep forest of Kedokhali. As a poet, he wanted to experience the pristine forest during the night. But his imagination was rocked when he failed to sleep throughout the night and craved for the break of dawn, so he could return back home. He revealed to me that to be a fisherman, you have to have a brave heart.

The forest provides a unique space for people to live in harmony, having a common forest goddess as their saviour, in this case *Bonbibi*. In the above discussion we have seen how *Bonbibi* plays a central role in the lives of forest goers and fishers in the delta. She emerges as a protector of the community who is looked upon as a deity breaking away from religious boundaries, *jati* classification and class distinctions. Besides *Bonbibi*, there are other lesser gods and saintly figures who are also considered to be pioneer settlers and patrons responsible for engineering social change through the introduction of paddy culture. The *pirs* (Islamic saints) played a defining role in transforming the landscape during the late sixteenth century. Bengali literature, which flourished under the patronage of local kings and landlords in the form of romance, epics and doggerel poems preserved in articles

and palm leaf *punthis* (manuscripts that are handwritten in separate leaflet-like sheets), transmuted the oral popular tradition into written forms during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The *Bonbibi Johurnama* was an integral part of this literary tradition adopted by the Islamic writers who came to settle in the region and propagate the message of the Prophet by adopting the style of storytelling as used in the *kavya* tradition. The only alteration came in the addition of new gods and goddesses who were now pirs, fakirs, gazi and bibis alongside the pre-existing deities, namely, *Manasa*, *Sitali*, *Chandi* and *Dakhin Rai*. In some popular ballads, the use of Hindu and Islamic goddess co-existed to form a secular world; for example, in *Ray Mangal*, we see a clear mention of Gazis, who rides on a tiger. Both the popular literature concerned the lives of marginal men and women who lived in the forest and littoral marshlands. The *Mangal Kavya* was a precursor to this form of literature, which had a running theme of reward and punishment carried out by terrestrial gods personified in the form of *Manasa* (the snake goddess), *Sitala* (the goddess of disease) and *Chandi* (the mother goddess), among others.

The famous nineteenth-century Bengali popular art revivalist, Guru Saday Dutt, in whose memory the Guru Saday Museum was established in south Kolkata, divided the popular narrative into three categories: such as heroism (i.e., epic narrative), worldliness (i.e., secular) and spiritual quests (Dutt, 1990). Dutt's contemporary, Ajit Mukherjee, in his work *Folk Art of Bengal* (1946), classifies them as (a) ritualistic: meaning used in the service of rituals associate with popular belief and practices; (b) utilitarian: social customs demand the object; mode of craftsmanship and material determine the form and (c) individualistic: it expressed the agency of the creator – the artist. However, these are not rigid boundaries, as the popular ballads are received by village communities as a source of entertainment through popular *pala-jatra* open air enactments. In all these performances, the sacred and the secular find space. As an example, the cult of Gazi Pir, who has equal votaries like Bonobibi in the sundarban reflect not only the dual Hindu/Muslim background of the worshippers but also the sacred/secular interaction in some of the verses, as Frank Koron observes We have many other examples of such religious uniqueness that are particular to lower Bengal and the delta littoral rim. For example, such evidence can be found in the discussion on Muslim faith healers in Bengal (Mukherjee, 2010). The idea of Bengals' native Islam or Bengali native Islam comes up in the well-researched ethnographies and historical studies carried out by Ashim Roy (1984), Tony Stewart (2004), Annu Jalais (2010) and Ahmed Sharif (2000), who proposed the idea of syncretic Islamic culture in Bengal that is egalitarian and home grown. Project Bihari Mukherjee's work on the history of Islamic faith healers reveals that the Babon Gazi invocation by Bengali Brahmin priest in Tajpur, South 24 Parganas, has played a more active role in ritualising Babon Gazi's fame as a spiritual healer, although he finds no place in the Hindu scriptures. This Mukherjee explains to be a classic case of 'liminal religiosity' (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 95). In this context, the Sundarban delta that is part of today's South 24 Parganas has been the recipient of countervailing religious philosophies that have been internalised by prophets (*pirs*) who have adopted the style of the local pantheon to spread the message of the divine in the *Johurnama*. The effect of this assimilation of new cultural elements has provided a complex of established customs and beliefs, which marks the operation of constructive social tendency. By the influence of these, the incoming new elements are sublimated into the old cultural patterns, and the old is widened in fresh and often striking ways. The blending of different cultural traits in the delta produce a distinctive 'cultural pattern' of liminal religiosity.

Katy Gardner, in her ethnographic work on *Islam in Sylhet, Bangladesh*, (1999) has made a very interesting point that also applies to the delta's social-cultural and religious pantheons. The mobile Muslim prophets have shrunk the broad division of Islam understood as binary between global and local. Instead she proposes through her study on the shrine of Saha Jalal, how the local discourses of Islam are constructed and interpreted in Sylhet.

The popular philosophy in *Bonbibi* offers us two perspectives. First, the popular dramatic ballad scripture is venerated by Dalit fishers and foresters through ceremonial worship and rituals that are set for the practical purposes of maintaining the ethos of the forest and its use. Second, it also gives us an intrinsic picture of the heterogeneity and liminality of religious identities in the delta.

## Global and Local in Folklore

In the contemporary everyday life in the Sundarbans, *Bonbibi*'s tale has seen transmission to new territories. Globalization – not the older kind that added *Bonbibi*'s ritual status to the long list of local pantheon during the sixteenth century – has now put her in the global marketplace. The *jatra* tradition of Bengal is replicated by *pala* popular drama performers that showcase the local culture, organised by tourist lodge operators. Lodge owners in the Sundarbans organize *Bonbibi*'s *pala* in order to entertain foreigners who visit the Sundarbans from mainland India, metropolitan Kolkata and all over the globe to get a glimpse of the Bengal tiger. I was eyewitness to two such performances on the invitation of my interlocutor, Shama Prasad Baidya (the lead performer of the local drama group, Tarangini), who inspired my interest in popular literature and local shrines in the delta.

To this end, much recent ethnographic literature on material culture has focussed on the effect that globalization and transnationalism (Appadurai, 1996) have had on the production and consumption of traditional art and culture (Marcus & Mayers, 1995). One thing that emerges clearly from such commodification of art is that it becomes competitive and contested among the community. Particularly in the context on my investigation, I discovered that different Dalit performance groups lay claim to the authenticity of their performances. While Shama Prasad Baidya asserted that his group were the pioneers in *pala* performance in Dayapur village, others contested such claims and deprecated its validity. These are common occurrences in all regions of the sub-continent, where local art forms have been commodified to attract global cash flows and to empower local communities with cultural capital by intermediaries who act as cultural brokers. The West Bengal Department of Art and Culture promotes the performance of dramas involving *Bonbibi* as representative of their folkloristic past and *ancholic* (regional) cultural tradition. In this competitive setting, issues of patronage, jealousy, innovation and even authenticity become topics of contestation. These, many of my village informants observed, have further polluted the forest environment, which makes the tigers wild and bloodthirsty. *Bonbibi*'s ordered restraint on human greed and her ethos of worship are today breached by people who once visited the forest. People who still go the forest and involve themselves in such performances and business become weak-hearted and often fall prey to tiger ambush inside the forest. The ethics of restraint remains a morality tale among Dalit forest-goers, who are at present corrupted by the lure of market capitalism and the incentive to make quick money through theatre performances.

The growth of 'eco-tourism' and the plight of people after the 2009 devastation that Cyclone Alia wrought on urban places (cities and towns) and livelihoods has forced many traditional fishers and forest-goers to join the tourist lodges and hotels as daytime cooks and gatekeepers, while at night *Bonbibi*'s o they entertain guests in open air theatre for paltry donation sums that they collect in the Islamic way by taking their *chadar* and *sari* across the gathered audience. The government and conservation NGOs project 'eco-tourism' as a way forward to sustainable livelihood that would prevent Dalit forest-goers from destroying the mangrove forest and minimise the risk to the lives of the vanishing tigers. For the local villagers, whom I interviewed, the Forest Department staff and *babus* are the undeclared poachers and exploiters of forest resources, as they secretly work in connivance with the big smugglers and

traffickers. Occasionally, they catch small forest trespassers that are highlighted in the media and are used as scapegoats to establish their guardianship of the forest as a national treasure – a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The foresters and village settlements are always blamed for the deaths of tigers.

I came to know from a local veterinary doctor that some tiger deaths get underreported by the mainstream media when they die in captivity of the Forest Departments care units, unlike a poaching incident, which catches international limelight. It so happened that during my stay in Dayapur, news of tiger trapped in a ditch was reported by villagers. The Forest Department patrol team soon located the tiger and used their tranquilizers to sedate the animal. The tiger was kept in the Sajnakali Tiger Reserve Forest Office inside an iron cage for treatment, and nobody was allowed to visit the place except forest staff and doctors. I had a luckily chance to interview the Forest Department doctor who treated the tiger. The tiger ultimately died in captivity, as the medical intervention failed to save his life. The doctor disclosed to me in private that Sundarban tigers not only get killed by poaching but they also die because of innumerable diseases and changing climatic conditions in the delta and the declining share of food inside the forest. We should not simply correlate the decline in tiger population with growing human settlement in the islands, although they are also part of the cause.

We can surmise from the above example how tiger conservationism presents an important dilemma for the human–animal coexistence debate. The popular literature of the Sundarban delta presents an intellectual history of religious and cultural encounters in the region, which transformed humans' relationship with nature by forging the ethics and morality of forest resource use between humans and non-humans. Dalit Bengali cultural morals came to occupy a dominant place in people's lives through the emulation of ballads by Muslim theologians since the sixteenth century. The fluid Hindu identity of the delta communities are reinforced by the veneration of *Bonbibi* (the forest goddess) and *Manasa* (the serpent goddess) among other vernacular gods and goddesses who derive their lineage from both religions. The popular narrative of *Bonbibi* thus should be seen from a wider global and local historical perspective, where the littoral has come to take centre stage. While examining why the delta community has come to incorporate and localise both Hindu and Islamic forms of commensality and faith through the workshop of the forest goddess, the answer lies in the liminality that does not represent a particular religious identity. The upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh and Hindu nationalism in India prompted by radical nationalist factions is challenged by the unity and reverence of the more varied ethos in the Sundarban delta. The mythical lore of *Bonbibi* has become even more relevant in the contemporary period to understand South Asian littoral societies, religion and culture. In this context, Dalit worship practices of village and local deities have rich plural and sacrilegious cultural philosophies presented in the vernacular literature of the delta.

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1. The *Bonbibi Johurnama* is about the mother goddess *Banababi*. This was composed by Banayuddin in 1877. There is another version of the tale by Marhum Munshi Muhammad Khater entitled *Bonbibi Jahauranama* written in 1287. The text is all written in simple verse.

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