

Bonbibi's ritualscape in Indian Sundarban

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Abstract

A territorial demarcation of folk culture associated with Bonbibi /Ban Bibi/Van bibi- the 'forest maiden' or 'lady of the forest' is specifically and exclusively confined to the Sundarban mangrove forest of both India and Bangladesh. Bonbibi is widely believed by the forest dwellers of Sundarban to protect the people from the uncertainties and dangers of forest life and holds an important place in the lives of these people. This is spatially manifested in the area dotted with such temples/shrines/thans venerating the female deity: thans being the seat for the deity. Prior to the journey into the deep forest or the khari (creek), honey collectors, wood cutters, and the fishermen belonging to all religious faiths or members of the tribal communities propitiate Bonbibi for her blessing to avert dangers. This localized practice is an important aspect of sacred geography of a syncretic tradition in the Sundarbans. Changing livelihood opportunities and decreased forest dependency due to restrictions imposed on movement into it has had an adverse impact on this practice but nevertheless continues unabated as part of a rich tradition. The present study treads into this unique terrain of ethnographic research in religious landscape..

Keywords: Tiger, Folk godling, Bonbibi, folk rituals, Pala Gaan.

Introduction

Religion describes various systems of belief and practice concerning what people determine to be sacred and spiritual, a belief in the supernatural. Folk religion also referred to as popular religion, or vernacular religion comprises various forms and expressions of religion that are distinct from the official doctrines and practices of organized religion. The folk or traditional practice of a religion, the folklore materials that consist of rites, ceremonies, beliefs, customs, etc; the unwritten form of it being based on present day methods and purpose of worship are different from mainstream religion. One such religious practice with its cultural landscape (ritualscape) prevalent in rural Southern deltaic Bengal is associated with the worship

of Bonbibi/ Ban Bibi/Van bibi- the 'forest maiden' or 'lady of the forest' that needs exploring. She is worshipped by the forest dependent people of both Hindu and Muslim faith for centuries till date. Such a practice reflects inter-religious interactions despite widespread religious diversity. A Special Issue was brought out by the European Association of Social Anthropologists in 2020 that mentioned about the dearth of literature in South Asia on inter-religious interactions despite widespread religious diversity (with the exception on the study on Sufi shrines). Moreover, in spite of religion's resurgence since the late 1970s, religion is yet not sufficiently grounded in the realities of the lived world (Fesenmyer, et al 2020).

The UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention held in 2003 made effective in 2006 had one of its five broad domains as social practices, rituals and festive events. These are significant because they reaffirm the identity of those who practice them as a group or a society. Urging geographers to make a distinct contribution to the understanding of religion Catherine Brace, et al (2006:31) drew attention to religion as an axis of identity 'because of the manifold articulations between religion and conceptualization of landscape and place, and the contribution of religion in sustaining material cultures'. This present paper in this context, demonstrates an approach to interpret identity construction: the spiritual, socio cultural and ecological status with worship of Bonbibi's practices in rural Bengal. Religion in India is simultaneously cultural, social, political, and 'intensely material' (Thomas, 2015:38) thus offering multiple opportunities for scholarly treatment. Sadly however, research undertaken by the geographers on the issue is rather scanty. This study on Bonbibi is significant both conceptually and contextually and stands out as a rich source of ethnographic in-depth study of a forest associated religious practice very much popular and prevalent in the Indian and Bangladesh part of Sundarban. The study is based on field visits conducted in a section of the Indian part of the Sundarban.

Human activities as particular rhythms in time and space are not universal constructs: they are constructed in specific conditions at particular places and one such place is the Sundarbans. Amitava Ghosh's novel 'The Hungry Tide' (2004) is based on the Sundarbans which he considers as a 'powerful landscape'. In two of his novels- 'The Hungry Tide' (2004) and 'Gun Island' (2019) - Ghosh theorized key concepts in island studies and

the struggle between the human and the non-human. Another very recent novel entitled 'Jungle Nama' (2021) is a verse adaptation of the medieval Bengali tale that is a retelling of a Sundarban legend of the forest deity, Bonbibi; to the spiritual, social and cultural history. Choosing Bonbibi folklore in Jungle Nama was to drive home the point of how essential a sustainable relationship is to the natural world. The territorial demarcation of folk culture associated with Bonbibi is specifically and exclusively confined to the world's largest mangrove deltaic region of India and Bangladesh, a world heritage site of the Sundarbans. This spatial exclusivity hence merits an understanding of the relationship between the social and the spatial as articulated by Soja (1989) as a 'socio-spatial dialectic' which is an interactive one in which people make places and places make people which this paper strives to do as its central theme.

Relationship with the place (the forest) of Sundarban is central to the understanding of the construction of belief and ritual and the reason for the shared cults. Sundarban consists of a number of ethnic groups drawn from diverse religious faiths of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and tribal pantheon, many of whom in some form or the other accept folk cult of Bonbibi/Ban Bibi/Van bibi- the 'forest maiden' or 'lady of the forest'. To them the forest is sacred and the worship of Bonbibi is widely practiced one amongst the many folk godlings. The Sundarbans- a tangled region of estuaries, rivers, and watercourses- has primeval forest, impenetrable jungle, trees and intertwined brushwood, and dangerous-looking creeks running into the darkness in all directions near the sea (Hunter, 1875:286-287). In spite of the associated dangers, the

forests with its multitude of resources of honey, wax, *gol pata* (a bush with a kind of broad palm like leaves) firewood and timber is frequented by the 'jongol kora lok' a term used by respondents and also written by Jalias (2014) to identify the forest goers who 'do the jungle'--the *mauley* or honey collectors, *bauley* (also spelt *bouli*, *bawlia*, *bawali*) or wood cutters and the *jele* or fishermen in the creeks. Bonbibi is widely believed to extend protection from the uncertainties and dangers of forest life to these people irrespective of their caste, class and religious affiliation. The forest is thus tied to the people and the way they live shaping individual and communal identity (Uddin, 2019). Through the religious sacraments of worship and veneration of Bonbibi a sacred bond is established among different communal forest dependent communities. This tradition and localized practices give meaning to the shrines' sacred geography. As per Jones and Murphy (2011) everyday practices are 'time-space assemblages' of body-minds, things, knowledge, discourse, and structures carried by agents such as individuals, organizations, and institutions. Continuation of this practice till date defies the much-reduced forest dependency of the people of the Sundarbans as a livelihood reasserting the significance of Bonbibi in their everyday lives. The practice also speaks eloquently of a sacred-secular continuum, the continuity of peace and harmony as a salient and unique feature of the Sundarban.

In a few instances though, the print literature on the natural environment mentions the story on Bonbibi. There are Bonbibi entries on the web, blogspots, Facebook, small texts and pamphlets: but with little emphasis on the cultural importance. An attempt is made

in this paper to answer new questions and to explore how contemporary geography of religion should address these issues. The paper showcases the unique terrain of ethnographic research of religious landscape in the particular context of Bonbibi. The paper deals with the contextual background associated with godlings particularly Bonbibi in the Indian part of Sundarban through a brisk literature search.

The context

Inter religious congruity has been a key thread in the fabric of many societies (Walton and Mahadev, 2019) in which communities from different religions co-exist harmoniously in shared spaces. The geography of religious practices demonstrates the role and importance of spatial proximity between diverse religious groups in melting apparent differences existing among them. Rudimentary make-shift hut or a brick structure with a red cloth flying over it symbolizes the Bonbibi's *than*/temple/shrine punctuating the landscape throughout the Sundarbans: *than* being the seat for the deity. British anthropologist O Malley (1914:71-72) in 1914 noted some popular beliefs in Sundarban transcending Hindu or Musalman (Muslim) orthodoxy. He wrote extensively about Muslims who 'do not fail to make offerings' to Sitala, the goddess of small pox, to Manasa, the goddess of snakes, and to Dakhin Dwar, the god of tigers. The elasticity of Hinduism permits its votaries to adore Satya Pir (under the name of Satya Narayan), Manik Pir, the god of cows, and Ola Bibi, the deity presiding over cholera- all godlings or saints of their lower class Musalman neighbours. The adoration of Muslim saints- the *Pirs*- believed to be endowed with supernatural powers is common among the lower-class Muslims and

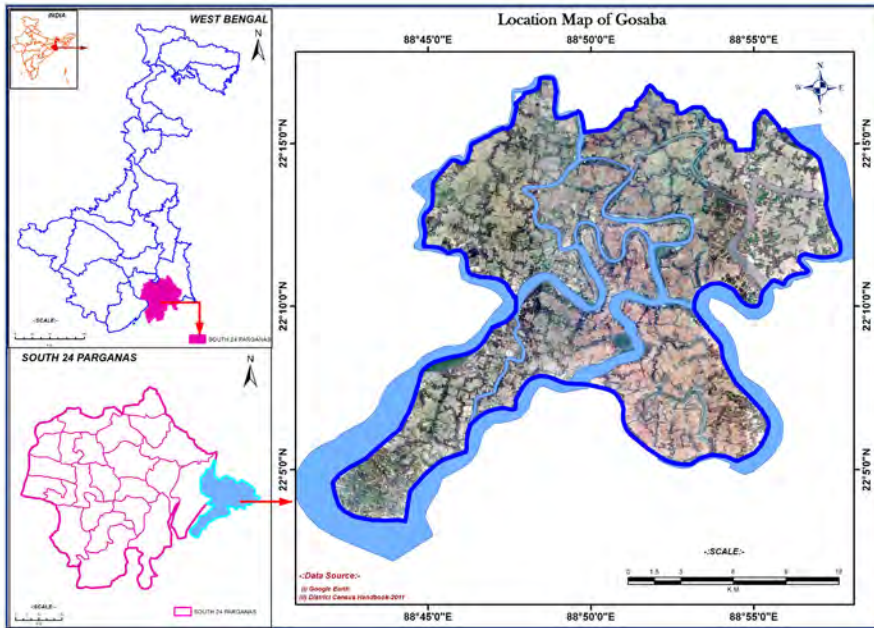


Fig. 1: Location of Gosaba

Source: Google Earth and District Census Handbook 2011

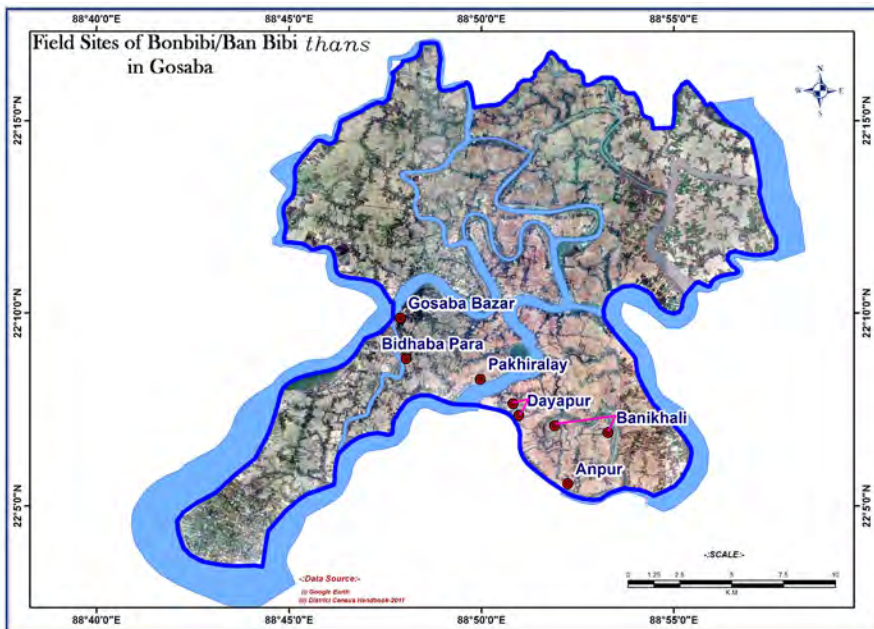


Fig. 2: Field sites of Bonbibi/Ban Bibi thans in Gosaba

Source: Field survey



Fig. 3: Hinduised iconography of Bonbibi in a house
Source: Field survey



Fig. 4: Institutionalised tourist site of Netidhopani Camp
Source: Field survey

the more ignorant and superstitious among the Hindus (O'Malley, 1914:74). In villages in the vicinity of the Sundarban, Mobrah Ghazi's altars (believed to be the king of the forest and wild beasts) are a common sight and wood-cutters never go into the jungle without invoking his protection (ibid, p75). Hunter (1875: 312) writing even earlier mentioned that all woodcutters were superstitious who believed in the existence of a number of forest spirits. None of them went to the forest without been accompanied by a fakir, who is supposed to receive power from the presiding deity – whom he propitiates with offerings-over the tigers and other wild animals. O'Malley (1914) quoting Mr. Sunder wrote that wood cutters had tremendous faith in the fakir and his ability to charm and the power of exorcism which provided them with the courage to enter the forests to work there, notwithstanding the variety of dangers with which they are surrounded. This practice exists even today.

The folk tradition of Bonbibi borrows from Islam in that Bonbibi along with her twin brother Shajangli/Shahjongoli (jungle king) are Muslim by birth sent to this land to protect the people from the exploits/clutches of a Hindu Dakhin Rai/Dokkhin Rai (Southern Lord), a powerful local ruler of the 'bhati desh' or land of low tide. Bonbibi's icon corresponds to a Hindu deity (a replica of earlier worshipped Bon devi/Bon Chandi /Bon Durga). Many including Bhattacharya (2017) contend that Bondevi and Bondurga were morphed into Bonbibi after widespread Islamization of the region. The worship of an idol does not fit into the normative pattern of Islamic mode of religious sacrament. Unlike other Hindu idols she sits facing the east with the priest facing the west while worshipping her. The Muslims offer *sinni* with

dhup-dhuna (incense and fragrant smoke) on the *hajot/hajat* (mound) and distribute a distinct ritualistic sweet locally called *shirni* at the festivals, a similar practice found at most *mazars* (a mausoleum or shrine or enshrined tomb of a saint or notable religious leader). Hindu devotees offer fruits, coconut, *batasha* (sweet cake), parched rice, puffed rice which are partly taken back home as *prasad* or blessed food after the ritual is over. The most conspicuous feature is that the ritual is everywhere officiated by ritual specialist (Uddin, 2019) known as *fakir/gunin/boule* and not a Brahmin priest. Bonbibi is thus an acculturation of two predominant faiths of Hinduism and Islam. Nonexistence of a Brahmin priest too reflects a tribal influence. The tribes refer to their sacred groves as '*than*' and Bonbibi's shrines are locally referred by this term. No animal or bird is sacrificed in honour of the deity; instead fowl is offered as vow and set free in the forest. In Muslim concentrated areas the personal attire and face of Bonbibi looks like a Muslim girl while in a Hindu area she resembles the presiding Hindu deity of Goddess Durga.

Objectives, materials and methods

Exploring inter-religious coexistence through the provincialization of religious rituals and its iconography in the geographical space of deltaic Sundarban is the primary aim of the study. Published literary sources provided evidences in different historical and cultural contexts on the ritual practice. Recent and contemporary online social media platforms, though few, was an added source of information for framing the research question. The scientific questioning was based on 'what, who, how, when and why' in which 'what' defines the subject matter of religious synthesis; 'who' as the target population- the

ordinary 'people from below' -the resilient communities positioned in the deltaic environment of land and water interface; 'how' refers to the methodological process dealing with the research problem; 'when' refers to the temporal scale of coverage and 'why' identifies the basis of the continuity of cultural ritual practice overlooking religious boundaries through the continued veneration of Bonbibi as an identity of the area and the people. Religious significance of the forest and wild life, the religious practice and the related cultural landscape based on the construction of religious ideas, beliefs and practices need critical insight. Looking 'in' at the practices of everyday life (after Alexander, Chatterji and Jalias, 2016), the cultural change, if any, is needed with respect to rituals, customs and practice. The paper argues that borrowing and mixing does not erase religious boundaries, but re-asserts their ongoing significance through such practice and lived experience shared by the community in this area.

Bonbibi has an important place in the everyday lives of the people as reflected through the area dotted with such temples/shrines and the variety in the iconography being the symbolism of religious landscape. Using intensive ethnographic fieldwork coverage to have a space-place specific analysis, the differential rate of the degree of acceptance of the godlings in different societies, three different pockets were selected : (i) at the individual household level, (ii) on road side public spaces, and (iii) institutionalized forest departmental tourist sites. A field diary was maintained in addition to audio-video clippings used with prior permission wherever applicable for transcribing the data later on. The target area chosen is Gosaba Block- the gateway to the wide expanse of the Sundarbans in the district of South 24

Parganas of West Bengal (Fig. 1). Based on a pilot study undertaken in December, 2019, several field sites were visited (Fig 2). The narratives around the forest which are the canvas for an understanding of how Bonbibi protects the people from the uncertainties and dangers of forest life were extracted by participant observation method in a Bonbibi *pala gaan* (songs that are expressed in long narrative verses) performance. An in-depth interview with a very brief semi-structured questionnaire instrument with the concerned stakeholders (localities) for about 30 minutes with prior intimation given on the venue and time through the key informant Sri Ranajit Sardar was enriching. Being an outsider, information was hence easily accessible and the researcher was easily acceptable to the community. The key question was on the continuity of the *pala gaan*, its importance and departures if any. A FGD (focus group discussion) with older residents who shared experiences of the 'Jongol kora' i.e., going to the forest discussing the livelihood opportunities in the forest with its perils was also done in Netaji Sardar *Para* (neighbourhood) of Hamilton Abad of Gosaba Block. Participant observation of festivals, family and community events and informal conversation with family members and neighbours supplemented the observation. A historical analysis of the origin and the narrative content of Bonbibi cult are beyond the scope of this paper. The community's sense of identity and belonging is expressed through the lived space and practices in the shrines through visual representations reflecting the veneration of Bonbibi as a mirror of the society, the venerator's relation to the forest was thus analyzed. To study the institutionalized practice if any, a touring boat was hired for boat safari in the Sundarbans

from the resort of Sundarban Residency with a local guide on board. Since no particular individual was considered as a case study, the conflict of interest does not arise.

Discussion

According to O'Malley (1914:19) the *bagh* (tiger)- fairly common in the jungles of the Sundarbans, is a great wanderer, covering large distances in search of prey, readily swimming across the rivers and *khals* (creeks) which intersect the jungles on all sides. Hunter (1875) viewed that reclaiming was difficult due to tigers being not infrequent: 'sometimes a tiger takes possession of a tract of land and commits such fearful havoc, that he is left at peace in his domain' was his observation (Hunter 1875:331). The menace of tiger attacks continues even now and is often reported in media. Entering the institutionalized forest departmental visiting sites, the visitors (Indian and foreigners) gain information on the significance of the tiger-worship put up in both English and Bengali; re-emphasizing its contemporary significance. Attack by tigers have led to several women being widowed and discriminated at as being husband eaters (*swami khejo*) responsible for death of the spouse by animal attack. *Bidhava Para* (the term *bidhava* stands for a widow and *para* is a neighbourhood) was visited (Fig. 2).

The team going to the forest mainly for wood cutting or honey collection is led by the *gunin/bauley/sadhak/fakir* of Hindu or Muslim faith who is guided by the vision of Bonbibi in mastering the charms and thus is a tiger charmer and a magician for these jungle goers. He inspects the '*mal*' or the land, gives the *mantra*- a verbal tool, a sacred formula recited during the worship offered to deities (Jalias, 2004:80) and sees whether this *mal* is good for entry into the forest or

not when they anchor the boat. To this Jalias (2004:88) referred to as 'mal dekha' (check the forest earth/ground) and she wrote about this act as 'checking the earth'. The forest is not normally entered on Friday (even by the Hindus) as it is the day when Bonbibi goes to 'azan'/adhan (call to prayer following Islamic rule).

The idol of Bonbibi manifests in multitude of ways. Generally, she has been observed sitting over a roaring tiger but also seen sitting over a deer and on rare occasions over a wild fowl. Normally she has in her lap Dukhe, with her twin brother Shah Jangali-standing beside her with a *gada* (club). All the visited *thans* have these three as the central characters worshipped. Dukhe (literally meaning sadness) is a poor boy whose life was saved from Dakhin Rai by Bonbibi; his struggles representing that of the poor. There is uniformity in the structure of the temples/shrines rudimentary in structure unlike those venerated by mainstream society on a public space, facing the road side with or without any door for easy visibility to which Jalias (2014) commented Bonbibi being an 'egalitarian' goddess is accessible to all. The institutionalized forest departmental tourist sites visited were of *pucca* (fully of cemented wall, floor and roof) or semi *pucca* structure (the roof is not of cement) but with a see-through door. *Thans* spotted at the entrance to an individual's house are fewer compared to those along the pathways. In Pakhiralaya, at the entrance to one such house facing the river, both Bonbibi and Manasa *thans* was seen seeking protection from both tiger and snake (Fig. 3). It reflected mainly Hindu iconography with several pictures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses in addition to Bonbibi, Dukhe and Shajangli: the main characters

associated with Bonbibi worship. A kuccha structure (i.e. of mud wall, floor and roof) having images of Bonbibi, Dukhe & Shajangli within the outskirts of a residential house venerated by a Munda family was visited near Banikhali positioned at the edge of the river. A unique assimilation and acculturation into the tribal religion was discernible. Annual worship on *Basanta Panchami* (venerating Hindu Goddess of learning Saraswati in Jan-Feb) and a weekly one on Fridays performed by this family following Hindu and Muslim traditions. Other icons of Gazhi, Ali Madhab and Kalu were seen with mounds of mud. Gazhi is believed to be the king of the forest and wild beasts, Ali Madhab- a *pir* (Muslim holy man considered powerful semi-gods capable of doing miracles) and Kalu brother of Dakhin Rai. In public places such as near Gosaba bazaar (Chandir More) Bonbibi, Dukhe and Shajangli are worshipped. At Dayapur-Pakhirala Ghat, Manasa was housed on a semi-pucca structure while Bonbibi was housed on a kucchha structure were adjacent; the latter had a half man half tiger image (Dakhin Rai) as one of its icons. This indicates that Dakhin Rai, a Brahmin, a *muni* (Hindu sage) referred so in legend is also respected and his permission to enter the forest is also sought. All the institutionalized forest departmental tourist sites have a shrine dedicated to the forest lady as seen in Netidhopani Camp, Basirhat Range, Sundarban Tiger Reserve where the 'lady' of the forest resides along with Gazhi Saheb and the tiger-god Dakhin Rai (Fig. 4). This reveals the flexibility given to the idols/icons/images yet with the homogeneity reflected in the worship of Bonbibi occupying the central position being interstitial and the mediator between the village and the forest, between the world of humans and the world of tigers

(Jalias, 2004:81).

It is rather intriguing that worshipping of the Bonbibi and associated rituals continue despite significant changes in livelihood that no longer are forest based. When asked about it, some respondents answered that it is due to '*manat*' - a promise- to make an offering to the deity after one's purpose is served. Sur (2006) coined paona puja or the puja performed after the deity comes to a member in his/her dream; or on fulfillment of a *manat*. The younger generation does not venture into the forest as they find it less rewarding and below their status as educated. The elderly people still continue forest-based activities as a source of living, a part-time occupation or as a passion. The veneration is done thrice by them: once before going to the forest, second after returning alive and third, often on a large scale, at the village level as an annual event. Day of annual worship overlaps important festive days of the Hindu calendar such as Makar Sankranti in *Poush* (mid-January), *Basant Panchami* venerating Saraswati, the Goddess of learning (Jan-Feb) or Charak to please the destroyer God Lord Shiva in Chaitra (March- April). In these auspicious occasions, new images of Bonbibi are placed. The month of Chaitra (March-April) to Baisakh (April-May) coincides with the seasonal honey and wax collection when tiger-attacks are frequent. The *meen dhara* (tiger prawn seed collectors) and the crab collectors do not enter the forests and so do not worship Bonbibi. Instead they worship Kali-a powerful mainstream Hindu goddess, a deity more responsive to their situation (Jalias, 2004).

From available literatures and through field observation, it is learnt that in the annual event '*Bonbibir Johuranamah*- a booklet

(Jalias, 2004:63) containing narrative of Bon Bibi's myth and Dukhe's tale- is read. The booklet is read similar to the Hindu *panchali* (a popular religious literary genre). Although written in Bengali language it is read from back to front as is done in Arabic/Urdu. The villagers identify themselves with Dukhe- the character whose unflinching belief in Bonbibi had saved him- and consider the forest as being only 'for those who are poor and for those who have no intention of taking more than what they need to survive' (Jalias, 2004 :84). The narrative hence stands significant for the forest goers. Bonbibi's *Pala gaan*- a dramatic performance-ritual is performed in the Sundarbans. It is a ritual enactment of the power and mercy of Bonbibi reaffirming the community's faith in Bonbibi and the forest (Uddin, 2019) and transmitting the story to the younger generation. The *Pala gaan* which is initially recited and sung to invoke the blessings of the deity as a part of the ritual later evolved to this enactment form. The *Pala Gaan* literally means songs that are expressed in long narrative verses. *Pala gaan* traditionally associated with Hindu religious practices is an old performative form, dramatising myths and stories about gods and goddesses. It incorporates reciting and singing of long narrative oral verses along with mimetic gestures (Mandal, 2017). The contemporary *Pala gaan* form has elements of urban *Jatra* or journey (a popular folk theatre of Bengal) referred to as *Dukher Jatrapala* or *Bonbibir Jatrapala*. Full length pala is mostly performed during the auspicious festive occasion on *Makar Sankranti* as a sacred event. It is also performed during *manat* as the *manat pala* organized by the villagers or the family concerned who approach the team carrying out such programmes. The event is sacred and certain rules are

observed to maintain the ritual purity and sanctity of worship such as having vegetarian meals, taking a bath before performing etc. Menstruating women do not participate in such rituals. A system called *pyala tola* used to be practiced to collect money from the spectators as a *bhikkha* (alms) during the performance. These days however the performance is a night-long affair against a fee. Such programmes are also often arranged for the tourists for their entertainment leading to commercialization of the cultural practice. The local *pala gaan* performers find this as an opportunity, promoted by the Government too; to earn some income. The younger generation although less interested in carrying forward this tradition is drawn to perform *Paala gaan* for the income earning opportunity that it offers.

Concluding Remarks

Conventional scholarship related to religion in India tend to focus on the culture and practices described as "great", meaning "Sanskritic," and "little" meaning 'folk' (Thomas, 2015). The continuity in culture is through mythological and legendary themes where the cultural performances are related to a common body of myth between the 'great' and 'little' traditions. Folk performative traditions associated with folk theatre such as *Dukhe jatra* and *Bonbibi pala gaan* on the annual Bonbibib *mela* (fair) reinforces such continuities. Myth, legend and imaginary characters are the carriers of the belief system. Once this belief system gets footage, the forces of synthesis and syncretism in the religious axis gets strengthened (Bera and Sahay, 2010). The local ecology and the economic vulnerability of its inhabitants give rise to religious synthesis and syncretism. Bonbibi's cult is highly localized but carries

with it the overarching belief of triumph of good over evil- representing a unique blend of Hindu and Islamic traditions. Bhattacharya (2017) rightly observes that Bonbibi represents the Islamisation of Bengal and Bengalisation of Islam through localization—leading to a heterodox pantheon. Jungle entrants under the compulsion of dreaded niche of the Sundarbans and for maintaining subsistence have developed this synthetic cultural tradition cutting across caste, religion and ethnic boundaries that often pit one community against the other. While ethnic boundaries are aggressively maintained, it does not entail cultural divisiveness due to survival in such niche. Jalias (2008:7) rightly commented: ‘for the islanders, Bonbibi goes against the distinction of class, caste and religion’.

Maintaining a distinct identity, Bonbibi acts as a source of power in need of superhuman intervention through the all-inclusive approach; denoting a local yet distinctive and unique cultural practice, flexible with no defined ritual practices, with its geographical influence on Sundarbans. Acceptance of certain deities reflects a mutual and harmonious co-existence in this era of inter-religious fissures that are transcended easily. Bonbibi’s saga is also intricately interwoven with the environmental issues at stake in the Sundarbans.

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