

## **The guardian of forest and forest-dwelling communities in Sundarban: An ethno-photographic account of the Bon Bibi worship and livelihood struggle**

### **Abstract**

Sundarban is the largest continuous mangrove forest and one of the richest biodiverse regions, which provides many critical ecosystem services from local to global level. Throughout human and non-human interaction in the region, a unique syncretic eco-centric culture has evolved centred around the local forest goddess, the Bon Bibi. This ethnographic article elucidates the emergence of Bon Bibi as the guardian of forests and forest-dwelling communities. Through a series of photographs, the article portrays different traditional livelihood practices, struggles of local forest/river-dwelling communities, belief systems, and rituals that played pivotal roles in adaptive strategies to avoid human-tiger conflict and foster community-based forest conservation in uncertain times of changing climate. The legends of Bon Bibi further teach several ecological virtues, from coexistence between humans and non-humans to avoiding conspicuous natural resource consumption. The Pantheon belief system played a prominent role in unifying diverse communities to foster resilience and provide moral strength while venturing into challenging mangrove landscapes.

### **Keywords**

Bon Bibi; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; Livelihood Struggle; Human-Tiger Conflict; Climate Change; Sundarban

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## Introduction

Sundarbans is the largest continuous mangrove forest extending over the coastal regions of India (4,200 sq. km.) and Bangladesh (6,000 sq. km.). Due to its immense ecological importance and rich biological diversity, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) inscribed it as a world heritage site in 1987. It is home to millions of climatic vulnerable populations and several endangered and threatened species, such as estuarine crocodiles and the man-eating Royal Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*) (Ghosh et al. 2015).

Sundarban has witnessed a distinctive settlement history from ancient to contemporary periods. During the early thirteenth century, an unknown holy Muslim saint introduced rice cultivation in the fertile soil of the delta region, and the initial settlements started on different islands. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence indicates that some indigenous populations lived on different islands. Due to abrupt climatic change or invasion by the Portuguese and the Magh pirates, the entire region was depopulated. The Mughal Empires considered Sundarbans a rice frontier region, but there is inadequate historical evidence of flourishing large-scale human settlement in that period. Later, the British colonial government began formal land reclamation by bringing tribal people (Santhal, Munda, and Orang) from central India to clear the forest to expand agricultural activities and supply timber to meet the thrust of the Industrial Revolution. In the meantime, various Christian missionary and philanthropic activities have begun in different parts of the Sundarban. As a result, it has led to a diverse ethnic composition comprising Hinduism, Islamism, Christianity, Buddhism, and tribal populations (Eaton 1990; Chatterjee-Sarkar 2010).

From the early civilisation to sustain in hostile terrain, human and non-human interaction has developed a unique syncretic eco-centric folk religion centred on the forest goddess Bon Bibi. Etymologically, the name Bon Bibi has been derived from the two Bengali words '*bon and bibi*,' which can be translated to '*lady of the forest*' or '*forest maiden*.' The earlier account of Bon Bibi can be traced to the many regional literary works and folklore; most notable among them are the late nineteenth-century literary works of Abdur Rahim's and Muhammad Khater's Bon Bibi's Juharanama (glory of Bon Bibi) (Sen & Mukherjee 2020). Both of the Juharanama are epic Bengali poems that narrate Bon Bibi's tale in two verses, which coincide with local folk tales: the first part depicts the background and emergence of Bon Bibi, while the second part tells the story of Dhuke—a poor child compelled to go in the forest—and how Bon Bibi protected him from the danger of man-eating tiger demon.

## Part I: Emergence of Bon Bibi

According to mythology, Bon Bobi is the daughter of a Muslim saint, Ibrahim, who lived in Mecca. Ibrahim's first wife, Phul Bibi, was unable to conceive, and she insisted her husband pray at the Prophet Muhammad's grave, which he did. The Prophet advised him to marry for the second time and have two children. Upon receiving prophetic advice, Ibrahim married his second wife, Gulal Bibi, who subsequently became pregnant.



Hearing the news, Phul Bibi became jealous and requested Ibrahim to abandon her. Phul Bibi's wish led to the deportation of Gulal Bibi to the land of eighteen tides (Sundarbans), where she gave birth to twin children, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli. Gulal Bibi was frightened about her ability to raise both of them and decided to raise Shah Jongoli. She abandoned Bon Bibi in the forest, where she was taken care by Bhangar Shah (a saint who lived in the forest), deer, and other animals. Later, Bon Bibi reunited with her parents and brother, learning about the divine order with the accompanies of her brother Shah Jongoli to protect the forest and its residents from Dakshin Rai, a legendary man-eating tiger demon. It is believed that Dakshin Rai was a Brahmin sage from lower Bengal who was once a tiger. Through his ascetic powers, he refused to share forest resources with humans and legitimised their killing by calling it tax. His arrogance and greed led him to claim the entire forest, which led to a broken trust between humans and non-humans. After a series of epic battles between Bon Bibi and Dakshin Rai's mother, Narayani, Bon Bibi conquered and established her reign, which brought her the title of guardian of forests. To establish peace in the Sundarbans, Bon Bibi and Narayani have become friends. However, the tranquillity did not last long, leading to the second part of the story (Chatterjee-Sarkar 2010; Uddin 2019).

## **Part-II: Tale of Dukhe**

Bon Bibi's legends always precede the tale of Dukhe and Dhona. According to folklore, Dukhe was a young boy living with his widowed mother in impoverished poverty. Dhona was Dhuke's uncle and a wealthy businessman who insisted Dhuke join his honey collection team. Despite his mother's disapproval, Dukhe left with his uncle to collect honey to sustain the family's basic needs. Dukhe's mother reminded him:

*"...you're going to the tideland where dangers are legion...  
In the land of Dokkhin Rai [Dakshin Rai]...; he hunts humans...  
...the lady of Jungle [forest], Ma [mother] Bon Bibi...  
She'll protect you with her brother, Shah Jongoli."* (Ghosh 2021: 22)

After reaching the deep forest, the team was unable to find any beehives for honey and wax. Dakshin Rai appeared before the team and pledged an abundance of honey in exchange for the sacrifice of Dhuke. Dhona acquiesced to the proposal. The intention was unveiled to Dukhe when all the team members left him alone. He immediately remembered his mother's last message. He called out to Bon Bibi, who rescued him from the life-threatening danger of the tiger demon and returned to his mother with abundant resources. Dakshin Rai's arrogance was destroyed by losing the battle to Bon Bibi. Fearing for his life, Dakshin Rai sought forgiveness and took refuge to Gazi Pir, a Muslim saint who lived in Sundarban. Bon Bibi graciously accepted Dakshin Rai's plea and regarded him as a son at the request of Gazi Pir. Then, she demarcated the forest into two regions: half of the land for wilderness, where all animals could live without human intervention, and another half for human settlement and open resource extraction.

Dakshin Rai promised Bon Bibi that he would be her servant forever, never harm anyone, and coexist without harming humans. Dukhe pledges that whenever villagers enter the forest, only with a 'pure heart' and 'empty hand' (Jalais 2008).



**Photo 1:** The Bon Bibi at Bonnie Camp, Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The above photograph depicts the clay idol of Bon Bibi seated on a tiger. Shah Jongoli stands on her left-hand side, and Dukhe is cradled in her lap. Traditionally, Bon Bibi is dressed in vibrant sarees with yellow, red, and green hues, adorned with detailed embroidery representing prosperity and love. Her head is crowned, and her neck is embellished with layers of necklaces made of gold or golden colour, as well as multiple layers of garlands made of hibiscus and marigold flowers. Her nose and ears are enlivened with rings, and her wrists are encircled with Shakha Pola—white and red bangles made of conch shell and red coral—in traditional mudras to symbolise blessings. Shah Jongoli is depicted as a brave warrior, adorned with garlands, holding a symbolic weapon, and wearing traditional headgear to showcase his bravery. Although the

appearance of Bon Bibi idols varies according to the creativity of the idol makers, religious differences, location, and availability of resources, the central theme remains consistent.

## **Present Day Practice**

“In the forest, Ma Bon Bibi is our only hope who will protect us from any danger, including the attack of tigers, while venturing to collect honey, crabs, and fish”.

Tapas Haldar, a honey collector, Sundarbans (Interview, 2023).

Unlike Tapas, every forest fringe villager of Sundarbans, especially the forest-workers<sup>1</sup>, worships Bon Bibi, regardless of religion, caste, and creed. The local communities identify themselves as Dhuke and believe Bon Bibi will protect them from any threat while venturing into the inhospitable mangrove forest, where man-eating tigers, crocodiles, and venomous snakes are persistent.

Before going to the forest, every forest-workers performs puja in the Bon Bibi's *thaan* (shrine) or puts a new saree and garland on the mangrove tree. The *thaan* is usually located at the edge of the forest or forest-fringe villages in a small hut with clay idols of Bon Bibi. Occasionally, fresh tiger pug-mark can be seen near *thaan*. Different types of rites are observed among religious groups; the followers of Hinduism perform puja, whereas the Muslims recite dua (invocation) from the Quran. After that, the devotees served wildflowers and sweets. Anup Mondal, a resident of Sundarbans, stated:

In Bon Bibi puja, there is no need of any Brahman (priest) or specific mantras; it can be performed by any folk, irrespective of social position or religious group. Ma (mother) Bon Bibi protects everyone who calls upon her (Interview, 2023).

The pantheon and heterodox worldview of Bon Bibi's belief system bridge the communal faultline and challenge the caste hierarchy of Hinduism. Its inclusive nature and homogeneous social order have become popular among the lower caste, tribal, and marginal communities (Bhattacharyya 2017). They especially follow the norms derived from Bon Bibi's legend, such as entering the forest with “pure heart and an empty hand”. Here, the pure heart epitomises the avoidance of any conscious intention of surplus consumption or excessive collection of forest resources, and the empty hand exemplifies the non-violence attitude and co-existence with forests and wild animals. After entering the forest, the forest-workers adhere to some traditional norms, such as avoiding cutting trees, not intentionally disturbing the wilderness, and abstaining from defecating in the forest to maintain the cleanliness and hygiene of the forest ecosystem.

In many forest fringe villages, an annual Bon Bibi *mela* (fair) is held on the last Tuesday of *Baisakh* and the first of *Magh* in the Bengali calendar. This yearly gathering reaffirms the connection with Bon Bibi and transcends the traditional belief to future

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<sup>1</sup> Forest workers are a common identity given by the residents of Sundarban, whose livelihood directly depends on the forest and river, including honey collectors, crab catchers, and fishing communities.



generations. Sometimes, the local artist performs Bon Bibi's legendary narrative in the form of a play—mostly the tale of Dukhe.







**Photos 2 & 3:** Bon Bibi's Thaan, Maipith & Mangrove Worship. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023, 2024.

A fisherman stands before Bon Bibi's thaán to perform rituals before commencing the fishing journey (photo 2). This thaán is located on the edge of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR) area, where tigers or pug marks are occasionally sighted. The forest-workers revere mangroves as a form of veneration for Bon Bibi. In the absence of a Bon Bibi's thaán, they worship mangroves and adore new sarees and garlands on them. Worshipping mangroves signifies the close relationship between local communities and mangroves.



**Photo 4:** Invoking Blessing of Bon Bibi. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The local community considered wooden boats as the living entities and the primary means of their livelihood, thus treating them with great dignity. Both ends of the boats were painted red colour and decorated with garlands. Standing on or touching these ends with one's feet was strictly forbidden, which would indicate disrespect. After offering puja at Bon Bibi's than or draping saree in the mangrove, they returned to their boats and performed additional rituals such as cleaning the boat, conducting puja, and distributing sweets to local areas.



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**Photo 5 & 6:** Final Preparation & Waiting for Tide. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

After performing rituals, the forest-workers await the high tides to begin their journey. Typically, they venture into the liminal landscape of mangroves and rivers for two to three days for fishing and crab catching and two weeks for honey collection.



**Photo 7:** In Searching for Livelihood. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The forest-workers began a challenging journey through narrow creeks and tidal rivers with only one hope to catch an abundance of fish, crabs, and honey without encountering any tiger attacks. They typically adhered to the local calendar to determine the most auspicious dates and times, which guided them to understand the moon's phase and intensity of tides during the journey. Despite several struggles and uncertainties in the traditional occupation, they believe a successful fish, crab catch, or honey collection depends on Bon Bibi's blessings.

### **Livelihood Struggle of Forest-Workers**

The Sundarbans have witnessed severe consequences of climate change, ranging from hydro-geophysical disruption to dismantling the socio-ecological balance in recent decades. From 1980 to 2007, the sea surface temperature increased at an accelerated rate of 0.5° C per decade, with an annual sea level rise ranging from 3.14 to 4.0 mm. The frequent occurrence of natural disasters, particularly super-cyclonic storms and floods, has increased alarmingly. The recurrent super-cyclones have led to multifaceted impacts: widespread deforestation, loss of human and wildlife, saline water intrusion into agricultural lands, extensive damage to housing infrastructure, and a surge in various waterborne diseases (Cited in Ghimire & Vikas 2012). Consequently, the local communities are entrapped in the impoverished poverty cycle. Many households continue to grapple with the aftermath of Cyclone Aila's devastation in 2009. Even though the subsequent cyclones—Phailin in 2013, Hudhud in 2014, Bulbul in 2019, Amphan in 2020, and Remal in 2024—along with the COVID-19 pandemic have broken the economic



foundations of coastal communities. Traditional forest-workers are confronting the impacts of climate change on the one hand and the imposition of restrictions on natural resources and wildlife conflicts on the other.



**Photo 8:** Sinking Land & Reclaimed by Nature. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The Sundarban is a dynamic deltaic system characterised by ongoing delta formation. Due to the abrupt rise in sea level, the annual net landmass loss has increased significantly—Lohachara, Suparibhanga, and Bedford islands have already submerged—while others are experiencing progressive submergence. Consequently, the local communities are losing their homes and agricultural land, and many are becoming internally displaced (climate refugees).





**Photo 9:** Mangrove Landscape. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The mangrove landscape of the Sundarbans is characterised by its complex network of mudflats, narrow and shallow creeks, and the upward growth of mangrove *pneumatophores* (breathing roots). The breathing roots, muddy terrain, and dense forest serve as natural barriers to movement. The traditional forest-workers face these natural obstacles, along with the threat of tiger attacks on land and crocodile attacks in the water. They believe that Bon Bibi will protect them from this formidable threat.



**Photo 10:** Fishing Community. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.



Traditionally, fishing communities use various sizes and types of boats based on their economic capital. Those who undertake extended fishing expeditions typically use larger motorised boats, accommodating teams of five to seven people. The larger boat may either be self-owned or rented. Upon their return, the profits are equitably distributed among the team members, including a share allocated to the boat owners. Those who engage in shorter fishing trips, lasting one to two days, often use their manually operated boats.







**Photo 11 & 12:** Perilous Occupations – Honey Collection & Crab Catching. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2024, 2023.

Honey collection and crab-catching are the most perilous occupations in the Sundarbans. While fishing can be conducted from boats, honey collection and crab-catching require venturing onto land. Often, individuals penetrate deep into the forest and excavate crab burrows to capture them, and honey collectors venture into the deep forest to search for beehives. This activity exposes them to the territories of tigers, leading to an increasing risk of human-tiger encounters. It is frequently reported that most tiger attacks occur during the crab-catching time.





**Photo 13:** Hental - the Natural Camouflage for Tiger. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The Hental (*Phoenix paludosa*) acts as a natural camouflage for tigers because the stripes on the tiger's body and the dense Hental forest match each other. Tigers adeptly use the cover, silently observing human activities before launching sudden attacks from behind. Many tiger attack incidents were reported in this area, and forest workers try to avoid these regions.





**Photo 14:** Net Fencing to Reduce Human-Tiger Conflicts. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

The forest department has implemented several measures to address the issue of human-tiger conflicts; the installation of net fencing is the most recent intervention. The forest department has strategically covered net fencing at various entry points, estuarine mouths, and around the village area. According to the forest department, this strategy has effectively reduced conflicts. Local forest-dwelling communities claimed that the net fencing initially reduced the attack. Now, the tigers have learned to navigate around and across it, and many incidents of tiger straying and tiger attacks are occurring.



**Photo 15:** Bawali – The Tiger Charmer. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

Tiger charmers, locally known as Bawali, Gunin, and Pir, are reputed for their unique abilities to guide forest-dwelling communities, particularly honey collectors, and avoid human-tiger conflict. The local communities believe that the tiger charmer possesses special powers and Bon Bibi's blessings, allowing them to safely venture into the forests and prevent illnesses through traditional plant-based medicinal practices. The Photo portrays a Gunin demonstrating the size of a tiger's paw. He has been venturing the forest for the last 40 years and has had numerous encounters with tigers. He claims he has successfully averted tiger attacks and rescued many co-workers by reciting *specific mantras*. On the contrary, he also asserts that the mantras do not possess inherent power but provide courage to confront a tiger. If someone courageously stands in front of a tiger, the tiger will retreat attack. Through extensive experience, the tiger charmers have learned the tiger's behaviour and attack patterns, which enable them to avoid dangerous situations. Hence, local communities prefer to rely on the wisdom of tiger charmer.







**Photo 16 & 17:** Victim of Tiger Attack. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

Traditional forest workers frequently fall prey to tiger attacks. The lack of medical facilities, inadequate compensation, and government failures exacerbate the traumatic conditions for victims and their families. In Photo 19, a survivor of a tiger attack displays his wound, which has left him physically disabled to resume his previous occupation. According to him, “with the blessings of Bon Bibi, my wife rescued me from the tiger’s jaws”. On the contrary, Photo 20 depicts the family of another victim who lost her husband to a tiger attack. His body was never recovered from the forest. She expresses her distress and scepticism about Bon Bibi’s protective power and status, questioning, “If Bon Bibi is our protector, why did my spouse get killed in a tiger attack? And why do tigers kill many poor people every year in the Sundarbans?”.





**Photo 18:** Returning Home. Photo by Amir Sohel, 2023.

If the fishing and crab-catching community faces no danger, they return with their caught fish and crabs. Usually, female family members await the arrival to assist them in categorising the fish based on type and size for sale.





**Photo 19:** Preparation Begins for the Next Trip. Photo by Amir Soheli, 2023.

After a few days of rest, the forest-workers prepare for their next trip with hope and uncertainty by repairing or making fishing nets for the next trip.



**Photo 20:** Restoring Mangrove, Chargheri, Sundarban Biosphere Reserve. Photo by Amir Soheli, 2023.

With the help of a non-governmental organisation (NGO), the local communities are planting mangroves to restore degraded forests. For them, the forest is not only the source of different tangible ecosystem services but also a bridging connection with their forest goddess. Umashankar Mandal, an environmental activist, stated, "Here people are facing the wrath of climate change every day, and some community-based initiatives are restoring mangrove ecosystem in different islands of Sundarban to sustain in these sinking islands. The belief of Bon Bibi becomes a mediator to connect with mangroves, tigers, and the community... and communities get a reason to connect with divinity while protecting mangroves".

## Conclusion

The legend of Bon Bibi has recently gained scholarly attention for its ecological wisdom and sustainable natural resource management principles. Although the worshipping of Bon Bibi is primarily prevalent among marginalised forest-workers in the Sundarbans region of India and Bangladesh, the anecdote teaches several ecological virtues from harmonious coexistence between humans and non-humans to avoiding conspicuous

natural resource consumption to protecting mangroves. The pantheon belief system of Bon Bibi played a prominent role in unifying diverse communities to foster resilience and reduce risk in the period of disaster. The cultural significance of mangroves in Bon Bibi's tale plays a crucial role in encouraging the local community to engage in community-based mangrove restoration and protection efforts. While the Western hegemonic international neoliberal policies and state-led centralised policies are ineffective in restoring forests, incorporating traditional value-based community-led forest restoration and reduction of deforestation could be a sustainable alternative. Considering the trends in human-tiger conflicts and cases of tiger straying incidents, there is no correlation between the belief in Bon Bibi and tiger attacks. However, it empowers local marginalised communities by providing moral strength while venturing into precarious mangrove landscapes, giving their lives purpose and meaning.

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