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The Parable of Bon Bibi and “Being” in the Sundarbans

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Editor’s Note: This is the fifth post in Ghost Light: Folkloric NonHumanity on the Environmental Stage, an eight-part series with an open call for further contributions edited by Caroline Abbott. The series aims to illuminate the relationships between non-human, or other-than-human beings, folklore, and the environmental humanities and to encourage intersectional conversation.



Cutting across the nations of India and Bangladesh, the Sundarbans, the largest deltaic mangrove forest in the world, is home to a diverse ecology and with it, a large number of non-human species. Among the most famous, and perhaps the most mighty, the carnivores like Bengal tigers or crocodiles live alongside the human inhabitants of the over ten thousand square kilometer region, and with them, the parables of their struggles for existence. The harsh environmental factors and the limited agrarian possibilities in the archipelago have provided crucial roles to deities, spirits, demons, and supernatural forces. The folkloric tradition emanating from such complex relationships between humans and non-humans offer rich ore for a historian’s craftsmanship: these non-human creatures offer mediation and frameworks under the watch of whom livelihoods and communities are crafted and managed.

The parable of Bon Bibi (literally, “the woman of the forest”) lives within the land of the Sundarbans and is one such example — but to the communities who venerate her, she is much more than a story. Bon Bibi regulates every aspect of life: reflecting

the islanders’ livelihoods and cultures, and dictating how they relate to the forest and to the other-than-human beings that inhabit it — especially tigers.

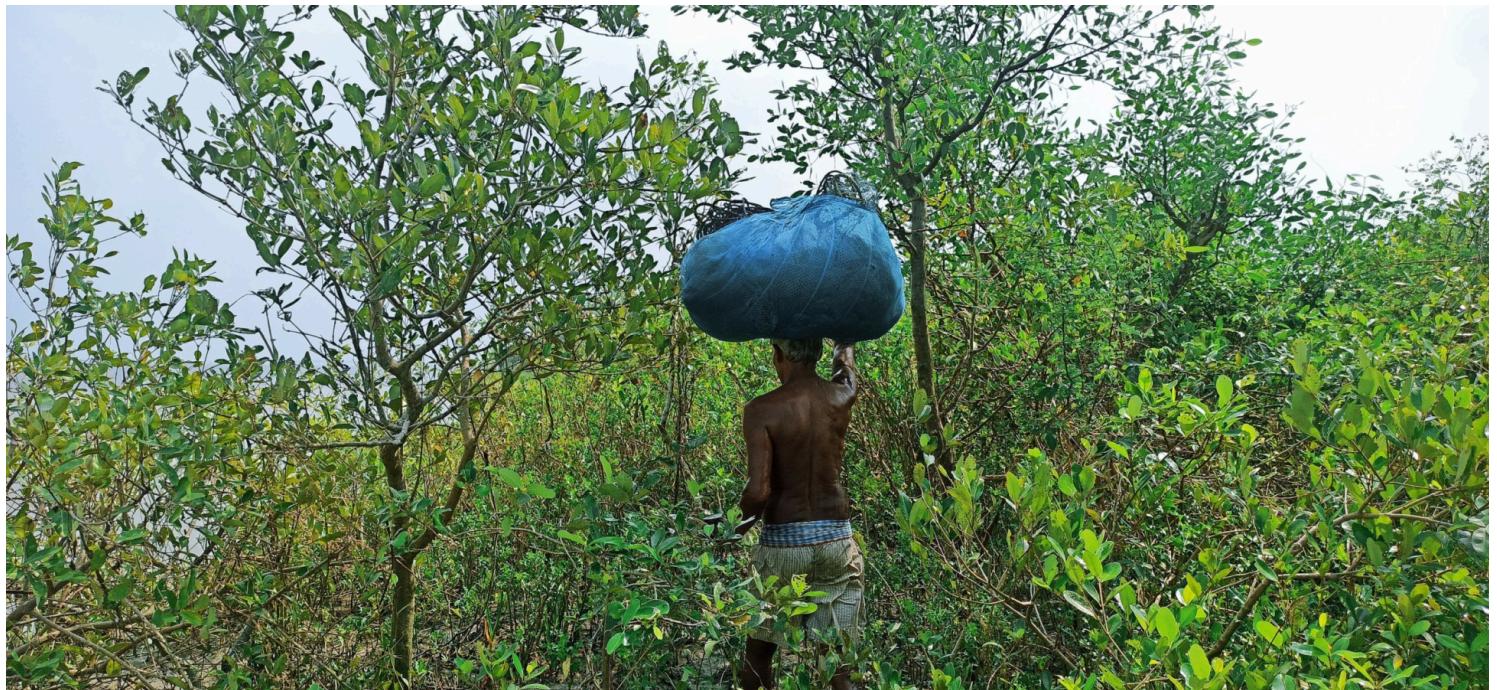


Fig. 1. An inhabitant of the Sundarbans venturing into the forest. Human lifeways in the region coexist, and entangle, with the forests. Image courtesy of the author, Suddhasil Halder, 2022. Used with permission.

The story begins with a young girl called Bon Bibi, who is chosen by Allah to relieve the people of ‘*Aathero Bhaatir Desh*’ or the land of eighteen tides – another name for the Sundarbans — from the growing tortures of a Brahmin sage, a high-caste priest. The sage, Dokkhin Rai, had assumed the veil of a tiger through his ascetic powers, terrorizing the people. Bon Bibi, travelling from distant Medina and accompanied by her brother Shah Jongoli was confronted by Dokkhin Rai, who she defeated in a pitched battle. But Bon Bibi was merciful in victory — she decided that one half of the tide country would remain a wilderness, free to all non-human species, and the rest she claimed for herself. Bon Bibi protected all those under her rule, and Dokkhin Rai fled to the forest under the agreement not to harm human beings. Under Bon Bibi’s protection, the once-forested domain was made safe for

human settlement. Thus a balance was reached, and a line of truthful belief demarcated the land. But it would not last: this peace would be challenged by human greed.

The tale continues with the story of Dukhi, a young village lad who lived with his widowed mother. Dukhi, who made his living shepherding and grazing other villagers' animals, was one day lured by his village uncle Dhona and convinced into joining his team to work in the forest as a honey collector. Dukhi's mother did not want him to go. When at last she allowed him to leave, she sent him with the recommendation that he should call out to mother Bon Bibi should any harm befall him. The expedition set off with exuberant greed and the goal of collecting good quality honey; a task which drew them deeper and deeper into the forest. The company proceeded on their quest until they reached an island — a territory under the domain of Dokkhin Rai.

“You humans just don't want to understand! You ignore what you see... and only take more and more! And when the catch near your home becomes sparse and unprofitable, you invade and plunder the forests!”

The character Dokkhin Rai debating Bon Bibi and a pair of children fishing beyond folkloric boundaries, as quoted in **Ghost Animation's 2020 re-imagining of the parable of Bon Bibi, released in collaboration with the Indian Wildlife Trust.** 2:50-3:02. Provided from English language subtitles en-suite to animation (not auto-generated).

The demonic Dokkhin Rai, much fond of young flesh, revealed himself to Dhona and proposed a pact in which they would each provide for the other's satisfaction. Dokkhin Rai could have young Dukhi, and in exchange, Dhona would receive as much wealth from the forest as his fleet of seven boats could carry. The next

morning, Dhona left the island, unbeknownst to Dukhi. Per their accord, Dokkhin Rai was free to make his approach. Just as Dukhi was about to be devoured, he called out to Bon Bibi — true to his mother’s promise, Bon Bibi rescued him and sent her brother Shah Jongoli to deal a terrible chastisement to the demon. Dokkhin Rai once more pleaded for mercy (and only through the intervention of a saint, Ghazi, was he protected and forgiven by Bon Bibi). Dhona’s ordeal over, the story’s ending reiterates the delicate balance to the demarcation of the land which Bon Bibi maintains. At its end, she sends Dukhi back to his mother, laden with a treasure trove of honey and wax — only *after* the boy’s promise that neither he nor his friends would ever again venture into the forest with the greedy intention of exploiting its resources for their own, excessive gains.



Fig. 2. Two boats float in the waters off of a bank in the Sundarbans. In the foreground, greenery contrasts a hazy sky offshore. Image courtesy of the author, Suddhasil Halder.

The literary history of Bon Bibi offers insight into the story’s blended origin which helps to frame her environmental relevance to the multi-faith communities of the Sundarbans. The two most popular versions of the story appear in more-recent, late nineteenth century literature: *Bonbibi Johuranamah* (“The Narrative of Bon Bibi’s Glory”) can be found in the work of Munshi Mohammad Khatir and Abdur Rahim, both composed mainly in ‘dwipodi-poyer,’ a Bengali verse meter consisting of rhyming couplets.¹ But as Annu Jalais opines, aspects of the story — specifically, the protection offered to Dokkhin Rai by the saint, Ghazi — evidence a connection to the epic poem “Ray-Mangal,” composed by Krishnaram Das in 1686, predating the legend of Bon Bibi by at least a couple of centuries, and suggesting a more extensive history.² Today, the parable lives among the Sundarban folks, a community of Hindu, Islamic, and Adivasis cultural and faith groups uniquely at-risk to climate change.³

Increasingly-extreme climatic conditions which threaten common regional livelihoods in the Sundarban region also strain tensions between human and other-than-human communities.⁴ Local livelihoods reliant on voyages to the forests to fish, hunt, trap — and indeed, to gather honey — see islanders forced deeper and deeper into the forest easily identify with the folkloric Dukhi. Following the tradition, Dukhi’s unfailing belief in Bon Bibi saved him this fate, and islanders enter the forest only after venerating goddess Bon Bibi and her associates, often offering worship in her honour after a tiger attack. Fishing and collecting in the jungles and on the banks of small streams as those ecosystems fall under more pressure, locals risk falling prey to the empire of tigers themselves. It is the agreement between non-humans and humans that permits both communities to

depend upon the forest, and to respect each others’ needs: it is this very agreement which is challenged in the Sundarbans by climate change.



Fig. 3. “The Idol of Bon Bibi along with Dokkhin Rai and Dukhi in a shrine,” courtesy of Arindam Maity in collaboration with the author, Sudhanshu Halder, 2022. Used with permission.

Throughout its course, the story of Bon Bibi explains the life of the Sundarbans people and the lived reality of their daily relationships with the non-human. It continues to do so in the age of Anthropocene. Historically and in the present, Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai provide a moral framework, maintaining boundaries between the human and the non-human which enforce peace and ecological stability. Yet as climate changes, so has Bon Bibi: an animation released by the Wildlife Trust of India in 2020 underscores the impacts of global climate change in the Sundarbans, placing the familiar folkloric figures Bon Bibi, Dokkhin Rai, and Shah Jongoli in conversation with a pair of youth who defied boundaries in their journey to find resources.⁵ Importantly, the animation proceeds to frame a climate and boundary debate between Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai themselves.⁶ Folklore,

then, and its evolutions, can play a vital role in attuning scholars to a more sensitive understanding of human-nonhuman relationships in the age of Anthropocene.

ABOSHESH (Remains) - A Shadow in the Forest



Vid.1. Ghost Animation's 2020 re-imagining of the parable of Bon Bibi, also reinvisions the role of the other-than-human figure Dokkhin Rai. After two children are forced by food insecurity deeper into the forest, Dokkhin Rai and Bon Bibi appear to them. The animation reconfigures the relationships between Dokkhin Rai and Bon Bibi. Dokkhin Rai implores Bon Bibi that, while she may not agree with his methods, it is “it is still time to make children understand” (3:32-3:35). He debates Bon Bibi (and the children) on humans violations of the original boundaries the parable set between the human and other-than-human lifeways long before, and Bon Bibi at last agrees with her foil, saying: “D[o]kkhin Rai is right” (4:02). The animation’s release in collaboration with the Indian Wildlife Trust builds upon Bon Bibi’s folkloric tenure and once more enters her into conversation between human and other-than-human worlds and politics, boundaries and borders, and Anthropocene. Provided from English language subtitles en-suite to animation (not auto-generated).

The legend of Bon Bibi is a wonder of hybridity, combining Islamic, Hindu and folk elements with such fluency that it is impossible to place the story squarely in a single faith tradition. Nor is it necessary to do so, for the central tenets of the narrative – ideals of limiting greed, and of preserving a balance between the needs of humans and those of others – do not belong to any one tradition: they recur

frequently in the folk stories of forest peoples around the world. For the islanders, the legend of Bon Bibi goes beyond the prejudices of caste, class and religion — these are essential values for this era of planetary crisis, and it is on them that the future rests.

Indeed, especially now, Bon Bibi offers a reminder: the forest is at its healthiest (and perhaps, at its *safest*), when humans communities have no intention of taking more than what they need to survive.



Fig. 4. “The mangrove pneumatophores emerging out of the ground,” courtesy of Arindam Maity in collaboration with the author, Suddhasil Halder, 2022. Used with permission.



Notes

1 Jalais, Annu. 2008. “Bonbibi: Bridging worlds.” *Indian Folklife* 28: 6 – 8

2 Ibid.

3 “Life in the Sundarbans Mangrove Forest: Cultural Beliefs, Religious Practices, and Environmental Degradation,” Connecticut College, accessed 23 October 2022. <http://uddin.digital.conncoll.edu/sundarbans/local/garjontola-satjelia-india/jatis/>.

4 Mitra, Dipawali. “Here, tiger kills men, widows await justice.” Times of India, September 11, 2022.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/times-special/here-tigers-kill-men-widows-await-justice/articleshow/94126613.cms>.

5 Ghost Animation, “ABOSHESH (Remains) – A Shadow in the Forest,” (English Subtitles), Wildlife Trust of India, July 29, 2020, Animation Video, 0:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecILOeAEmXk>.

6 Ibid., 2:52 – 4:02.



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Feature Image: An embankment in the Sundarbans. Courtesy of the author, Suddhasil Halder, 2022. Used with permission.



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I have recently completed my Masters (2021) in Ancient Indian History and Culture from University of Calcutta. I am interested in environmental history of India, the

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