

A Bonbibi 'thaan' in Dhyanaaari village, Khulna, Bangladesh. Photo: Raihan Raju

Environment

Departure from the goddess: Sunderbans' women & Bonbibi suffer the worst of climate crisis

Women live precarious lives in the cyclone-ravaged delta, as people slowly disconnect from Bonbibi worship its principles of ecosystem preservation

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A Bonbibi 'thaan' in Dhyanmaari village, Khulna, Bangladesh. Photo: Raihan Raju

"I talked to at least six *bagh-bidhobas* (tiger widows) during my fieldwork but couldn't finish any of the interviews," recalled Md Raihan Raju, who has been doing an ethnographic study of the Bangladesh Sunderbans as a PhD researcher in South Asian University, New Delhi. "All of them broke down trying to recount the traumatic day they lost their husbands to tiger attacks and the horrors of the o
sed life that followed."

These women barely ever manage to get a proper meal, battle difficult physical and mental ailments without access to healthcare and are haunted by 'the tragedy' till

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seasonally) land of River Churna at the edge of the Sunderbans. Forty years ago, she lost two of her husbands to tiger attacks and was branded *swami kheko* (husband eater).

After being driven out of her house by her in-laws, she tried to find work but no one in the vicinity would employ her. "People refused me to my face," the 80-year-old told Raju. She started collecting rice starch people would throw away and sometimes cooked *shaluk* (water lilies) whenever she could forage for any.

Now, the elderly woman works as a sweeper in a tea shop in Munshiganj Bazaar and earns tea, cigarettes, *paan* (betel leaf) and an occasional biscuit or some other food if the shopkeeper is happy with her work. Whenever she finds the energy, she visits local decorator shops, hotels, storehouses and grocery shops to wash large vessels and earns Rs 20. It is a cursed life, said another 'tiger widow' Raju interviewed in an adjacent neighbourhood.

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Sonamoni at work in Munshiganj Bazaar. Photo: Raihan Raju

Beyond the ecological exoticism that the rest of the world has bestowed upon it, beyond its mangrove forests and tidal islands, the Sunderbans is a land of contradictions. It is where humans' conflict with the wild resides along with their harmonious coexistence with nature, almost as if the unparalleled understanding exists because of the unprecedented propensity of conflict.

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The lives of the locals, who navigate the region's marshy labyrinthes and dangerous interiors of the dense mangrove forests all day long, are equally intricate, and their beliefs inexplicably inconsistent. The same people who seemingly rise above


It is inexplicable, of course, only to the outsider who may have been lulled by the romanticised, overtly syncretic nature of Bonbibi worship. Bonbibi, literally the woman who lives in the forest, is revered by both Hindus and Muslims of the land as the one who protects them from the dangers lurking in the jungles, especially wild animals such as the Royal Bengal Tigers.

The goddess has been loosely considered an emblem of interfaith unity because the rituals and sacred texts are replete with such signs: *Bonbibi Johuranama*, the scripture that tells the story of her origin and consecration, is influenced by the Arabic & Persian lexicons comfortably interspersed with Bengali; it is read backwards like in Arabic literature but is set to the poetic rhythm of the Bengali verse meter (*dwipodi-poyar*/two-footed line); some forest-dependent Muslims also offer prayers to Bonbibi, although the Islamic scriptures forbid idolatry.

But there is more to the story than meets the eye. As scholars Akhila Vimal C, Dipanjali Deka, Poulomi Das pointed out in their 2021 case study of the politics and poetics of the Bonbibi Cult published in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, “the regional variations in the iconography of Bonbibi and her cohort is what contradicts the uniformity of a hybrid syncretic divinity”.

In the Hindu-majority localities of the West Bengal Sunderbans, the saree-clad idols resemble Hindu goddesses. Whereas, in the “Muslim majority regions [she]... is...dressed in a *salwar kameez*, wearing necklaces, hair plaited and at times head covered with a *dupatta*, or with a decorated Muslim *topi* (cap) and feet covered with shoes and socks,” they added citing from researcher Mausumi Mandal’s work on Sunderbans’ cultural practices and artforms that celebrate Bonbibi.

More starkly, a large segment of both communities, don’t identify the goddess as their own because she is “tainted” by the rituals of the other.

 **NEW** So it is not surprising that now, with intensifying polarisation in the country, Bonbibi is slowly fading away from the public consciousness. As Vimal C, Deka and Das noted in their article, the shade of syncretism that shores up in the Bonbibi cult is one “that selectively appropriates customs arising out of the dire necessity of a

Six months ago when Raju last spoke to Sonamoni, she was still trying to get a widow allowance card from the local governance body (Union Council). In the forty years since she lost her husband, not once did the forest department of Bangladesh provide her with any compensation, Raju noted. The country recently introduced some compensation schemes for the tiger widows but they do not extend to those like Sonamoni who lost their husbands so many decades ago.

The odds are stacked against the women of the Sunderbans, whether they're married or unmarried or widowed. They live in a deeply patriarchal society, parts of which even impose the *pardah* tradition of secluding women and restricting their movement.

With significant out-migration of male members of the family due to limited local livelihood options, the women have to earn a living wading in muddy, saline swamps for long hours every day, searching for prawn or crab seeds that they sell to organised prawn farms for less than Re 1 for a piece, who make exponential profit from selling the mature prawns.

The health problems the women suffer due to this occupation — water-borne diseases, uterine disease, skin ailments, including skin cancer, high blood pressure, miscarriages, irregular menstrual cycles — have been well-documented and reported in the media. But what didn't get as much attention is how their lives have become more challenging and uncertain with the shrinking forest area they now have access to.

In the Bangladesh Sunderbans, *meendhara* or prawn seed collection is completely prohibited, shared Raju. The reason, a local forest official in Dhaynmari forest department told him, is that “*meendhara* has degraded the forest ecosystem to a great extent. While collecting *meen* (prawn seeds) hundreds of other aqua-species get caught in their nets the locals throw away after segregating the prawn seeds”. “If others aqua-species cannot have a chance to grow, the entire marshy ecosystem in the Sunderbans will collapse,” the official added.

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factories in Dhaka. In all these jobs, they get paid a lot less than men for doing the same amount of work and are also exploited in various ways.

Masud Shardar, a shrimp cultivator from Assasuni, Satkhira, said that in the shrimp farms, if a woman works from 8 am to 1 pm, she gets paid 300 taka, where as a man gets 500 taka.


Those who still manage to eke out a living gathering prawn seeds from rivers near the forest are extorted by syndicates. "We have to pay a portion of our collection money to the mafia to just get access to the river. The different zones are controlled by different groups of local influential people," one of the women said.

Climate change has made things worse for them, Md Rahamatullah, a researcher on the Bangladesh Sunderbans with the South Asian University, noted. Extreme weather events such as recurring, intense cyclones and floods have increased the salinity of the water these women drink, bathe and collect *meen* in, he noted.

This worsens the access to clean water in a region that was already struggling with salinity and arsenic and iron contamination, he highlighted. "Before Cyclone Aila in 2009, locals mostly used to drink pond water."

Not only does the poor quality of water cause frequent bouts of diarrhea and typhoid, it also increases their blood pressure levels, leading to a surge of cases of heart and brain strokes in the area, a physician told Rahamatullah.

Most of the women cannot afford to buy sanitary napkins and use clothes during their menstrual cycles. They wash these clothes in the acutely saline water, which leads to long-term health impacts, the researcher found.

Wor^{NEW} nutritional security has also been hit hard by the environmental d  nation wrought by climate vagaries, the researcher observed. Earlier, green banana trees and untended vegetables were ubiquitous in the villages of Sunderbans. Now, due to rising temperatures and increasing salinity levels in the

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Montaz, a woman from Gabura Union of Sylhet, said that it is a norm in the local households that women eat last, after serving the male members. "As a result, most of the time they are left with less or inferior quality food than men, contributing to their nutritional deficiency."

Also, collecting and managing water is the responsibility of the women in Gabura, Rahamatullah observed. The region always had a shortage of potable water and amid the climate crisis, women have to walk for close to an hour to collect water, he noted. "During this time they face physical difficulties and often face sexual crimes."

In these desperate times, with more and more arable land submerged in saline floodwaters for years and government clampdown on gathering natural resources, the women looking for work are targeted by trafficking agents. With promises of jobs away from the delta in cities in India and Bangladesh, they are sold as sex labour. The women who face such fates are mostly widows, homeless or those who have lost their livelihoods, a respondent told Raju.

And as they try to tide over such attacks from all sides, the men of their communities blame them for natural calamities. Dedarul Gazi, a resident of Koyra, told Rahamatullah, that the hot weather as well as the unfamiliar virus that has destroyed the local shrimp ponds are because the women don't follow *pardah* nowadays.

And this is where the non-western, traditional values of community conservation of the land that was fostered by the worship of Bonbibi becomes important, said Raju. The locals believe that people venturing into the depths of the forests to gather natural resources like will be protected by the deity only as long as they collect for their needs and not greed. If they deplete or degrade the forest, disturb the wildlife, they will lose the grace of Bonbibi and won't be protected from tiger attacks or other dangers. "All those practices actually created a way for the humans to co-exist and survive with the wildlife," the researcher mentioned.

When Raju was in Munshiganj union to visit a 100-year-old Bonbibi temple for his fieldwork, locals told him that since the past two years, the number of people