

STRATEGIES OF LIVING IN UNITY AMID RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY, AND NATURAL CALAMITY IN SUNDARBANS: READING *BONBIBI JOHURANAMA*.

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Abstract

The Sundarbans region from the 16th century onwards witnessed the fusion of Bengali Hindu traditional culture with that of Perso-Arabic Islamic one that gave birth to a variety of faiths and rituals represented in the goddesses like Bonbibi, Sitala, and Manasa- bridging the cultural and religious divides. Bonbibi Johuranama, a product of that fusion, is based on the Bonbibi myth and rituals. It tells the story of the deification of Bonbibi, a marginalized woman, who is traditionally seen as the savior of both Hindu and Muslim people of Sundarbans from the clutches of Dakshin Rai (Royal Bengal Tiger). As Bonbibi's victory over Dakshin Rai settles the disputes about sharing natural resources of the jungle, she establishes herself as a goddess among the people of Sundarbans irrespective of their caste, creed, and religion. Thus Bonbibi Johuranama stands out, for the people of the archipelago situated in the southernmost part of Bengal, as a unique example of the unification of communal divides and the co-existence of nature, human and non-human in peace. This paper intends to explore the history and development of the Bonbibi cult and its relevance in contemporary Bengal

KEYWORDS: Bonbibi, palagaan, unification, coexistence, hybrid, reconciliation.

During the 16th and 17th centuries different religious and cultural aspects of Bengal became instrumental in the formation of various myths and rituals which were the basis of some of the 'Mongal Kabyas' and folk performances. The assimilation of different cultures began to

happen in the pre-colonial Bengal from the time of the migration of the Persian and the central Asian poets to India from 1206 onwards. This resulted in the adoption of Persian literary trends into the Indian cultural landscape. Language is the most important area in which it was particularly evident. In Delhi, it was remarkably evident from the development of Urdu - a mixture of Hindi and Persian languages. In Bengal, its impact was felt during the 15th and 16th centuries when the 'Moslem king of Bengal and his lieutenants in Chittagong were active patrons of Bengali literature' (Chatterjee 203). Bengali chiefs mastered Persian as part of their job in the sultan's court, the Shia Muslims took up positions as Ulemas, teachers, and poets in Bengal after migrating to the cities of Murshidabad, Dhaka, and Hooghly- all of these paved the way for the popularity and mythologization of Persian tales among Bengali people such as that of Laila and Majnu, Yusuf and Zulekha, Jami and Nizami, etc. (The Daily Star). And at the same time, the absorption of Persian words into Bengali developed a new variant of the language known as the Musolmani Bangla. An estimate of about 10,000 Bengali words was influenced by Persian words, and more than 5,000 were taken directly from Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. More importantly, Persian remained the official state language of Bengal for 600 years until the British replaced it with English in around 1836 (The Daily Star). Thus, Persian influence remains a milestone event in the development of the Bengali language. What is significant here is the nature of the Persian impact that reminds us how language, human thought, and history operate. A corollary to the assimilation of Persian, Urdu, and Bengali languages was the amalgamation of Bengali Hindu and Muslim cultures and rituals in southern Bengal. This syncretism of Hindu and Muslim cultures is evident in the worship of Satya Pir, sometimes known as Satya Narayan. While Satya in Sanskrit means Vishnu; pir denotes "old man" (Fakir) in Persian. Muslim people's faith in Satya Pir is similar to that of the reverence of the Hindus for Satya Narayan. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Islam was increasingly adopted by many Bengali Hindus, and women of both communities began to have faith in others' rituals because of their prolonged interactions and living in proximity. For example, Muslim women put their faith in 'brata' (fasting), popular among Hindus, to ensure good luck and wellbeing. This cult of Pir gave rise to Pir Kavya or, pir literature. With the introduction of Islam in Bengal many different pirs, graced with divine power, became popular. Poets like Kavi Kanka, Sheikh Faizullah,

Saha Garibullah, and Bharatchandra have mentioned the names of Panchpir, Satyapir, Manikpir and others in their writings. This tradition of religious syncretism continued even after the Muslim reign had ended in Bengal. Besides Satyapir, we get the names of goddesses like Olaichandi (also known as Olabibi among the Muslims) and Banbibi (also worshipped as Bandevi by the Hindus) who represent this unification of two religions. The most famous and significant of these is a legend, with a folk performance based on it, recorded in Bonbibi Johuranama ('The Narrative of Bonbibi's Glory') from the Sundarbans region. In this legend, Bonbibi is revered by both Hindus and Muslims as a goddess who regulates every aspect of their lives.

Of the two best-known print versions of Bonbibi Johuranama, the first was composed by Munshi Mohammad Khater, and the other by Abdur Rahim Sahib in the nineteenth century. They are both written in Persian Bengali. The vocabulary is extraordinarily mixed and hybrid. Besides these two texts, several different versions of the Bonbibi story exist. They are still performed today as palagaan by different Yatra Daal (theatrical troupe) in southern Bengal. The 'Namah' tradition to which Bonbibi Johuranama belongs entered the Bengali literary tradition through contact with the 'Persianate' culture (Hodgson 1947 293-94). The word 'Namah' in Persian means epistle or letter or book. This 'Namah' tradition has been used here for the record of the Bonbibi myth popular among the folks of Sundarbans following the classical Persian literary convention. The text of Khater begins from the end in the Arabic script and is supposed to be read from right to left. The myth of Bonbibi on which the above-mentioned texts are based centres on the Islamic deity Bonbibi and has variously been re-created by numerous palakaars (palagaan directors) in their unpublished, handwritten manuscripts. From the various accounts of local myths, three co-relative narratives seem to emerge. They can be categorized as such-

1. Janmakhanda or Bonbibi's birth in the tidal land.
2. Narayani-r Jang or battle with Narayani.
3. Dukhey Jatra or the travels of Dukhey.

In Medina, childless Fakir Ibrahim and his wife prayed to Rasul (messenger of Allah) for a son. Rasul advised him to remarry. Phulbibi, his first wife, consented to one condition. When the second wife Gulal became pregnant Ibrahim was forced to send her to Jungle to fulfill the

condition promised to Phulbibi. In the forest Gulalbibi gave birth to Bonbibi and SahaJangali. Both of them were the messengers of Allah disguised as humans. In the Jungle Bonbibi was raised by a doe as her mother left her there taking the son with her to another place. After seven years Ibrahim understood his guilt and took back Gulalbibi and her children to Mecca. Once while praying at a mosque Bonbibi and SahaJangali were reminded of their task of rescuing people from the clutches of Dakshin Rai, the demon king and they arrived at the country of the eighteen tides, the residence of Dakshin Rai and his mother Narayani. Dakshin Rai came to know the arrival of the duo to defeat him. The demon king threatened to overthrow them from the realm. Narayani prevented his son and went to fight against Bonbibi instead. Bonbibi defeated her but out of mercy returned half of the kingdom to Narayani and her son. As a result, Dakshin Rai and his mother remained the ruler of the southern part of Sundarbans.

The Dukhey Jatra deals with the story of Dukhey who is persuaded by Dhana, a honey collector to work with him. Despite his mother's dissent, Dukhey joins Dhana and his sailors to mitigate his poverty. The mother does not forget to remind Dukhey to call up Bonbibi if he eventually falls in danger in the jungle. The fleet of Dhana reaches Kendokhali, a territory belonging to Dakshin Rai. Dhana and his team do not find any honey and wax for three days as he forgot to propitiate Dakshin Rai with any kind of offering. After three days Dakshin Rai appears in his dream and asks for a human sacrifice. Dhana agrees and decides to leave Dukhey in Jungle in return for honey and wax. Dhana does so with a trick. He asks Dukhey to fetch some wood as fuel from the forest and when Dukhey enters the forest the entire team leaves the place leaving Dukhey alone in the forest. Dakshin Rai was lurking in the jungle in the guise of a tiger. Terrified with the impending danger Dukhey remembered and prayed for Bonbibi. She appeared with her brother SahaJangali who defeated Dakshin Rai. When chased by SahaJangali, Rai took refuge in the abode of Barha Khan Gaji, a pir and warrior saint. For a proper judgment, three of them go to Bonbibi who accepts Dakshin Rai as her son with the intervention of Gaji as she has already called Narayani her sister. She now advises Dukhey- "with Dhona you must reconcile; /I know you must hate him, and it's true that he's vile. /But you must forgive him, rascal though he is; /to hate forever is to fall into an abyss. /And after all, it was he who brought you to me; (Jungle Nama 48). Eventually, both Dhana and Dukhey

become rich with the blessings of Bonbibi and Barha Khan Gaji. Dukhey pardons Dhona and marries his daughter, Champa, abiding by Bonbibi's command.

The appellation of the deity Bonbibi is interesting because of its syncretic nature as the word *ban* is 'forest' in Bengali and *bibi* is 'lady' or 'wife' in Persian word. The combined word 'Bonbibi' thus means the 'lady of the forest' who is given the shape of a Hindu goddess, placed in the temple in the Sundarbans and its surrounding locality. Though Bonbibi is an Islamic deity she has a certain physical appearance unlike the Muslim religious tradition where we don't find any image or idol of a god or goddess. In some places, she is worshipped as *Bandurga*, *Bandevi*, or *Bonbibi* by her Hindu devotees and her idols are found wearing a crown and garland, holding a 'Trishul'. She rides on a tiger almost like *Durga* who rides on a lion. She is also adored by her Muslim followers as *Banbibi* and she is known as a *pirani* (wife of the *pir*). Nevertheless, she blesses all her devotees irrespective of their religion, caste, and creed. This has been rightly pointed out by *Amitav Ghosh* in his afterword written for *Jungle Nama*, 'The Bonbibi legend is a marvel 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'. This communal syncretism provides both physical and psychological sustenance to the people inhabiting the region which is threatened with natural calamity and religious tensions. This long-standing communal coexistence shattered significantly when Bengal was partitioned on communal lines in 1947. This tradition continues even today giving rise to socio-religious turmoil in the region. What this *palagaan* underlines is not just a threat from *Dakshin Rai* rather it points to the need for reciprocity between nature and the human, a condition of living where both will have an equal role to play. Human beings will have to understand the importance of the survival of the forest and the balance of the ecosystem without placing humans in the center of that system. *Bonbibi-r Palagaan* remains not only the representative performance ritual of the Sundarbans regions but also an emblem of the syncretistic nature of the region. Continuity of this popular traditional performance, as well as the ritual of the Bonbibi cult, indicates the urgency of togetherness between Hindu and Muslim people for their survival in the archipelago historically threatened by nature and wild animals. In some of the versions of the *palagaan* of Bonbibi the conflict between *Dakshin Rai* and his subjects who are dependent on the forest is resolved by Bonbibi in such

a way that none of them get absolute control over the forest; rather they are told to get their sustenance from the forest only as much as they need and not more than that. In *Jungle Nama* Bonbibi resonates with this idea, 'You must stay within your bounds and never transgress; /with what you have you must make do, don't seek excess' (Ghosh 42). So there is an arrangement in which the idea of the preservation of forests and the coexistence of nature, humans, and wild animals is obvious, the lack of which has become the concern of the world for the last few decades. The gradual destruction of the Sundarban jungle will result in the eradication of the people and their hybrid culture of that region. People of this region irrespective of their religion and culture have learned to live in harmony with nature. The emergence of the cult of Bonbibi is comparable to the emergence of the 'Shakti Cult' represented by Maa Kali and Durga, Goddesses who can save people from evil power. In our contemporary world, several attempts have been made to make people aware of the need to conserve forests and wildlife but the result has not at all been good. It is believed that Sundarbans keep the balance in the ecosystem and protects southern Bengal including Kolkata from various devastating natural disasters. So any damage to Sundarbans will cost the life and culture of this region. The rituals and myth of Bonbibi which is deeply ingrained in the mind of the people of this region have always been able to make them aware of the need to conserve forest and wildlife. But there has been a significant decline in the tradition of Bonbibi cult in recent years. Therefore, the idea of protecting the forest and its inhabitants proposed by Bonbibi Johuranama can be included in mainstream religious discourse for inculcating that awareness among people. Propagation, patronage, and performances of this folk theatrical performance in this regard might prove fruitful.

The palagaan of Bonbibi and its verbal record in Bonbibi Johuranama represent a cultural paradigm that embraces and unifies conflicting ideas and elements of two different religions of the Sundarbans region. The presence of this unification and reconciliation within the cult of Bonbibi seem to work as a defense mechanism for physical and psychological sustenance in a geo-political and cultural space that has always been threatened by devastating natural disasters and wild animals. This cult of Bonbibi takes elements from and traverses orthodox religions to provide a different order of faith and belief that shelters people across religions, caste, and creed. This palagaan also embraces the concept of sustainable development by way

of proposing the idea sharing natural resources just to meet our needs, not our greed. Both these ideas of communal harmony and human-nature dependence contained in this palagaan are the burning need of the hour when people are disintegrating and dividing into communal lines and facing the deadliest consequences of natural hazards. Following this example of the role of this palagaan and Bonbibir Johuranama as a mode of communal harmony and environmental awareness all should come forward for its popularisation and propagation.

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